



# Happy Vet Visits

We all hope our dogs will be as healthy as possible for as long as possible, but even dogs without medical conditions will still need general health checks for parasitic prevention and vaccinations, as well as neutering, so it's unlikely that any pet dog will ever completely avoid visiting the vet practice. We know that the types of experiences dogs have will influence their future behaviour, so if a dog has a bad time during a vet visit they're likely to be worried next appointment, but if they had a good time they're likely to be more comfortable in future.

## Relaxing in the Waiting Room

The waiting room can be very exciting, scary and confusing so dogs will benefit from feeling that this is a good place to be, despite smelling strange and being full of dogs, cats and rabbits! Don't expect them to stay calm, quiet and still because this is likely to be incredibly difficult for them - unless they've practised!

Teaching your dog to settle down calmly, no matter where they are, will make waiting times much more relaxing for everybody! Practice this at home, placing a lightweight blanket in your dog's bed when you do. You can bring the same blanket along to the clinic to help them know what to do here – it'll smell of home too!

Encourage your dog to remain on the blanket by slowly dropping treats onto it, as though they're raining gently from the sky like magic! Your dog should soon learn that their blanket is the BEST place to be.

Start at home when it's calm and quiet then, once your dog is getting the hang of it, practice in increasingly busier places so your dog will be 'waiting-room-ready'!

## Helping your dog LOVE the clinic - and the things and people in it!

If your dog associates being at the vet clinic with tasty treats and good things happening, then there's no need for them to worry about it!

Popping in when it isn't busy as part of your normal walkies, just for a sniff around and a fuss or a treat (or two!) from the clinic team, will help your dog enjoy visiting and prepare them for the occasional time they need to be examined or receive treatment.

Think of every 'just for fun' visit as plumping up a large cushion of good experiences to fall back on should they ever need to visit when they're poorly!

## **Learn to recognise what your dog is telling you, so you can reassure them and help them feel safe!**

The vet clinic can be a strange place – at the same time both exciting and scary – every dog will feel differently here and how they feel might also depend on a whole host of things, such as what's wrong with them, any exciting or worrying experience they had earlier that day, how hungry they are or whether they've met this particular vet before for example!

By watching and understanding your dog's behaviour you can manage their experiences and ensure these are as good as can be. You might be able to recognise a happy dog with their tail loosely swinging, eyes round, ears floppy and tongue lolling out of a relaxed mouth but signs of anxiety and fear can be very subtle, at least to begin with.

Signs that your dog is becoming worried can include panting and inability to remain still, visible dandruff or hair shedding, eyes wide with the whites showing, a closed, tight mouth, ears held backwards, a tense, lowered body with their tail tucked beneath them, leaning backwards and lifting a paw and blinking or turning their head away from something.

Dogs need us to respond appropriately when they're becoming worried and take steps to make them feel safe again! This could be really simple, such as asking the vet to examine them on the floor if they're worried about being picked up and put on a table for example or waiting outside the clinic until it's time to see the vet if they're feeling worried or overexcited in the waiting room.

## **What to do if they growl!**

**Listen to your dog when they're growling, they're telling you they're not comfortable and want whatever is happening to stop right away!**

It's important dogs are never told off for growling because it's their way of telling us they don't feel safe and need us to change what's happening for them!

Dogs might be growling because they're in pain and it hurts when they're being examined – even though there may not be any visible signs of injury! Telling a dog off for lunging, barking, growling or snapping at a person or another dog can make them feel as though they have no way of telling us how they feel, so they might need to be more explosive in their behaviour next time they feel this way.

Instead, we can help our dogs by listening when they start to show how worried they are by showing their teeth or growling – even if this is at the vet! – and asking the vet to stop what they're doing so our dogs can take a breather.

## **Teach your dog that being examined all over is okay! And means that treats are coming their way!**

Use tasty treats to teach this at home first, then practice in lots of different places so your dog will feel okay about a vet examining them. Our 'Handling' hand-out outlines a step-by-step approach to this!

Start by touching your dog somewhere they enjoy having a fuss, some dogs will enjoy being scratched behind their ears while others might prefer to be stroked on their chest. Keep it brief by touching them for only 3 seconds then stop and giving them a treat straight away. This means your dog will understand that they get to relax in between different parts of their body being looked at.

Build up gradually to placing your hand on different parts of their body – going in the same order each time means they'll always know what to expect! Remember to give a treat after every part of their body you touch – their ears, face, chest and back!

Don't forget to carefully introduce touching their tail and feet, always keeping it brief and giving treats straight away in the same manner. Dogs can feel especially vulnerable when having their paws and tail examined, because it means they're less able to move away if they want to, so take these extra gently. Run your hands down their legs so they know you're heading to their paws and it isn't a shock suddenly having their paws touched! If you are looking at their paws always lift their legs so these move and bend naturally, so you don't accidentally hurt them.

## **Introduce strange things, like medicines and muzzles, slowly and in a fun way!**

Use whatever your dog loves - treats, toys, a gentle fuss – to teach them that new things like ear or eye drops, tablets or flea treatments are okay and can mean good things are going to happen now!

Whenever you have to give your dog any medication, always prepare some extra special tasty treats ready to give them straight away afterwards, so that the new and potentially scary or uncomfortable thing always means that something lovely and yummy will happen right away.

## **If your dog is already scared about having medicine either applied to their skin or put into their food or their mouth.....**

Be proactive and start to teach them that it's okay before they next need it. Ask your vet for an empty ear/eye drop bottle or flea treatment tube and start gently by just holding it in one hand, just as though you're carrying it without any significance for your dog at all, then giving them a treat with the other hand. Your dog needs to get used to you holding it and realising they don't need to worry about it in your hand at all!

Gradually build on this until you can hold it out towards your dog while giving them a treat with the other hand at the same time. All these times when they're just getting a treat and nothing

uncomfortable happens to them are part of that cushion they'll have to fall back on when they next need medicine given to them!

You can slowly progress to touching them briefly with it while feeding them – you can see how this gradual approach teaches them not to be worried as soon as they see the medicine in your hand, even if it comes towards them and touches them!

## Teach your dog to cope alone in case they ever need to stay in the vets

It's so much better to prepare in advance for your dog ever needing to stay in the vets. Teaching them to cope without you and to be all by themselves is a great start to them coping in the vets. Dogs are naturally social animals, so it's normal for them to feel worried when they're left on their own. They aren't born knowing how to feel okay when they're all by themselves, so it's important to teach your dog to feel confident and relaxed about being alone – whether at home or somewhere like the vets when you're not able to stay there with them. Our 'Coping Home Alone' Handout provides greater detail about teaching your dog this valuable skill.

You can use baby-gates across doorways to teach your dog that you can be at a distance from them without them having to worry. They'll be able to see you, hear you and smell you but just not physically connect with you.

Just before going through the baby-gate scatter some treats onto the floor for your dog to search for, or give them a toy, chew or food-releasing toy to play with by themselves. They'll be learning that being alone is okay because they'll be having a good time!

If you haven't got a baby-gate don't worry, just gently close the door, but be aware you're completely going out of sight, so this is a big step!

Stay outside only for a very short time to begin with then gradually build up the length of time you are away from your dog, as long as they remain relaxed.

## Keep calm!

Staying calm and training yourself to always think about what your dog needs at any point - on the journey to the vet, in the waiting room, during the consultation and afterwards while you might be waiting for medication or to book future appointments – means that you'll always be showing them that you're calm and relaxed about what is happening. This should help them feel more comfortable about what's happening, because on the other hand if they see you becoming increasingly more agitated and worried they might follow suit! Visiting the vet can be just as difficult for owners because our dogs mean so much to us and we naturally worry about their health, so help yourself by preparing a list of questions for the vet in advance if you are particularly worried so you can concentrate on making your dog feel as comfortable as possible during the visit.

If your dog appears to be worried or frightened at the vets – and becomes aggressive when being examined, you might benefit from professional support.

**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](mailto:reception@dogstrust.ie)**

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