

How to Take the Stress Out of Veterinary Visits

Countless cats and nearly 80% of dogs are fearful and anxious when they go to the vet - so much so that some owners think twice before bringing their pets in for regular visits. If your pet is one of the many who dread the veterinarian, take these steps now to help fear melt away.

Analysis by [Dr. Karen Shaw Becker](#)

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Veterinary visits come with unfamiliar sights, sounds and smells, other animals and strangers around every corner, making many pets stressed out and anxious
- For cats, take time getting them used to the cat carrier, and all pets should spend time taking occasional car rides to neutral or fun places — like a family member’s house or local park
- Gradually acclimate your pet to the vet’s office by dropping by for a short visit to say hello; this is important for cats too, especially kittens
- It's also important that your pet gets used to handling, including having their paws, nails and ears touched
- Choose a fear-free certified practice 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

Many pets, including nearly 80% of dogs, are fearful and anxious when they go to the vet.¹ There are unfamiliar sights, sounds and smells, other animals and strangers around every corner. Veterinary exams may come along with handling and procedures that your pet isn’t used to, and even the process of getting to the vet’s office can be stressful in its own right — think cat carriers and car rides.

Unfortunately, for some pet guardians, veterinary visits become such a hassle that they’re less likely to bring their pets in for regular visits, which can put their pet’s health at risk.² But with a bit of preparation and care, it’s possible to get even the most fearful pet on-board with visiting the vet.

Is Your Pet Uncomfortable at the Vet?

First off, it’s important to understand how anxious your pet is when at the vet. Every animal is different, with unique tolerances to new experiences. “Within a household, you can have one dog who is relaxed and one who is a challenge, even with the exact same circumstances,” dog trainer Victoria Schade told PetMD.³

If your pet is typically an anxious animal, you can expect the same at the vet. But even laid-back cats and dogs may get nervous during an exam. Pets that have already had a negative experience at the vet are particularly likely to regard it as an unpleasant experience. “Therefore, animals who have been traumatized by an experience at the vet are more likely to react badly at future visits,” Schade says.⁴

Cats that are stressed may hiss, growl, scratch or bite, while dogs may snarl, act aggressively or try to shrink away. Cats may try to avoid going in their cat carriers — and once at the vet avoid coming out of them — while dogs may try to run from the exam room.

Drop by Your Vet to Say Hello

It's a good idea to slowly **acclimate your pet to the vet's office**, ideally from a young age. 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. Even cats can make quick social visits to the vet. I also recommend my clients multitask a hello visit by weighing their animals when they swing by.

"This is important, with kittens in particular," Dr. Cathy Lund, who runs a cat-centered veterinary practice in Providence, Rhode Island, told PetMD. "We want to teach them that changes in scenery are OK, that changes in the environment are not stressful."⁵ You should also take time getting your cat used to the cat carrier, and all pets should spend time taking occasional car rides to fun places — like a family member's house or local park.

It's also important that your pet gets used to handling, 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. Here's a video on some quick tips for puppies:

Choose Your Veterinary Clinic Carefully

Your pet's experience at the vet also depends on the clinic and the veterinarian. Choose a **fear-free certified practice** 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.

There are also **cat-friendly practices**, which specialize in making your kitty feel at home. They may have separate, quiet waiting areas for cats or conduct an exam while your cat hides under a blanket. Your veterinarian should make every effort to keep your cat or dog calm during visits and avoid using excessive restraint or exposing your pet to fear-inducing stimuli, like loud noises and other animals.

In some cases, if your pet is extremely fearful of the vet, even sedation may be preferable to restraint. If you're going to have a long wait, another simple trick to ease your pet's nerves is to wait in your car or outside the clinic in a safe, grassy area.

You can bring a few treats and a favorite blanket with you to make your pet more comfortable. Your attitude also matters, as pets pick up on our emotions. The more you stay calm, the easier it will be for your pet to also.

"Don't drag your animal out of the carrier or be rough with the leash," Lund told PetMD. "If your pet is very scared, dismantle the carrier so the vet can examine him while he stays put. The biggest thing is recognizing that this is all fear and to just minimize the fear."⁶

To ease your pet's nerves ahead of time, consider using flower essences and pheromone sprays for cats and offering calming nutraceuticals and herbs, such as holy basil (tulsi), valerian, l-theanine, rhodiola, ashwagandha and chamomile to dogs, which can be administered a few hours before the vet visit.

Consider Mobile Veterinary Care

Mobile veterinary care is an alternative option for pets and their owners who prefer to have their veterinarian come to them. This eliminates many of the most stressful elements of veterinary clinics while getting your pet the care they need. In-home veterinary care is ideal for annual visits and wellness checks, but keep in mind you may still need to see another veterinarian for emergency care, surgeries, x-rays and other procedures.

For this reason, it's still a good idea to get your pet comfortable with visiting a veterinary practice, so if the need arises, you'll be ready to get help when your pet needs it.

Sources and References

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

^{3,4,5,6} [PetMD July 18, 2017](#)
