

## Behavior Tips: *Minimizing fear at veterinary visits*

**Veterinary visits can induce stress and fear in pet owners and pets alike. It's important to try to minimize this for many reasons.**

- This stress and fear puts you, your pet, and the veterinary professionals providing care at an increased risk of injury.
- Veterinary associated fear and stress tend to escalate and worsen over time unless active training and conditioning are used to make the experience more positive for your pet.
- Some owners will delay seeking medical care to avoid the stress of a veterinary visit. This can lead to exacerbation of some medical conditions, increasing the severity of disease and leading to more expensive and urgent visits.
- It is much more challenging for your veterinarian to accurately evaluate an extremely fearful pet.

### ***Getting your pet accustomed to vet visits***

Helping your pet become comfortable at the veterinary clinic can be very valuable. In many patients (primarily dogs and puppies, but kittens benefit, too!) "happy visits" can help your pet form positive associations with the veterinary clinic and staff. These visits can be thought of as a test-run for your pet. Load them into the car, drive to your vet, and offer lots of treats. These visits should be positive and fun. Just play with everyone and try not to "do" anything to them. Staff at the clinic can give out high value treats and pet animals who are relaxed. As your pet's comfort level increases, trained behaviors can also be integrated. Teaching your pet to be comfortable stepping onto the scale, and practicing the behavior at happy visits can become a game that reduces the stress associated with that aspect of veterinary care. Ask your veterinarian if there is a good time to bring your pet in for this type of training experience. They can identify low stress times which will help the "happy visit" stay happy for both your pet and veterinary staff! Most clinics encourage these "happy visits" because they decrease the fear and stress of veterinary visits which reduces the risk of injury to staff, as well as keeping your pet happy and safe.

Many owners struggle to get their cat into the carrier for transportation. This can set off a cascade of negative emotions that escalate the fear of veterinary visits. Allowing cats and kittens to explore their carrier by leaving it out in the home in a cozy spot at all times can help to decrease any negative associations and form positive associations.



A cat who is accustomed to and comfortable in his carrier. After the cat accepts the carrier without a lid, a lid can be placed on top to further acclimate to the carrier.

### ***Pharmaceutical Interventions***

In some pets, the negative associations with veterinary visits can be quite powerful, and may interfere with the behavioral modification techniques discussed. These pets have fear levels that are high enough to prevent the pet from accepting treats. These dogs and cats may also display defensive behaviors like growling and hissing when approached in a veterinary setting. They may be unwilling to enter the veterinary clinic, or may be challenging to get into their carriers prior to the visit. In pets who display fear and stress at a high level, it may be necessary to discuss pharmacological options with your veterinarian to help work on building a positive association with veterinary care. Your veterinarian can create a plan for situational medication for your cat or dog that will allow them to experience minimal stress at veterinary visits.

### ***Choosing the Right Clinic For YOU***

Some clinics offer fear minimizing exam techniques, cat-friendly scheduling, separate cat and dog waiting rooms, and other fear decreasing tools. It may be beneficial to visit a clinic during a scheduled time to discuss and observe how the clinic manages fearful animals. You as a pet owner can determine if you are comfortable with methods used, and assess if those techniques are appropriate for your pet.

A dog who is being trained using treats to have positive associations with blood draws. No restraint is required to obtain the sample.



### ***Food treats***

Experiment with various rewards, especially for animals who are particular about what they eat. Determine your pet's favorite treats and flavors, and share those with your veterinary clinic so that your veterinary care team can include that information in your pet's record. For especially picky pets, it can be helpful to bring your own treats to the visit. It is also often advisable to skip the meal just prior to the veterinary visit to increase the likelihood that your pet will be interested in food rewards. Make sure to discuss this with your veterinarian, especially in patients with chronic conditions, very young animals, or exotic pets. Often, not feeding a meal just prior to the visit also allows for more accurate blood work and safer sedation in the event that either are necessary.

### ***Training Cooperative Veterinary Behaviors***

Training your dog or cat to help with their own care can reduce fear associated with veterinary visits. Teach your pet to accept touch on all regions of their body. If your pet is used to having their paws, body, and face handled, they will be much more likely to accept and tolerate this type of touch from your veterinarian. Dogs and cats can be taught to offer simple behaviors like "sit", "stand", "down", and "stay" which will help them cooperate in their own care. Ask your veterinarian for ideas about which behaviors may be most valuable. If your dog is going to need frequent radiographs, ask your veterinarian to show you the posture to teach the dog that will help them the most. For pets with areas that are particularly sensitive to touch, you can change the associated emotional state from one of stress/fear to one of joy/comfort by "counter-conditioning" them. If the cat reacts negatively to having their body touched, gently approach the area but don't touch them and offer a great treat. If they take the treat work up to a gently touch and offer the treat, then very slowly offer treats for gradually increasing pressure and length of the touch. The goal of this type of training is to alter the negative emotions associated with manipulation and instead connect that experience with a positive emotional state.



A dog who has been trained to offer her paw and cooperate in her own nail maintenance.

***Although these tips are helpful, please discuss any behavioural/medical concerns with your local veterinarian. For all cases where you still have concerns, seek specialist services ([www.dacvb.org](http://www.dacvb.org)). At AVC you can contact the AVC Behavioural Medicine Service ([AVCBehaviouralMed@upeji.ca](mailto:AVCBehaviouralMed@upeji.ca)).***