



Freeport
Veterinary Hospital

Counter-Conditioning and Desensitization for Body Handling

As pets, and part of our family, we expect our dogs to willingly tolerate a wide variety of handling and interaction that would not be considered normal in the dog world. Dogs are extremely social animals, but their interactions mostly revolve around vocalizations, posturing and body language, with physical contact being typically reserved for play or aggression. We expect our dogs to accept and enjoy being pet everywhere on their bodies, hugged, snuggled, pushed and pulled pretty much 24 hours a day. On top of the regular handling we do with our dogs, there are also instances of specific types of handling for medical or cosmetic reasons such as cleaning or looking in ears, clipping nails, brushing or checking teeth, giving oral medications or restraining for grooming. Even the healthiest dog will eventually have an issue that will result in owners needing to clean ears, medicate eyes, or give oral pills or liquids.

It is unreasonable to assume that all dogs will be 100% fine with all types of handling and making such assumptions can often result in a dangerous situation for both the dogs and humans. Dogs that find this type of interaction scary can react in a variety of ways from being squirmy and unmanageable to becoming very aggressive. Just like people, dogs also have a wide variety of personalities and innate tolerance levels. There are some dogs whose owners never practice restraining them or cleaning their ears, and yet they handle such things stoically with no more than a gentle tail wag. On the other hand there are some dogs who may become extremely fearful and panic or become aggressive when the owners attempt to clean ears or trim their nails.

If you are reading this handout, your dog has demonstrated some aversion to some type of body handling, either for us here at the clinic, for you at home, or both. It is important to understand that your dog is acting the way he is out of fear, not out of malice or spite. He needs your understanding and patience with this issue. While it may be physically possible to do a nail trim or ear cleaning on your dog through use of force, this would cause his fear to worsen; since the force used has just proven to the dog he was right to be fearful. Fearful dogs that are handled with force get worse and worse over time, and their behavior can escalate to a point that they are no longer able to be handled at all. For dogs that have reached the point where they view specific types of body handling, or all body handling as an aversive event, the problem can be solved by taking a step back and employing a counter-conditioning and desensitization (CC/DS) program. Using a CC/DS method is one great way to help assuage your dog's fear, and teach him that he has nothing to worry with any type of body handling. This type of training is much better than using force, not only will you be able to handle your dog in any way you need to, but your dog will be relaxed and calm about the process and ultimately require little to no restraint at all.



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So, what is counter-conditioning and desensitization? Counter-conditioning means reversing the negative association the dog has formed with a certain thing (the vet exam), and replacing it with a positive (happy!) association. Desensitization means exposing the dog to the thing he finds scary at very low levels, low enough that it does not provoke a fear response, and gradually increasing the level of exposure until the dog is comfortable and happy with the full-force of the “scary thing.” These two methods of training are done together, as a combo they are extremely effective and can be used to cure dogs of all sorts of anxieties and even extreme phobias.

Planning a CC/DS Program for Body Handling

The specific steps involved in a CC/DS program are unique to each individual dog, and depend greatly on how fearful the dog is. Below is an outline of a general CC/DS program for body handling, but you will need to adjust the program to fit your dog’s individual needs. Some dogs may only have issues with a very specific type of handling, such as ear cleanings and treatment, while other dogs may panic when any part of their body is handled. Remember to break every fear into small pieces, and always start at a low enough level that your dog demonstrates absolutely no fear. Feel free to ask us if you are not sure how to come up with a plan for your dog’s CC/DS program.

There are two options for treat delivery, both techniques are effective, use whichever technique is easier for you, and whichever one seems to work best for your dog. The outline below describes using the “Open Bar/Closed Bar” technique, if you choose to use the “Pay as you go” technique, simply take breaks more frequently and offer a treat.

1. Open Bar/Closed Bar: With this technique, you make a steady stream of treats available the entire time the handling is going on. As soon as the handling stops, the treats stop too. This teaches the dog that the handling predicts treats. This technique is more practical if you have two people, one to do the exam and the other to supply food. A Kong or bone stuffed with peanut butter or cheese can easily be used for this process. If using this technique, make sure you both have good timing, the treat should be given simultaneously to the handling, or just after the handling begins. If the food is presented and then the handling starts, you are teaching the dog that the food predicts something negative, and the learning process will be slower.
2. Pay as you go: With this technique, you pay the dog with treats for each piece of handling you do. This is the best technique to use if you don’t have anyone to help you, or if you struggle with your timing using the open bar technique. Using pay as you go, you should break each action in very tiny incremental pieces and feed a piece of food after each piece. Using this technique you can start with just one small piece of handling, repeat it over and



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over again with many rewards until the dog is completely relaxed, and then add more pieces of handling on. This process can also streamline learning for the dog, because the technique provides the dog with a predictable pattern. You start with a small action, and repeat it until the dog becomes comfortable with that pattern, then you add another small action on the end. Because the dog is already comfortable with the original action, you are just adding another step onto a predictable and familiar pattern, leaving the dog feeling much more confident and calm about the process.

Getting Started

In order to come up with a treatment plan, you must first have a clear idea of what types of body handling your dog dislikes, so you can work on each of them. If your dog shows even mild signs of discomfort about a specific type of body handling, add it to the list to work through! If your dog is severely distressed about any particular area of his body, that area should probably be dealt with separately, and after he is comfortable in other areas. The most common types of body handling include the following:

- **Ears**: handling the ears, manipulating them to look inside and cleaning them
- **Mouth**: lifting the lip to examine the teeth, opening the jaws to look inside, giving an oral liquid or tablet (you don't have to medicate your dog to test, just open the jaws)
- **Collar**: grasping the collar and applying gentle pressure to guide the direction of the dog in an emergency, leaning over the head to grasp the collar
- **Legs/Feet**: running hands down all limbs, handling the paws, handling each toe, trimming toenails
- **Tail**: lifting the tail to examine anus region
- **Grooming**: brushing all areas of the body, using electric clippers in breeds that require clippers to groom
- **Body**: touching anywhere on the chest and abdomen, hugging around chest, hugging around abdomen

Once you have a complete list of the areas your dog dislikes having handled, the next step is to come up with a step by step plan for CC/DS. As previously stated, each dog will be unique and the outline below is just a general example. For this example we will discuss a dog that is uncomfortable having his nails trimmed. This outline is described using the open bar/closed bar technique, if you use the pay as you go technique, stop often and pay your dog.

1. Get your treats and assistant ready! Gently place your hand(s) on your dog's chest while your assistant begins feeding, slowly run your hand down his leg to his foot. Don't grasp the foot at this point, just run your hand down the leg and off the foot. Repeat this until your dog is completely relaxed about having his leg and foot handled this way.



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2. Next, run your hand down to his paw and rest your hand on the paw for 1-2 seconds, then move on and off the foot. Repeat this step until your dog is calm and relaxed.

3. Run your hand down his leg and rest your hand on his paw, while grasping the paw very gently for 1-2 seconds.

4. Take several steps, however many your dog needs, until you can gently grasp the paw for up to 10 seconds with your dog staying calm and relaxed.

5. Grasp the paw for a few seconds, and push slightly to spread the toes apart a little, gently manipulating the toes for 1-2 seconds. Repeat this step until your dog is calm and relaxed.

6. Continue working on holding the paw gently and manipulating the toes, begin pushing slightly on each toe to extend the toenail slightly, as you would if you were going to clip them.

7. Next, repeat the pattern your dog already knows, but this time after pushing on the toe, tap one nail gently with the clippers. Some dogs have such an intense fear of the nail clippers that this step is too much for them. For those dogs, you may need additional steps such as:

a. Repeat steps 1-6 with the nail clippers sitting visibly on the floor, to help the dog relax about the clippers.

b. Repeat steps 1-6 with the nail clippers in your hand, but not using them.

c. Start by tapping the clippers to the toe, not the actual nail, to desensitize the dog to the tapping pattern.

8. Add to the above pattern, tapping one more toenail each time, until you can tap all of the toenails.

9. After you can tap all toenails, move onto an “air-snip” after the tap. Tap the toenail and then “snip” the air with the clippers, right in front of the toe, without actually cutting the nail.

10. Finally move onto clipping a toenail. If you have taken your time and used positive reinforcement and small steps, your dog should be completely calm and relaxed for his nail trim!

These steps outline a nail trim, but the same process can be used for any type of body handling such as cleaning ears, lifting lips to look at teeth, or lifting the tail. If your dog is nervous for body handling either at home or at the vet, working through this type of process will help them to be much more comfortable!