

OVERCOMING the FEAR of VET VISITS

Dogs are not born with an innate fear of visiting the veterinarian's office, they learn to be fearful. There are several reasons for this beyond the obvious. The first is that the owner is often stressed about how the visit will go and how the dog might react. Dogs are incredibly perceptive to our moods and can smell even minute amounts of adrenaline and stress hormones that let them know that the situation is uncomfortable. Secondly, the veterinarian's office smells and looks different than anywhere else that they visit. That alone can cause stress for a dog. Add to that the uncomfortable and sometimes painful things that happen there and you have the recipe for fearfulness.



If your puppy is visiting the vet's office for the first time you have a great opportunity to set the tone for all future visits by following the directions below to make the visit a fun and exciting event.

- 1) Arm yourself with high value dog treats and a positive attitude as you set off for your first visit. You will be using the treats to give your dog the perception that good things happen during vet visits.
- 2) Let your puppy walk around the outside of the building to get used to the sights and smells as you give her lots of the great treats. When she appears comfortable, walk into the veterinarian's waiting room.
- 3) Once inside, repeat the process, being sure to talk in an excited voice while giving lots of those great treats that you brought along. Don't forget to practice stepping up on the weight scale and visiting with the receptionist. You want your little puppy to think you are on a great adventure.
- 4) Once in the exam room remember to stay calm and collected as you reward her for checking out the area. You can even try lifting her to the exam table for a few seconds as you reward heavily.
- 5) Keep rewarding your dog when the veterinarian is performing her examination and, as a distraction, offer a big tasty treat while her shots are being administered. All of that positive reinforcement can go a long way towards overriding the comparatively minor negative event of getting her shots. Use this method every time you visit your veterinarian.

If you have an older dog that already has a fearful reaction to the vet's office your job will be a bit harder. This dog has already made a negative association with vet visits that you will have to overcome. The training protocol is basically the same but will need to be carried out with three very important differences.

- 1) First, practice the above steps at a different veterinarian's office when you are not in need of medical services. I am not recommending that you change your veterinarian; I am recommending that you practice these steps at an office that is new to your dog.

The new office will smell very similar but will hopefully be new enough to your dog that she will not react as fearfully to the new surroundings. You will obviously need to ask the new office for their cooperation. Most animal hospitals will be more than happy to help out.

2) Once your dog is obviously enjoying the visits to the new office, it is time to reintroduce her to your own veterinarian's office again. Go slowly through the above five steps and be sure not to push her faster than she is able to go. If all she can do comfortably is to walk around the outside of the building then celebrate her success until she feels brave enough to venture inside. Your dog's reactions will tell you when you should move to the next step.

2) You will need to practice these "dry runs" many, many times before taking your dog in for a real visit. Take your dog with you every time you run errands and drop in to the vet's office for just a few minutes each time. You will need to practice these steps at least twice a week for many weeks. Practicing multiple times in a week can help speed up the process but be sure to be patient with your dog. If you were afraid to fly, how helpful would it be to have a friend loose his patients with you and force you into the plane against your will?

Remember to "keep your eye on the prize" and work steadily towards the day when your dog can walk confidently into the veterinarian's office!

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