

Helpful Ways to Take the Edge Off Veterinary Visits

Nearly 80% of dogs experience fear, anxiety and stress at the vet. For cats it can be even worse since a carrier is involved, and many only go in their cat carrier when it's time for a vet visit. Here are some tricks and tools to help your stressed, frightened pet.

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Nearly 80% of dogs experience fear, anxiety and stress at the vet
- Once in a while, drop by your vet just to say hello to show your pet that the veterinarian's office isn't a scary place, just somewhere new to visit, sniff and explore
- Calming nutraceuticals and herbs can be administered a few hours before the vet visit; for highly stressed pets, I recommend the use of safe sedatives
- Choose a fear-free clinic with species-specific exam rooms, which conducts exams where your pet prefers, such as on your lap, on the floor or in a carrier
- For pets that simply despise going to the vet, despite your best efforts at calming them, it's worth exploring whether in-home veterinary care is available in your area

Visiting the veterinarian is a stressful, unpleasant experience for many pets, putting pet owners looking out for their dog or cat's well-being in a tough spot. Regular veterinary visits are essential for wellness checks and spotting any health problems early on, when they're more easily treatable. But many pet owners put off going to the vet to spare their pet the extra stress.

Just how stressed do pets get when it's time for a check-up? It depends on your pet's personality, but research suggests nearly 80% of dogs experience fear, anxiety and stress at the vet.¹ In one study of more than 450 dogs, 69.9% would not enter the veterinary clinic willingly, while another study found 77.8% were stressed before they even arrived at the vet.

In another example, veterinary behaviorists reported that 28.9% of dogs were under high stress even in the waiting room.² When pets are stressed, it interferes with proper care, resulting in increases in blood pressure, temperature, pulse rate and panting — signs that can be confused with other conditions and at a minimum interfere with accurate physiological measurements.

The stress also makes it more likely that pet owners will skip the vet entirely in an attempt to spare their pet — and themselves — the ordeal. According to Fear Free Pets, "Clients report reluctance to bring cats to the veterinarian due to the stress of placing the cat in the carrier, transit, dogs in the veterinary clinic, and examination and acted unfriendly for days on returning home."³

Visiting the Vet Doesn't Have To Be Stressful

Trips to the vet can be a peaceful experience for your pet, provided you take a proactive approach to keeping your pet calm and start the positive learning experiences early on in their life. Ideally, this starts when your pet is young by acclimating them to the veterinarian's office. Once in a while, drop by your vet just to say hello — do give them a heads up that you'll be coming and ask when a slower, quieter time to visit would be.

This shows your pet that the veterinarian's office isn't a scary place, just somewhere new to visit, sniff and explore. For cats, this begins with getting them used to the cat carrier and occasional car rides.

Many cats only go in their cat carrier when it's time for a veterinary visit, leading them to associate the two — and hide whenever you bring the carrier out. A better option is to leave the carrier out for your cat to nap or enjoy a treat in. Then, try going for a short drive with your cat in the carrier, then coming straight home so they learn that's nothing to be afraid of.

It's important that your pet gets used to handling as well, including having their paws, nails and ears touched. The more that your pet tolerates and, even better, enjoys the interaction, the easier it will be during a veterinarian's exam.

Calming Tools to Help Your Stressed Pet

If you've tried all of the above and your pet still despises the vet, take steps to ease your pet's nerves as much as possible.

Examples of methods to reduce stress before and during veterinary visits include calming nutraceuticals and herbs, such as holy basil (tulsi), valerian, l-theanine, rhodiola, ashwagandha and chamomile, which can be administered a few hours before the vet visit. Finding a veterinary clinic that commits to also reducing stress in pets can also help; this means finding a **fear-free certified practice**.

You'll also want to minimize the time spent at the clinic — and wait with your pet in your vehicle if you can't go directly to an exam room. Species-specific exam rooms are also important to help your pet feel at ease — even better if they also use species-specific pheromones and calming music.

If your pet gets highly stressed by the vet, I highly recommend the use of safe sedatives, as it allows for appropriate medical interventions while reducing the risk of additional post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Remember that your demeanor also matters; the more you stay calm, the easier it will be for your pet to also.

Another trick is to limit your pet's food prior to the appointment and come prepared with a handful of their favorite treats.⁴ If they're a little bit hungry during the examination, they're more likely to focus on and respond to the tasty treats you're offering.

The Vet's Approach Also Matters

The veterinarian you choose can also make or break your pet's opinion of veterinary trips. As noted by veterinarian Dr. Cynthia Maro in *The Times*:⁵

“Our office uses calming essential oils, slow movements, restraint techniques that mimic calming behaviors of the parents for their young and other methods to create the most comfortable experience for your pets. Do tell the staff about where your pet likes to be rubbed and bring their toys and treats from home to have staff use as positive rewards for their ‘Good Dog’ and ‘Sweet Kitty’ behaviors.”

In addition, choose a clinic with species-specific exam rooms, which conducts exams where your pet prefers, such as on your lap, on the floor or in a carrier, if possible.

The American Association of Feline Practitioners (AAFP) and the International Society for Feline Medicine (ISFM) also established the Cat Friendly Practice (CFP) program to make veterinary care less stressful for cats and their guardians.⁶ This includes feline-friendly handling, such as performing exams while your cat is under a blanket, if that’s what she prefers.

Cat friendly practices also provide safe havens to animals that must be hospitalized, and encourage guardians to leave a blanket from home to help their cat feel more secure. Special attention is also paid to assess cats’ pain levels and provide individualized care based on life stage and health concerns.⁷

The best method of positional compliance must also be uncovered. This means identifying how your pet prefers to be handled during the exam so she feels the most comfortable. This should then be noted in their patient record.

For pets that simply despise going to the vet, despite your best efforts at calming them, it’s worth exploring whether in-home veterinary care is available in your area. When your veterinarian comes to you, pets can stay in the comfort of their own, relieving many of the most stressful elements of veterinary clinics. For very fearful pets, this may offer the ideal option to ease anxiety while still getting them the veterinary care they need.

Sources and References

^{1, 2, 3} [Fearfreepets.com Fear Free Symposium Lisa Radosta Proceedings](#)

^{4, 5} [The Times June 13, 2022](#)

⁶ [American Association of Feline Practitioners, Cat Friendly Practices](#)

⁷ [Cat Friendly Practice](#)
