



Happy Handling for Vet Check's 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 – start with an area your dog feels comfortable with and keep sessions really short. After you have touched the comfy area you can slowly move onto touching different parts 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!



Step-by-step guide to lifting your dog onto a vet's table

Being placed on a table can make a dog feel vulnerable because they aren't able to easily get away if they're worried. Teaching small dogs and puppies that being lifted and placed onto a table can be pleasant and enjoyable should help their confidence grow.

If your dog finds this particularly difficult, ask your vet if they can be examined on the floor instead.

You will need:

- tasty treats
- a sturdy low coffee table
- a sturdy higher table such as a dining room or kitchen table
- a non-slip mat, like a bath or yoga mat.

Safety first! Picking a dog up to place them on a table might mean you need to twist your body or hold your dog away from your body, which could cause strain. Stand close to the table and move alongside it so you don't need to twist to put your dog down. It's a good idea to practice the movement without your dog first.

1. Put your non-slip mat onto the lower table and scatter some treats on it. Pick up your dog in the way you've taught them, using your cue word. Place them on the table and allow them to enjoy the treats. Ideally you want to put them in the centre of the table, safely away from the edge. But if they're a bit worried they might stay close to you, so be prepared for them to lean towards or onto you.
2. To get them down, guide them in to position alongside you and gently lift them back down. Reward them with praise and treats.
3. Repeat step one without treats ready on the table, Give your dog a treat from your hand instead.
4. Repeat steps one, two and three with the higher table.

Even for dogs who are happy being lifted, there are times when you should avoid lifting them. If your dog is unwell, injured or recovering from surgery, you may need to avoid lifting them, or change the way you pick them up so you don't put pressure on any sore part of their body. When you're at the vet, let the vet know where your dog is sore and ask if they can check your dog over without lifting them onto the table.

Step-by-step guide to picking up your small dog or puppy

You will need:

- tasty treats
- some space
- a non-slip floor, or a bath or yoga mat.
-

Safety first! Lifting anything, let alone something that moves, places your body under pressure. Avoid unnecessary strain by bending your knees to crouch down next to your dog. Bending forwards from your waist risks back injury. As you lift, keep your dog close to your body to remain stable and make your dog feel supported.

1. Kneel or squat with your dog in front of you and give them some treats.



2. Slide your arm that's closest to your dog's tail around their body so your hand sits either just along their side or beneath their tummy. If they're small enough, tuck it in between their front legs. Gently stroke their chest with your hand closest to their face then give them a treat.
3. If they're comfy with this, you can progress a bit more. This time, slide your arm that's closest to your dog's tail around their body in a scooping motion so they're almost gently sitting on the crook of your arm. Slide your hand either under their chest or between their front legs if they're very small. This arm supports most of their body and back legs. Very small dogs will almost be lying along the length of your arm. At the same time slide your hand closest to your dog's face across their chest to help them feel stable and supported in front. Hold them for a moment, then reward them with a treat. Once your dog is comfortable being held like this, you can proceed to the next stage.
4. Add in a word or phrase to let your dog know what is about to happen, such as "one, two, three, up". Use the same phrase every time, so your dog learns to associate these words with being lifted. Say your chosen phrase, then slowly lift your dog briefly, just off the ground. Then gently lower them down again and reward them with treats and praise.
5. Say the phrase again and slowly lift your dog while you stand to your feet. Hold your dog close to your chest so that they feel secure. Then lower them to the ground and reward them with treats and praise.
6. Introduce moving while carrying them close to your body. Hold your dog, say your phrase, lift your dog and take just a couple of steps initially while giving them treats. If they're comfortable with this, gradually walk a little further each time so they can get used to it. Lower them back down safely and reward them with praise and treats.

Once your dog is comfortable being picked up and carried at home, you can introduce the training again outside, starting somewhere familiar and calm to begin with. You may well be outside when they need to be carried, so preparing them in advance really helps.

There are other ways to pick up your dog, and sometimes you might need to do things slightly differently — maybe to avoid putting pressure on your dog's stomach if it's sore.

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 Dogs 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 8791000, write to: Dogs Trust, Ashbourne Road, Finglas, Dublin 11 or visit www.dogstrust.ie



If you are interested in Dog School training classes, please contact the team via www.DogsTrust.ie/DogSchool

The advice contained in this handout is of a general nature and is no substitute for specific behavioural or veterinary advice.