



Happy Handling for Vet Checks etc.

Lots of dogs love to be stroked and certainly enjoy a good old fuss, but might become worried about more formal handling such as when we closely examine specific parts of their bodies. Dogs don't necessarily understand why we have suddenly changed the way we are touching them, and rather than fussing them are now holding parts of their bodies – such as their ears or paws - firmly and still. They have no way of knowing that we are looking 'just to make sure everything is alright', so this can result in them becoming worried or frightened, especially if handling is uncomfortable or painful for them. If your dog is in pain, they are more likely to show fear and respond aggressively. If you think they have a health issue, its best to take them straight to the vet.

How do I know how my dog feels about handling?

Dogs that are worried about handling can show a variety of behaviours:

Some dogs might want to run right away and try to completely avoid the situation altogether, so they might become very wriggly and squirm around in an attempt to get free from being held still.

Some dogs might completely freeze and remain very still instead – hoping you'll get the hint and stop right away and leave them alone. Freezing and tolerating being handled doesn't mean they're enjoying it, so if your dog does this it's important to recognise, they're afraid and stop what you're doing!

Some dogs might feel they have no other means of telling you to let them go than to growl or even snap if they feel very threatened when being handled.

Respond appropriately to your dog's feelings!

Our 'Body Language' hand-out will help you become familiar with common signs of fears, so you can observe for any of these in your dog and learn how to assess how they are feeling about being handled. **If you notice any signs that your dog is becoming worried about how you are handling them, then stop and pause to consider how to make your handling easier for them –** such as reducing your speed, reducing the amount of time you are handling them and handling them in a gentler manner, with less physical contact or pressure at this point while they're learning to enjoy it!

You can help build a more positive association by talking in a calm voice and rewarding them with a tasty treat or game!

Introducing handling so your dog doesn't find it worrying

Start where your dog feels comfortable

It will help to make your dog feel comfortable if you start to practice handling them in an environment that they are most comfortable in, because they're likely to feel safe here. Start by touching them on a part of their body where they're used to being touched and enjoy it – this will be different for every dog!

Reward as you go along - make every step of the way enjoyable!

Make being handled extra enjoyable by giving your dog tasty treats – something they really love eating – just after you have touched each part of their body. For example, touch their ear then remove your hand and give a yummy treat, and then repeat, touch their ear and then give them a treat.

Be gentle, systematic and brief!

Keep all your handling slow, relaxed and drawn out using prolonged, calm movements. Dogs feel confident when they can predict what is going to happen so if you always examine your dog's body in the same order then they will know exactly what to expect, which will give them confidence. And by touching them for just a second or two at a time, and then having a break before moving to the next part of their body, you're giving them breathing space in between!

Gradually increase the time you handle your dog

Once your dog is readily accepting brief handling you can gradually start to build up the length of time you are handling them at each point. Slowly just gently hold or stroke each body part for a teeny while longer each time you practice and always follow up with a tasty treat! Remember, going at your dog's pace is key to them putting their trust in you!

Stop if your dog seems worried

It's really important that your dog knows that you will recognise their attempts at telling you they're becoming worried, and that you'll stop and not carry on – which might make them panic! Think about which part of their body you were handling when they responded in this way and, after taking a break, start again at a part they do seem to enjoy being handled.

Introduce new places and people

Whenever you are starting to examine them in a new location go right back to the beginning again and start by gently touching them for a brief moment and giving them the extra tasty treat. And again, build their confidence in this new place by gradually building up the length of time you handle them. You can then introduce new people! Always make sure the person is well-known to your dog beforehand and that they are happy to help you teach your dog. Give

them clear instructions on how to touch your dog, exactly where and for how long – and remember to begin with this will just be a gentle fuss in a place where your dog really enjoys being fussed, and always followed by extra tasty treats!

Introduce grooming equipment gradually

Firstly, make sure you are using equipment that is best suited to your dog's coat type – as there are all sorts of brushes and combs available. Starting with a very gentle, soft brush can be useful.

Simply do exactly as you did with your hands – starting by placing the brush onto your dog's body for a brief moment then removing it and giving them a very tasty treat. And continue with the step by step process as slowly as you did when introducing your handling!

Take a regular walk to your vet practice

So why not plan a weekly walkies to your local vet? Pop in with some of your dog's favourite treats – or you could even take his dinner along and feed him there – and do nothing more than go inside, let your dog sniff around the waiting area and make it a fun experience for them. Be aware that other people and animals might be waiting for appointments so going at a quiet period might be useful as you'll have more space and time!

If your dog is struggling with learning to be handled

Simply stop and have a break, which you'll both appreciate. Only practice handling when you and your dog are both relaxed so that they won't pick up on any tension you might be feeling, and you will be ready to help them remain calm.

If your dog already has a severe or established fear of handling, or is already showing signs of aggression when being handled.....

...contact your vet for a health check to rule out a medical problem that might be affecting your dog's behaviour. Your dog might benefit from a professionally qualified and experienced behaviourist providing advice on the gradual introduction of handling where a dog is showing a fearful response.

Dogs Trust provide lifelong behavioural support for all our adopted dogs.

If you need help for your Dog Trust Dog please email: reception@dogstrust.ie

For more information about Dogs Trust, to make a donation or help us in our campaigns please call 01 879 1000, write to: Dogs Trust, Ashbourne Road, Finglas, Dublin 11 or visit www.dogstrust.ie