

HOW TO MAKE VET VISITS ENJOYABLE FOR BOTH YOU AND YOUR DOG

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Living in a home with multiple pets has me visiting the vet clinic often. I am so in tune with dogs that I can't help but notice them in the waiting room while I'm there. You'll often find me trying to feed them treats or helping the owners handle the leash.

What I see is a lot of stressed dogs. They're trembling, whining, barking, panting, or completely shut down. Here are some tips to help both you and your dog relax and hopefully even enjoy going to the vet.

I learned many years ago how to do this for my pets, and I'm happy to say that they like going to the vet. I know this because they appear to be relaxed, perform behaviours upon request, and will happily take treats.

I accomplished this with a mixed bag of tricks.

Trick #1

Visit the vet when your dog doesn't need too. Pop in to say hello, get a treat, and leave. Try to do this once or twice a month. This will help your dog make a positive association with both the drive over to the clinic and inside the clinic.

If you only visit the vet when your dog is due for their annual vaccines or when they are not feeling well, they will probably see it the same way I see going to the dentist – scary and painful.

Trick #2

Buy a lightweight bath mat with a rubber backing. Make this a happy mat. Give your dog treats on the mat, massages, chewies, or a stuffed Kong. Practise sit, down, and stand on the mat and always use high-value rewards. Bring the mat with you to the vet and put it on the metal exam table. This way your dog already feels comfortable on the mat and doesn't have to stand on a cold, slippery table for their exam. You can even lightly mist the mat with lavender and/or chamomile essential oils before going to the clinic. Make sure that the lavender oil you buy has the Latin name *Lavendula augustifolia* or *Lavendula officinalis*. This has been shown to help calm dogs – consider it a-roo-matherapy!

Trick #3

Bring squeeze cheese or peanut butter in a tube. Anything that will keep your dog focused and licking while the veterinarian performs the exam.

Trick #4

Practise handling exercises at home. You don't want the first time that someone looks into your dogs' ears to be when they are infected and sore. Pair your ear examinations with treats. Flip them over, inspect them, and gently massage them. Do the same with their paws and all other parts of their body. Also pair gentle restraint along with treats.

Trick #5

I know going to the vet with a sick dog is stressful. Try to keep yourself as relaxed as possible. Focus on your breathing, bring a stress ball to squeeze, try to stay positive, perhaps bring a friend for support. Your dog can pick up on your anxiety. If you are relaxed and breathing, your dog will be less stressed.

Trick #6

If your dog is uncomfortable around other dogs, stay in your car instead of

sitting in the waiting room. Call the clinic beforehand to see if they are on time and call from the car when you arrive to let them know you are there. If they are ready for you, then go straight into the exam room; if they're not ready, ask that they call you when the exam room is available. Most vets understand and will comply with this.

Trick #7

If your dog is uncomfortable and reactive in the clinic, do not correct them. Soothe and comfort them. Barking and growling are often symptoms of a stressed dog and their emotional state. If you can help them feel more comfortable, those behaviours will go away on their own. Also, when it is time to visit the vet, avoid saying it to your dog with a sad intonation in your voice. Be as up beat as you are when asking your dog if they want to go for a walk.

If all else fails, consider a mobile vet. Some dogs just do better in the comfort of their own home.

Happy training for keeping your dog healthy!

