

FEAR FREE VETERINARY VISITS FOR DOGS



The veterinary hospital can be a scary place for a pet. Strange people, unfamiliar smells and noises, poking, prodding and sometimes pain from procedures all add up to a very frightening experience. Some dogs are afraid of car rides or become car sick. This means that many pets are fearful before their visit even starts!

Simple things we don't think would be frightening to our pets can be perceived as such. For example, the rubber mat on the scale looks like a hole in the floor to a dog. Other dogs barking can be very intimidating. White coats or strange objects such as laser or anesthetic machines can be frightening. Noises we don't notice, like beeping timers or a whirling centrifuge, may startle a pet. Dogs and cats can also smell fear pheromones emitted by other frightened pets.

You can watch our videos on Low Stress Veterinary Visits on our YouTube channel, BFACTV.

Anxiety has Consequences

- **Anxiety** is the anticipation of danger – it's being worried about what will happen next. When anxiety occurs, the body has what is termed a stress response, where stress hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol are released.
- **Fear** is the next step above anxiety, and occurs when pets perceive the danger they were anticipating is now upon them. Signs of fear are usually more apparent than those of anxiety.
- **Terror** is the most extreme sign of stress, when a pet is in full "Fight or Flight" mode.

An example of anxiety for a human is heading off to a checkup at the doctor or dentist office, which is not painful but not any fun, either. Fear might happen if you were going in for surgery. You know it will be both scary and probably painful. Terror is having someone come at you with a gun or a large knife to kill you. It's a much higher level of fear than we commonly experience.

It's easy to underestimate or discount a pet's fear. It's often our response to think that the pet should just "suck it up" because it's not that bad – but we don't have the pet's perspective. The point is, we are not trying to kill our patients, but they may think we are. We can't tell them what is going to happen or what to expect for pain or discomfort. Most of our patients are nervous or fearful, but a few probably believe they are going to die when they come here, they are that frightened. This is an unfair amount of fear to put a pet through, even if it's only once a year, plus

Mental health is important to animals just as it is to humans

- Fear, anxiety and stress have all sorts of negative consequences for the body.
- As well as anxiety, we see obsessive-compulsive behaviors, hyperactivity disorders, fear-based aggression, phobias and many other problems.

it often gets worse over time. Eventually, it's dangerous for both the pet and the veterinary staff.

The **stress response** is a normal and adaptive mechanism that prepares an animal for activity or defense, but it also has adverse consequences such as increasing heart rate, blood pressure and blood sugar. These are all things we like to measure during a veterinary visit so the more stress, the less accurate our measurements are going to be. Long term stress, which can happen when a pet is hospitalized or boarding here, has even more adverse consequences – inability to sleep, poor appetite, decreased immune function, risk for diarrhea, etc.

Our goal is to minimize the stress response and to reduce it whenever possible, preferably avoiding the Fear and Terror stages altogether. This means we have to address anxiety early so it doesn't progress to a more severe response. Anxiety itself can often be reduced so veterinary visits are more pleasant. We tend to take it for granted that our pets are frightened at the vet, but it doesn't have to be that way.

So How Do I Know if My Pet Is Anxious or Stressed?

Your pet may be more frightened than you are aware of. Most people are familiar with at least some of the behaviors that indicate a dog may be stressed or frightened; shivering, cowering, hiding – we all understand those. But many times people miss more subtle cues of anxiety, like yawning, lip licking or leaning backwards. Looking or moving away, a wrinkled forehead with ears to the side and refusal to take treats are other signs.

There are four basic ways in which animals behave when stressed or afraid. These are **Fight, Flight, Freeze** and **Fidget**.

Fighting includes growling, biting and other aggressive behaviors. Your dog is trying to defend itself from unwanted handling.

Fleeing is when the dog panics and tries desperately to get away from us. Digging or chewing in a carrier or at cage bars or the floor of an enclosure are also attempts at fleeing.

Dogs often **Fidget** when anxious, including yawning, lip licking, pacing, panting, getting up and down, or nudging their owners. If you see your dog yawning in the waiting area that's a clear sign of anxiety.

Cats are more likely to **Freeze** but some dogs also do this. They hold rigidly still or stiff with their pupils dilated. Freezing also includes walking in slow motion.

Dogs yawn when they are tired, just as people do, and they sometimes yawn when they see their humans yawning. But in new or stressful situations, yawning almost always means your dog is nervous about something.

Lip licking is another subtle sign of stress that is often overlooked. Panting may be seen even if the pet is not hot or thirsty.

Clients often ask for a bowl of water for their dog thinking he is panting or licking his lips due to thirst. Usually the dog is just nervous.

About 75% of dogs show at least a couple of these signs when they visit the veterinarian. Sometimes this is situational – for example, a dog is fine until lifted on to the exam table and then he gets scared. Be alert to the signs so we can address the fear.

Know the Signs Your Pet is Uncomfortable



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Once You Know What to Watch for and You See Your Pet is Stressed, What Can Be Done?

We use lots of treat rewards, praise and petting. We try not to get a procedure done by brute force. We would much rather bribe a dog with peanut butter or cheese whiz to trim the nails than to need 3 people piled on top of the frightened, struggling animal to hold it down.

We use pheromones a lot nowadays. Adaptil™ contains a pheromone that smells like a mother dog when she is nursing puppies. It's a comforting, reassuring smell to a dog, whether or not they actually remember nursing from their mother. Wearing a bandana sprayed with Adaptil during a veterinary visit can keep a dog much more calm and relaxed. The doctors and techs can spray Adaptil on our lab coats so we smell calming

to our patients. We also have diffusers in the exam rooms and kennel areas that release Adaptil into the air.

Another product we recommend is the Thundershirt™. Thundershirts, and other similar products made by other companies, squeeze dogs like a hug, which relaxes them. Similar wraps are used for autistic children to help calm and settle them. The pressure of a wrap like this stimulates the release of endorphins. Not only are Thundershirts good for thunderstorms, they work here in the hospital as well.

If these easy options are not enough it's time for something stronger. An anxious or fearful animal should be treated as early as possible. **Each fearful event that does not have a positive outcome is likely to lead to a worsening of the problem.** Over time, if the event is not as bad as the animal feared, anxiety can lessen. If the experience is as bad or worse, the anxiety can progress to fear and then to phobia, which is no fun for anybody, least of all your pet.

Clients are often hesitant to give their pets prescription antianxiety medication but the risk of problems from these drugs is very low. We want to give your dog or cat the medication he or she needs in order to have a reasonably calm and quiet visit, with less stress for everyone involved.

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Fear and stress affect the immune system, blood pressure, blood sugar and the mental health of your pet. The danger is not in giving the medication but rather from fear behavior, which can injure the pet, our staff or you. To us, it also seems cruel to let pets be so scared when we could do something about it.



Fear is the normal reaction of an animal faced with a situation that it perceives as dangerous. Individual animals differ in what they perceive as fearful, and in their response to fear, and it is not always possible to predict how a particular animal will respond. Fear is accompanied by physiological signs such as trembling, excessive salivation, high heart rate and respiratory rate or panting, piloerection – the hair standing up along the back, sweating, submissive urination and defecation.

When a pet has a persistent and excessive fear in the face of a specific stimulus that may not present a real threat that's called a **phobia**. Animals can develop phobias to loud noises (thunderstorms or fireworks), specific situations (car rides), to certain individuals (small children, veterinarians or groomers) and other animals. Coming here can be a big phobia for dogs.

No human or dog should have to be that traumatized if there is a way we can prevent it. Anxiety is one thing but fear goes beyond that. We can address anxiety with simple

things, such as an Adaptil bandana, but many pets with moderate to severe fear behavior would benefit immensely from prescription anti-anxiety medications.

There are several medications we can use for anxious dogs. It often takes us a few tries to find a medication and dose that works best for a particular dog but once we do, visits tend to go much more smoothly. Trazadone is the one we use most commonly. Fearful dogs should be given medication before their appointment in order to have it working from the time they arrive. The timing will vary depending on the medication.

Pets that suffer from car sickness can get antinausea medication before traveling along with antianxiety medication.

Can Anxiety Be Prevented?

When puppies come in to see us we work especially hard to make their first visits fun and not scary. What they learn as youngsters will stay with them for the rest of their lives and we want to get off to a good start. We snuggle them, give them baby food, carry them around and try not to have them feel the poke of the needle when we vaccinate them – it's amazing how they won't notice a shot as long as they are eating a tasty treat!

Socializing your puppy to people, other pets and different situations is very important. Puppies who have fun attending our puppy preschool classes love coming here for the rest of their lives and that's what we aim for – dogs who are happy here instead of being frightened. The more people a young puppy meets, the more relaxed he will be around humans all his life, so youngsters should get lots and lots of socialization to other people.

It's helpful if we can tour a dog around to get used to the kennel area and the equipment. Just bringing a pet in and sitting quietly in the waiting area or exam room and then leaving without anything scary happening can be helpful. We are always happy to work with you and your pet at a quiet time to introduce unfamiliar items. We call these "Happy Visits."

Your prep work ahead of time can also make a big difference. The more you handle the feet and toes of puppies and kittens the less they will struggle when it's time to trim the toenails or treat a foot wound. Getting your dog or cat used to having the ears and mouth handled means examining those areas will be easier in the future.

Here are some things you can do to make veterinary visits less frightening for your dog:

- 1) Know the signs of anxiety so you can address the issue.
- 2) Let us give him lots of treats. Bring along any he particularly likes.



- 3) Use an Adaptil bandana.
- 4) Try a Thundershirt – we have them at the front desk for your dog to wear while he is here.
- 5) Bring your pet in for happy visits, where nothing bad happens.
- 6) Enroll your puppy in a socialization class and make sure he or she meets as many people as possible between 6 and 12 weeks of age.
- 7) Between 12 and 15 weeks of age introduce other puppies and calm adult dogs.
- 8) Try some over-the-counter anti-anxiety remedies, such as melatonin.
- 9) If your pet is still anxious, go for the big guns and let us use prescription medication. We can't stress this enough – your pet doesn't have to be afraid!
- 10) Be patient if our first try isn't successful and we have to try a different drug.