

Fear of the Veterinary Hospital and Medical Procedures

Recognize that your pet's bad behavior at the veterinary hospital is an emotional reaction that stems from fear. This fear may be the result of a painful or scary experience your pet had there in the past. What you need to do to help your dog get over this fear is to condition a competing emotional response to what scares him. To accomplish this, the vet's office and the scary handling and medical procedures that occur there must become predictors of wonderful things.

Desensitization involves slowly exposing your pet to the fearful stimulus, increasing the intensity over time. We often combine desensitization with counterconditioning in order to help pets overcome fear. Counterconditioning is a procedure where by you work to change your pet's emotional response to the scary stimulus, from one of fear to one of acceptance, by pairing these things with special treats.

To desensitize your pet to the handling procedures performed at the vet's office, it is helpful to perform these procedures at home. Go very slowly, increasing the intensity of the handling in tiny increments. Pairing the handling with a special food treat is helpful. By doing this you will be counterconditioning your pet's emotional response. Our goal is to have the animal not only accept the handling but to associate it with good things. It is also advisable to put the veterinary procedures on cue - meaning that you label them with words so that your dog can anticipate what is going to happen when at the vet office. For example: touch your dog's ear and say "ear" each time. Look in your dog's eyes with a flash light and say "eye" each time. Palpate your dog's abdomen and say "tummy" each time. Then when you are at the veterinary clinic you can say the words just before the vet does the particular exam and your dog will know what to expect.

To desensitize and countercondition your pet to visiting the vet's office, start by first simply driving to the parking lot - give a treat - go home. Then drive to the parking lot - get out of the car - give treat - go home. Next, drive to the parking lot - get out of the car - walk towards the building - give a treat - go home. You will eventually inch your way up to the door and then into the waiting room. Eventually you can ask a technician to come over and give a treat. Then you will take him/her into the exam room, give a treat and go home. Eventually you will want the veterinarian to come into the room, give a treat, and then you leave.

Over time your pet will no longer be fearful of the veterinarians office. This combined with the desensitization to handling will enable the doctor to perform a medical exam without your pet becoming fearful. As an extra you can also work to desensitize your dog to wearing a basket muzzle so that if one is needed during a veterinary procedure, your dog will at least be comfortable in the muzzle.

Make sure you *GO SLOWLY*. The process is going to take a while, weeks to months.