



Freeport Veterinary Hospital

Decreasing Your Dogs Stress at the Vet

We all know that for most dogs, coming to the vet is not their favorite activity but with these tips we hope to change that for our patients! The suggestions below outline things you can do to help change your dog's anxiety level and negative associations to the clinic.

1. Medications: Depending on the level of anxiety your dog is displaying your veterinarian may recommend using a dose of a mild anti-anxiety medication. Given 1-1.5 hours prior to coming to the vet, these medications decrease anxiety levels and make the entire process of being at the clinic less stressful and more relaxing. Using these medications will make it easier to work on some of the other training methods outlined below and will hopefully help permanently change your pets overall outlook of the clinic.

2. Happy Visits: For many dogs, the anxiety they feel at the veterinary clinic stems from a negative association they have formed. This makes sense as most dogs only come to the vet when something is wrong, or they are due for vaccinations. Because of this these dogs have come to associate the vet with experiences they view as negative such as nail trims, ear cleanings, vaccinations and blood draws. Over time this experience becomes rooted in their brain and they become anxious when coming to the clinic even if nothing is being done to them at that time.

Thankfully, this process can be reversed!! To do this we just need to start creating positive experiences at the vet. One way to do this is by bringing your dog in for "Happy Visits." Happy Visits are visits to the clinic where only good things will happen, we will provide your dog with cookies, or a Kong with peanut butter, and some nice attention. We always have high value food items on hand, and you can also bring your dog's favorite chew bone or toy. Over time, having these positive experiences helps to reverse some of the negative association your dog has. Many dogs even end up loving the clinic! Happy visits don't have to be long or complicated, simply stop in when you have a few minutes to spare! At Freeport Vet, we believe so strongly in the effectiveness of these happy visits that we will give you a \$1 credit on your account for every happy visit you bring your dog in for!

4. De-sensitizing at Home: For a lot of dogs the basic things involved in an exam, even a routine one, can seem scary not because they are painful, but because they are out of the ordinary for them. For most pets, their daily routine does not include having their feet handled, or having someone look in their ears or eyes. When they come to the vet their bodies are handled in ways they are not familiar with, and they may be receiving injections, having their nails trimmed or even having blood drawn. Even though the veterinary staff is always as gentle as possible these things can be scary just because they are so unusual for your dog.

One way to help make this process easier is to practice some of these things at home. If your dog is used to the basic things involved in an exam it will be much less scary when he comes to the vet. This is called desensitizing and is a process by which you can accustom your dog to things that may seem scary by practicing them in small quantities in a safe environment (their home). This is something that should be done routinely in all puppies, as it will make them less likely to ever develop or anxiety at the veterinarian but can also be done in older dogs to help reverse some of the fears they have developed.

Desensitizing your dog to a physical exam is easy to do and doesn't ever need to be painful or scary! Simply take a few minutes every day to perform a mock "examination". Run your hands over your dog's



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entire body, touching gently each leg and food, take a peak in each ear, lift the lip to look at the teeth. A retractable ball point pen can be gently pressed against the body to simulate a vaccine. Practice a little restraint with your dog by giving your dog a hug around his neck. Each time you handle a different part of the body offer praise and a treat - make sure to keep the process fun! If your dog displays any signs of anxiety during this process, back up and do a little less, with more praise and treats. If you are interested in learning more about this process, please let our staff know and we will provide you with additional materials.

5. Skip Breakfast: For many dogs, the way to their heart is truly through their stomach! Skipping a meal on the day they are coming to the vet means your dog will be hungrier and more willing to accept treats from the staff. If they are willing to accept treats at the clinic they will enjoy their visits more, be distracted from their exam or procedures and will form more positive associations. For dogs that suffer from car sickness, skipping a meal will often prevent vomiting in the car as well.

6. Bring Treats: If your dog has a particular type of treats that he/she enjoys, make sure to bring some to the clinic with you! This is especially helpful if your dog is fussy about food, or if they have any food allergies or sensitivities that may make the treats at the clinic an unacceptable option.

7. Exercise: Tired dogs are happy and relaxed dogs! Well exercised dogs will have less energy, less anxiety and be much more relaxed and accepting of their visit to the clinic. Whenever possible try to ensure your dog gets a solid 20-30 minutes of aerobic activity the day of their appointment.

8. Pheromone Products: Pheromones are chemicals that are secreted by the body that send signals to the animals. Pheromones are species specific and are odorless and tasteless to other species. Nursing mother dogs naturally product an appeasing pheromone that calms her puppies. Clinical studies have demonstrated that a synthetic form of this pheromone can help provide reassurance and comfort to puppies and dogs of all ages. **Adaptil** is an over the counter product that comes in a spray, a collar and a diffuser that can be used for this purpose. For anxious dogs these products can be very helpful at reducing stress at the clinic (and in other situations too!). Th spray can be applied to a bandana and tied around the dogs neck, or the **Adaptil** collar can be worn. We also have **Adaptil** plug-in diffusers in our exam rooms!

9. Skip the Waiting Room: For anxious dogs, the waiting room can be a very scary place! It can be busy and loud and full of other animals. If an anxious dog has to sit and wait in the lobby they will get progressively more worked up and this will make their exam more difficult for them. If you dog is anxious it is a much better option to wait with them in the car until the doctor is ready to see you. Our staff members will come out to the car and get you when the doctor is ready to go!

10. Have a Plan: Anxious dogs get more anxious when they have no direction. Entering into a stressful situation with no guidance is very hard for them. A lot of anxious dogs do much better even when just given a command to sit or lie down and are given rewards to reinforce their behavior. Dogs that are thinking actively don't have the time to be stressed out! Before you come to the clinic have a plan of how to handle your dog. Remember, your dog is feeling very anxious and may not be able to have the same self-control or perform the same repertoire of behaviors as he does at home, so take that into consideration. Keep it positive, don't scold your dog if he isn't able to hold a down stay the way you would like, instead keep him moving and focusing on you by asking for a series of small, easy behaviors that you can reward. For example, instead of expecting your dog to hold a down for the full five minutes he is in the waiting room, maybe ask for a sit, then walk back a few steps to the end of the leash and call him to you, ask for another sit, then a down, then sit and give a paw and so on. Keeping your dog's brain moving and their focus on you will leave them less room for anxious behaviors!



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