

How to Have a Stress-Free Vet Visit

Level 1 - At Home

Fear Free™

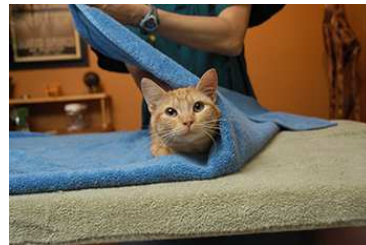
Training for a less fearful veterinary visit starts before the dog/cat comes through our front door. Pet owners can help by training these behaviors to make the exam a less stressful experience.

Cats:

- ✿ Pull out cat carrier a week in advance. Better than that, have leave it out all the time.
 - *If you can't do this, then have your cat follow you in to the bathroom and feed the cat in the bathroom. Shut the door and bring the carrier into the bathroom. This way the kitty can't hide under anything.*
- ✿ When the carrier is out prior to leaving for the appointment, cover the carrier with a blanket that has the cat's smell, and put another blanket or towel in cat carrier.
- ✿ If the cat is super scared of the carrier in house, feed your cat several feet away from carrier. Each day move the food closer and closer to the carrier. **See picture A**
- ✿ Put your cat's favorite treat in the carrier. You can even put catnip inside the carrier.
- ✿ Spray Feliway inside the carrier. Feliway needs to dry 20 mins before introducing the cat to the carrier because it's alcohol based. Otherwise, it may work against your valiant efforts to have the cat go in the carrier.
- ✿ Countercondition the cat to the towel. Always keep the experience positive. **See picture B**



A



B

See the informational handout [“Tips on taking your cat to the vet.”](#) What are some stress triggers for your cat?

Dogs:

- ✿ Tricks for Treats
 - Teach them “Down stay on Mat”
 - Teach them “Hand Target”
 - Teach them “Wait”
 - *Please see flyers at end of protocol for more detail on Tricks for Treats.*
- ✿ Bring your dog to the veterinarian to have happy veterinary visits just for treats only. Bring your pet's favorite treat to give to the staff at the front desk and ask them to reward your dog.

- ✿ Bring non-aggressive dogs in to say hi to the front staff. Practice getting your dog on to the scale (use positive reward).
- ✿ Drive to veterinary clinic just for the fun of a car ride. Give treats while in the parking lot.
- ✿ Spray Adaptil in the car or on a blanket prior to car ride.
- ✿ Take them for a long walk (weather permitting), or do training indoors to help bring down their energy.
 - **Exercise can help reduce anxiety in dogs for everyday living and quality of life.**

For pets that are overly fearful or stressed, ask your doctor about medications that can be prescribed to help. There are safe medications that can be given at home 2-3 hours prior to your appointment/car ride.

Your veterinarian may also discuss holistic supplements as well such as Rescue Remedy, or Zylkene.

See informational handout *"What are some stress triggers for your dog?"*

Level 2 - Car Ride to the Clinic

Cats:

- ✿ Cover cat carrier with towel. For an extra added benefit, add Feliway to the towel (allowing 20 mins for the alcohol base to dry). Keep towel covering the kennel during the car ride, and in the lobby.
- ✿ Have low music playing in the car. There is specially made music for cats you can purchase that has been shown to be calming.
- ✿ Talk in a low, mellow tone.
- ✿ If your cat is food responsive, allow for cheese whiz or other various types of food treats in carrier for ride.
 - If your cat is not food responsive, try cat nip in carrier.
- ✿ Spray Feliway on their favorite blanket in the car.

Dogs:

- ✿ Have low music playing in the car. There is specially made music for dogs you can purchase that has been shown to be calming.
- ✿ Come to your appointment a tad early and go for a walk in parking lot.
- ✿ Meet and greet in lobby with treats. Let the front staff and technicians (all in scrubs) give the treats.

Level 3 - In the Lobby

Cats:

- ✿ Cover cat carrier with towel. Add Feliway to the towel. Keep towel covering the carrier during the car ride, and in the lobby.
- ✿ Talk in a low, mellow tone.
- ✿ If a room is available, ask to go directly into the exam room.

Dogs:

- ✿ If your dog is scared or barking dogs, ask if there is a room available to wait in. If they are afraid of the floor, make sure there is a no-slip mat for them to stand on (and if you don't see one, ask).
- ✿ While you are in the lobby:
 - Offer treats or a favorite toy.
 - **Avoid** looking directly at other dogs. It can make them feel uncomfortable or even threatened.

Level 4 - Exam Room/Treatment Room

Cats:

- ✿ If your cat is food responsive, offer cheese whiz or other various types of food treats (can feed while getting exam and treatments).
 - If not food responsive, try toys or cat nip.
- ✿ Give your cat a massage, or a scratch in their favorite/preferred place.
- ✿ If treatments are performed in the exam room:
 - **Do not** touch or hold your cat. Cats can behave unpredictably when they feel uncomfortable, and cat bites to owners can be very dangerous.
 - **Do** talk to your cat. Cats are very voice responsive, and the sound of their owner's voices can be soothing.

Dogs:

- ✿ Offer cheese whiz, peanut butter, or other special treats during the exam and treatments.
- ✿ Give your dog a massage, or a scratch in their favorite/preferred place.
- ✿ If your dog is toy responsive, use a toy to distract them, make them sit, and wait.

A quiet room that has music playing would be ideal for the anxious pet.

When patients are painful, their fear of pain can cause anxiety. Talk to your veterinarian about using pain medication for painful pets, which may allow further evaluation.

If too much force is needed for your pet, you can reschedule routine treatments such as nail trims.

TIPS ON TAKING YOUR CAT TO THE VET

We are glad that you are bringing your cat to our hospital for a visit! Getting your cat to the veterinary hospital can be challenging, but it's worth it. Veterinary care, including annual exams, lab screening and vaccinations, is the best way to keep your cat healthy and happy. Cats are also masters at hiding illness. Be aware of any changes in your cat's drinking, eating, grooming or litter box habits, problems with jumping or other movements, weight loss or gain, bad breath, or if your cat is withdrawn or sleeping more. Be sure to mention any changes to your healthcare team during your exam.

TRAVEL TIPS

AT HOME

Love the carrier. Use a carrier that is easy to take your cat in and out of (top-loading carriers work best). At home, keep the cat carrier out of the closet and easily accessible. Create a positive association with the carrier by making it a comfortable resting, feeding, play and sleeping location. Keep toys and food around and in the carrier.



Get smelly. To make the carrier more inviting, place in it a piece of clothing from a favorite person or a piece of cloth dampened with Feliway, a calming synthetic pheromone available at Southgate Animal Clinic.

Keep it cozy. Place a blanket or cover over the carrier during transport.

Handle your cat. Pretend to do routine veterinary procedures with your cat at home, like touching the cat's face, ears, feet and tail.

ON THE DAY OF YOUR VISIT

Do not snack. Do not feed your cat just before you get in the car to visit the veterinarian. This can prevent messy motion sickness. An empty tummy will also make your cat easier to coax and reward during the exam. Additionally, a 12 hour fast can be beneficial if blood is being drawn during an exam.

Take a thick towel. Your veterinary team will use a towel to handle your cat. It helps if the towel smells like home.



Bring your cat's favorite treats or toys.

BACK AT HOME

In the house. The trip is not over until it is over. Keep the cover or blanket on the carrier until you are in the house.

Take your time. Place the carrier in a quiet place, open the door and let your cat come out whenever it is ready.

Stress triggers for **cats**

Are you contributing to your cat's anxiety and behavior issues? It's possible if you do any of the following:

1. You punish your cat. Swatting and hitting your cat only teaches it to fear your approach. Telling your cat "no" only interrupts the behavior. Instead, show your cat what you want it to do, and reward it for appropriate behaviors. Cats are very curious and agile—so give yours places to go and things to do, and keep potentially dangerous items picked up and put away.

2. You assume your cat "knows" English. Animals communicate using body language and are very good at figuring us out. Most people don't bother teaching their cats to sit, much less any other cue—but it's surprisingly easy to train them to do behaviors on cue. Just don't assume your cat understands what you're saying without teaching it what you want it to do first.

3. You grab your cat's head to tousle its hair. Nobody likes to have their head grabbed and rubbed—cats are no different! Most cats prefer a few long strokes from head to tail; others prefer a small amount of gentle scratching around the chin or ears. Many cats get irritated by an extended period of repetitive stroking.

4. You hug or kiss your cat. Cats like to be able to move and escape situations. When we hold them tightly, they may become stressed, anticipating that something bad is going to happen.

5. You don't clean your cat's litter box. Nobody likes to use a dirty toilet—including your cat. Imagine not flushing your own toilet for three or four days! Ideally, the litter box should be scooped every time you notice waste. Otherwise, they should be scooped at least once daily. Most need to be completely emptied and cleaned every one to two weeks.

Regular scooping also allows you to identify early signs of illness such as diarrhea, constipation, or excessive or lack of urination.



6. Your cat's litter box is in an inconvenient location. The spot you've chosen for the litter box might work best for you, but a cat that has to negotiate humans of all ages, other pets, stairs, or loud appliances might feel like the journey is a suicide mission every time it needs to eliminate.

7. You tempt your cat to play by wiggling your fingers or toes, then get angry when it bites or scratches you. Cats naturally grab "prey" using their teeth and claws. Offer your cat the appropriate chew toys so it knows that hands are for loving—not biting!

8. You leave your cat home alone with a jumbo-sized portion of food and one litter box while you go on vacation for a long weekend. Especially for cats that eat quickly, this can be stressful because they'll have no food left by the end of the weekend. Cats can become sick if they don't eat every day. Timed feeders can be helpful in this situation. A self-cleaning litter box may also be a reasonable option, but don't rely on it—it's important that you pay attention to the frequency and quality of your pet's eliminations so you can identify any changes that could indicate stress-induced health problems such as cystitis, constipation, and diarrhea.

9. You use strong-smelling cleansers, deodorizers, and products containing alcohol. Cats' noses are sensitive, and these scents can be offensive to them. Be careful about the use of these products in your home or on your person. Some cats may even find the smell of hair spray, perfume, or cologne unpleasant.

10. You add new cats to your home without an introduction period. When an unrelated cat appears and tries to join a related group, it's in the cats' nature to attack and force the outsider to leave. Without a proper period of controlled, gradual introduction, the chance of aggression between cats and stress increases.

Information provided by Valarie V. Tynes, DVM, DACVB, Premier Veterinary Behavior Consulting, Sweetwater, Texas, and Colleen Koch, DVM, Lincoln Land Animal Clinic, Jacksonville, Ill.

Stress triggers for **dogs**

information provided by Valarie V. tynes, DVM, DaCVB, Premier Veterinary Behavior Consulting, sweetwater, texas, and Colleen Koch, DVM, Lincoln Land animal Clinic, Jacksonville, ill.

Are you contributing to your dog's anxiety and behavior issues? it's possible if you do any of the following:

1. You punish your dog. Dogs are creatures of opportunity, so avoid opportunities for trouble. If you leave trash or your "stuff" where the dog can get it, it will explore the wonderful-smelling tidbits and assume they're his or hers. If you value your "stuff," keep it picked up and put away.

2. You keep telling your dog "no." When you say "no" and your dog stops the behavior, but then repeats it in a short period of time, the "no" was simply an interrupter. Skeptical? Try saying "pickle" instead of "no," and the same pattern of stopping then repeating the behavior is likely to return. Instead, show your dog what you want it to do.

3. You assume your dog "knows" English. Animals communicate using body language and are very good at figuring us out. Unless you have specifically taught your dog to "drop it," "leave it," "get it," and "come," just to name a few, then your dog may not actually "know" these terms. Therefore, using them will result in stress as your dog attempts to guess the right answer.

4. You say to your dog, "It's OK." While this may comfort some pets, generally, owners only say this when something bad is happening or is about to happen. It becomes a cue to be afraid or vigilant. Instead, teach your dog some coping skills for various anxiety-inducing situations.



5. You pull on the leash. You may think your dog is pulling you and that your dog thinks the only way it can go forward is to tug the slow lazy human forward. But pulling on the leash increases everyone's frustration and stress. We owe it to our dogs to

teach them—without punishment—that a loose leash is a wonderful thing. (*For more information on Nos. 4 and 5, check out Decoding Your Dog: The Ultimate Experts Explain Common Dog Behaviors and Reveal How to Prevent or Change Unwanted Ones, from the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists.*)

6. You hug or kiss your dog. Do you like when someone holds onto you so you can't move away? How about being hugged and kissed by strangers? Dogs in general do not like to be hugged and kissed—especially by strangers. Restraining a dog so it can't get away puts you on its "not-to-be-trusted" list.

7. You stare at your dog. Direct prolonged eye contact with dogs is very confrontational. In canine body language, it suggests you would like to interact—and not necessarily in a good way.

8. You point or shake your finger at your dog. Typically, when you're doing this, you're also leaning over your dog—and this too makes your dog uncomfortable. How do you know? The "guilty look" isn't because it's actually guilty, but rather it's uncomfortable with the current interaction.

9. You command your pet to "get down" when it's jumping. What word do you use when you want your dog to get into the position where its belly is touching the floor? If it's "down," then when your pet is jumping up, do you expect it to have its belly on the floor when you say "down"—or just on all four paws? Use a different term such as "off," or "four on floor" and teach the dog what the word means. The name of the cue is irrelevant. You could use the word "purple," as long as you show the dog the action that goes along with it. (*See No. 3.*)

10. You don't "let sleeping dogs lie." Dogs don't like to be bothered while sleeping any more than we do.

**Fear-Free veterinary visits start before the dog trots through the clinic door.
Pet owners can help by training these three behaviors to make the exam a
less stressful experience.**



Jun 19, 2015
By Mikkel Becker, CPDT
dvm360.com



Bella and Buckley should have good doggy manners, and doggy parents just love showing off their precocious pooch's amazing abilities to sit, wait, jump through hoops and rollover on command. But do your clients know that training also boosts their pooch's positive emotional state? Even better, a relaxed pup might just be more willing to do what you need her to do in the exam room. Sound too good to be true? It just takes a little training.

Veterinary visits are naturally frightening for many dogs because of the invasive nature of the work. When dogs feel uncomfortable or scared, they may freeze—and many progress to struggling, fleeing or fighting to get away. When the pooch panics this increases the risk of injury to the dog—and to the veterinary team—and may lead to pronounced fear during future veterinary visits.

Even the more laid back canines may have unique challenges if you're handling them in a sensitive area or they dislike a certain procedure, like nail trims. Or they may need guidance in tasks like remaining calmly in place on the scale and during an exam.

Training allows the pet owner to share a form of communication and cooperation with their dog. When dogs can willingly participate in their care, they are more relaxed and easy to handle during their visit. It also helps you refocus the dog when you need to either distract during handling or procedures and to help pups calm down when they're feeling upset.

Training is highly individualized, but every dog can benefit from learning three foundational behaviors for less stressful veterinary visits. Read on to the next page for three helpful training tips.

Tricks for treats: How to train pets for a Fear-Free Veterinary Experience

Fear-Free veterinary visits start before the dog trots through your front door. Pet owners can help by training these three behaviors to make the exam a less stressful experience.



Jun 19, 2015
By [Mikkel Becker, CPDT](#)

Training tip 1: Down stay on a mat

How to train

1. Start by tossing treats to get your dog interested in the mat area. When she puts any paw on the mat, mark with a word like “yes” or a click, and then toss a treat onto the mat.
2. Over time, work to get the dog into a down position. Either ask for the down once she’s on the mat or wait for it to naturally happen and place treats onto the mat when she does.
3. Eventually add a cue like “mat” to the behavior when your dog reliably goes to lie down in the space. Reward your dog intermittently for resting on her mat so she never anticipates how long it will be. Gradually build up distractions and duration.

How it helps

The mat serves as a security blanket, going along with your dog from the home, to the car, to a waiting area and into the exam. The mat gives your dog a designated area to rest instead of pacing restlessly.

Quick tip: Choose the right mat

The best mats are those with an anti-slip bottom to prevent slipping on slick surfaces. You can place the mat on the floor, scale and exam table to provide a familiar and comfortable space for your dog when she’s weighed and examined.

Training tip 2: Hand target

How to train

1. Place your hand gently out a few inches from your dog’s nose. If she makes any movement towards the hand, mark with a word like “yes” or a click, and reward.
2. If your dog is uninterested, start with a peanut butter approved by your veterinarian or spreadable treat on your hand. Then, once she’s interested in the hand, remove the smeared treat. Add in a word like “touch” and say it just as your dog touches her nose to your hand.
3. Work with your dog until she’s able to follow your hand further distances and onto and off of things. Practice the behavior with other people so your dog gets used to touching other people’s hands as well.

How it helps

Hand targeting prepares your dog to willingly move towards, away from and on or off of objects and directs her focus. Then you can ask your dog to target to get her out of the car or onto the exam table. The hand target also provides a familiar way for your dog to first greet and interact with new people, such as members of the

veterinary team. If your dog is distracted by something, such as another dog in the waiting room, the hand target allows for you to help refocus their attention and to get her willingly turn to face you.

Bonus: Training your pet to hand target can also boost her confidence with novel or seemingly threatening objects. If your dog is afraid of the stethoscope, you can use the hand target to get your dog to willingly approach the instrument and investigate it at her own pace. This makes the novel object more of a familiar part of a game she knows how to play rather than something she fears.

Training tip 3: Wait

How to train

1. Start with your dog in a sit or a down—even four paws firmly planted on the ground will do. Say the word “wait” and make a small movement, like a foot shift or glance away. If your dog stays in position, offer a reward. Mark with a word, like “yes,” or a click when your dog remains in place during distractions.
2. If your dog breaks the “wait,” make it easier the next time with less distraction.
3. Slowly build up until your dog can remain in place even while distractions happen. For example, you can lower the food bowl or open a door.
4. Work up to adding in petting and handling your dog’s body parts as your dog stays relaxed. Reward her for letting the handling and touch occur and for remaining in a stationary position.
5. Build in a release cue by saying a word like “OK” to let her know the exercise is finished.

How it helps

This behavior teaches your dog to remain in place until she’s released. Your dog may feel frightened if veterinary team members handle her body and she isn’t sure why they’re touching her or what to do about it. But if your dog has been trained to remain in place and knows a reward is coming, she may stay calmer. You can also use wait in combination with prior handling and associated rewards to help your dog remain calm when she’s handled in myriad ways.

Bonus: During the exam you can ask your dog to wait while the veterinarian examines each body part or performs each procedure. Then you can release and reward your dog afterward.

There are many benefits of training the “wait” behavior. For example, it can help you get your dog to remain on the exam table rather than jumping, or help your dog remain calmly on her side for handling until you release her.

How to create low-stress veterinary visits for cats



The ominous hissing, the mournful meows, the defensive scratching or biting, the upset bowels—feline stress is just plain unpleasant for cats and you. Many cats get stressed when it's time for a veterinary visit. Thankfully, there are ways to help cats relax and enjoy the ride—yes, even in the car. Here's what you can do.

1 Transport your cat in a carrier

Putting cats in a carrier on the way to and from the veterinary clinic is extremely important. Cats are often startled by loud noises or other pets, and, if you're carrying your cat in your hands, you might not be able to hold on if it abruptly tries to get away. Also, cats that are allowed to roam freely inside the car face the risk of more severe injury should there be an accident.



2 Choose a hard-plastic carrier with a removable top

Some cats might resist being put into a carrier. But removable tops make getting cats into—and out of—the carrier easier. Simply undo the screws or latches, lift off the top, set the cat in the bottom, and replace the top. This eliminates the need to force the cat inside, which makes the cat—and you—more relaxed.

3 Make the carrier a favorite place

Some cats come to love their carriers. When cats see their carriers as safe, enjoyable places, they're

happy to go into them and feel more safe in scary places, like the car. Use these strategies to create crate-fondness in your cat:

- Leave the carrier out in your house so your cat can access it at any time.
- Make the carrier inviting by putting a favorite blanket or toy in it.
- Every now and then, lay a few treats inside the carrier.

4 Head to the veterinary clinic for "happy visits"

Does your cat seem to bristle at the thought of visiting the veterinarian? Then take it on a few stress-free trial runs. Call the veterinary clinic to ask if the schedule would allow you and your cat to stop in for five or 10 minutes. You won't be making a medical visit, but rather a mock appointment that allows your cat to experience all the steps of a routine visit without the physical examination. This free-of-charge "happy visit" gives your cat the chance to get used to the sounds and smells of the clinic, meet the veterinary team members, and eat a few treats all while enjoying the safety of its carrier. After some canoodling, you and your cat will head back home.

If a car ride alone puts your cat in a tailspin, entice your cat into its carrier and start by going for a test drive around the block. Continue to take a drive every now and then, gradually increasing the amount of time you and your cat spend in the car. Remember to reward your cat with a treat for being a good passenger. Eventually, you'll work your way up to doing a drive that will allow you and your cat to make a "happy visit." Positive reinforcement is the best way to modify feline behavior, so making car rides and veterinary visits pleasant will help decrease your cat's anxiety.



TRAINING TIP 1:

Down stay on a mat

HOW to train

1 **Start by tossing treats** to get your dog interested in the mat area. When she puts any paw on the mat, mark with a word like “yes” or a click, and then toss a treat onto the mat.

2 **Over time**, work to get the dog into a down position. Either ask for the down once she’s on the mat or wait for it to naturally happen and place treats onto the mat when she does.

3 **Eventually add a cue** like “mat” to the behavior when your dog reliably goes to lie down in the space. Reward your dog intermittently for resting on her mat so she never anticipates how long it will be. Gradually build up distractions and duration.

HOW it helps

The mat serves as a security blanket, going along with your dog from the home, to the car, to a waiting area and into the exam. The mat gives your dog a designated area to rest instead of pacing restlessly.

QUICK TIP:

Choose the right mat

The best mats are those with an anti-slip bottom to prevent slipping on slick surfaces. You can place the mat on the floor, scale and exam table to provide a familiar and comfortable space for your dog when she’s weighed and examined.

