Pet Friendly Visits – Happy Pets Make Happy Vets
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Introduction
It’s not surprising that the veterinary clinic might be a scary place. Unfamiliar and fear evoking sights, sounds, and odors; examination of the eyes, ears and perhaps even prostate; taking temperatures and giving injections; nail trimming and anal sac expression; and visits for illness and injury will all contribute to negative experiences and outcomes. Fear is not only a health and welfare issue for the pet, but impacts on physical, physiological and blood results is a potential safety issue for veterinarians, staff and owner and leads to decreased patient return year over year. As many as 58% of cat owners and 38% of dog owners report their pets hate going to the veterinarian while 38% of cat owners and 26% of dog owners are stressed just thinking about it.1 In fact, 28% of cat owners and 22% of dog owners would visit the veterinarian more frequently if it wasn’t so stressful for owner and pet.

Making the veterinary clinic a happy place requires a proactive, approach to turn potentially unpleasant experiences into positive ones. This includes car travel and the entire veterinary experience from examination to hospitalization. In addition, the use of both pre-visit pharmaceuticals and in clinic sedation can further help manage situations in which fear, anxiety, and pain cannot be prevented.

Effects of fear, anxiety and stress
Stress can arise from either psychogenic or physical causes. Psychogenic stressors include sensory stimuli including noise, novelty, unfamiliar environments, separation from the owner, and confinement. Psychogenic stressors may be social or non-social and controllable (e.g. able to withdraw) or uncontrollable (e.g. unable to escape).2 When exposed to fearful stimuli, the initial response is the activation of the sympathetic-adrenal-medullary axis (SAM) as an adaptive response to deal with the threat including increased cardiac output, increased blood flow to the skeletal muscles, and increased glucose release. Activation of the hypo-thalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis leads to cortisol release and release of vasopressin. Cortisol affects protein, glucose and fat metabolism and immune function while vasopressin leads to decreased urinary output. As stress is a normal part of life, the healthy individual will adapt to the acute stressors. In fact, if the stressor is acute and occurs in advance of the stress response it may be immune-enhancing, while stressors that follow the immune response, are particularly intense or chronic may be immune suppressive.2 With intense or chronic physiologic or psychogenic stress, the pet may be unable to restore homeostasis, resulting in deleterious effects on mental, cardiovascular, respiratory, urinary, reproductive, gastrointestinal, dermatologic and immune health, delayed healing and even reduced lifespan.3,4

Veterinary Hospital Stress
Stress associated with veterinary visits has been demonstrated to increase Urine Cortisol Creatinine Ratios in dogs5, and increases blood pressure, temperature, panting and pulse in dogs6, blood pressure, heart rate, respiratory rate and temperature in cats7 and increases glucose in cats in hospital visits compared to home visits.8 Dogs with highest cortisol levels had panting and lip licking behaviors, while those with the lowest had greater head resting behavior.9 After dexmedetomidine / butorphanol sedation and reversal cortisol levels remained low even after 6 hours. In one study that assessed videotape of dogs entering the reception area, with open questioning 13% of owners thought the dog was stressed, which rose to 60% on direct questioning. Fifty-eight per cent of owners reported that pets were aware that they were going to the veterinary clinic. Pet owners scored stress as high in 29% of dogs based primarily on signs of hiding and attempting to escape. While veterinary behaviorists also rated
29% of dogs as highly stressed, there was a low level of agreement with owner scores. The high stress score of the veterinary behaviorist correlated with number of signs, time displaying stress, and resistance to enter the exam room. Two thirds of the dogs were stressed at least 20% of the time, while 53% showed 4 signs or more, with primary signs of ear position, tail position, trembling, and attempts to hide and escape.

Preventive strategies
Since the puppy’s sensitive period begins to wane by 12 weeks and the kitten by 7 to 9 weeks, the first few visits will shape how the pet views the veterinary clinic. Every effort should be made to insure a pet friendly experience, using treats, toys, and low stress handling to build positive associations, while minimizing or preventing unpleasant experiences. Problems can be prevented by considering each step in the visit: crating, travel, procedures, the hospital, and the actions and interactions with veterinarians, staff, and owners.

Canine and Feline Communication
Learn to recognize body postures, facial expressions and vocalizations that indicate a relaxed state and a desire to positively interact as well as signs of fear and anxiety. See resource list. Monitor closely since signs of fear can be subtle and arise quickly. At the first signs of fear and anxiety, step back from further interactions and determine the best way to proceed or discontinue the procedures and schedule for a future date.

Why are pets aggressive in the veterinary hospital?
Pets that display aggression in the veterinary clinic are fearful and defensive. Even pets that freeze or flee, may become aggressive if approached, cornered or restrained. If the pet learns that aggression is successful at removing the threat, the behavior is negatively reinforced. Fearful responses by the owner, veterinarians or staff, cause the pet’s fear and aggression to escalate. In addition, physical restraint can cause further fear and aggression.

Minimizing fear from travel through procedures
a) Making positive experiences happen
Engage staff and owners in working to make veterinary experiences happy, by accentuating what is positive and eliminating what is negative. While a neutral outcome is acceptable it does not achieve the positive experience on which to build for future visits, and can quickly spiral downward if the outcome is negative. Both owners and staff members can influence behavior positively by their attitude, and by offer motivating highly motivating treats or play toys. Fasting the pet for a portion of the day, so that the pet arrives a little hungry can increase motivation for treats. In addition, begin offering treats (multiple small treats) or engaging the pet in play before beginning interactions to start with a positive baseline. Use the highest motivating treats and toys to positively condition and maintain the pet’s focus. Consider multiple small portions of freeze dried treats, a lick stick, canned food, peanut butter or cheese spread on a wooden spoon or tongue depressors or cans or tubs of squeeze treats. For pets that are mat trained or have a favored blanket or bed, have the owners bring along the pets bedding for use on the scale, exam table or hospital cage. Ask the owner if there are any cues (training) that will evoke an immediate response for rewards as these might be used to engage the pet in behaviors for rewards (sit, paw, touch, mat).

b) Positive travel experience
Address management of the pet during travel including positively conditioning the pet to the carrier or restraint device in advance. A pheromone spray or wipes (Feliway, Adaptil) might increase comfort with crating and travel. Crates with top entry or removable top are more practical for handling cats. Next, begin to accustom the pet to the car gradually while pairing
with high value rewards. A treat and train can also help to reward and countercondition remotely during travel. Also see www.catvets.com/public/PDFs/ClientBrochures/Cat-to-Vet-HandoutPrint.pdf

c) Pet friendly veterinary environment – facility, scheduling and flow of activity.

Consider separate cat and dog waiting areas, minimal waiting times, and separate times of day for cat appointments. One study found that dogs may be more settled if given time to adapt, and that the weigh scale was the most stressful procedure. For weighing, use valued treats, favored toys, and trained commands (mat, touch, sit) to make positive associations. Have the owners bring along the pets bed or mat, or consider weighing in its carrier or a towel wrap. Be prepared to direct the pet into an open exam room; however for some dogs social interactions with other calm, friendly, dogs may have a positive effect on the veterinary experience. Book fearful pets when the clinic is least likely to be busy and when staff can be properly prepared. Keep records to record what works and avoid what doesn’t at future visits. While pets with a recent veterinary visit are more likely to be stressed, pets with previous positive veterinary experiences will be less fearful.

Sensory input will strongly influence the outcome of the veterinary visit. Sounds (equipment, other pets, tone of voice), visual stimuli, odors, and tactile stimuli can aid in calming or increase anxiety. In addition, the emotional state of owners, staff and other pets can help to calm or evoke fear. Every effort should be made to have the owner present for examination and procedures, to help calm the pet. Removing the pet from the owners may result in a pet that is more inhibited but emotionally more fearful. However, if the owner is emotionally anxious, fearful, or confrontational this will add to the pet’s anxiety.

For auditory stimuli, a cover over the carrier, sound muting of exam rooms and playing soft calming music, or white noise or a water fountain can help minimize auditory cues. Classical music or species specific background music in cats may also help to calm. However, in one study of shelter dogs audiobooks were even more calming than music. Soft pleasant voices may calm; loud, angry or fearful voices or vocalization of pets can evoke fear.

Dogs and cats can detect pheromones and odors that communicate alarm or distress. Odors should be removed by cleaning thoroughly between patients and the use of animal odor eliminators. Adaptil and Feliway diffuser, spray or table wipe may help to calm in the air, on the surfaces or perhaps on clothes. Lavender or chamomile may also be calming.

Avoid sudden movements, direct eye contact, or direct approach. Visual barriers, a blanket over the pet’s cage or a covering over the eyes can minimize visual threats. Approaching from the side and avoiding reaching can reduce anxiety. Consider natural daylight and pastel colors rather than bright white which might appear fluorescent to pets. Insure surfaces are comfortable, secure and perhaps warmed and provide elevated surfaces and perching areas (heights) for cats. Cold surfaces, insecure footing and unsteady scales or table tops can negatively affect behavior.

Where practical discuss with owners how to prepare the pet for veterinary visits by positively conditioning the pet to touch and body handling, lifting onto a table (if indicated), and even to the instrumentation used in the visit (lights, stethoscopes). Training to touch on cue (targeting), to settle on a portable mat or bed, and to rest the chin on cue (see abtconcepts.com) can help to maintain focus and achieve positive outcomes throughout the visit. In fact, these can be valuable components of puppy classes and dog training.

(d) Pet friendly handling

Train staff on how to physically manage pets with low stress handling / gentle control and a minimum of restraint to insure a calm, positive outcome. Offer lasting high value food treats or play toys to encourage and maintain a positive experience. Proceed slowly and monitor the pet’s body language at all times to determine optimum handling and preferred location,
when to proceed and when to stop. For cats, while greeting the client and taking the history, open the carrier and allow the cat to come out on its own onto the floor, a chair or exam table. Approach slowly and avoid reaching, staring, or sudden movements. If the cat will not come out voluntarily try leaving treats in front of the carrier or enticing with treats or a toy. Avoid reaching in or grasping by the scruff. Instead remove the top of the cage and lift the cat out, with the aid of a towel if necessary. Some cats will be more comfortable remaining in the bottom of their carrier. Feliway may facilitate handling.18

When performing procedures maintain the least amount of restraint necessary to achieve success, and allow the pet to select a position in which it would prefer to stand, sit or lie down. Use gentle handling that keep the pet safe, comfortable and secure. For cats, minimize hands on control by keeping a hand or towel in front of the cat to keep it from moving forward. Evaluate whether the pet solicits or is calmed by stroking or petting. Gentle stroking or rubbing of the head between the ears, cheeks or chin of cats may help to calm cats while caudal body handling may be fear evoking.19 For small dogs and cats a towel or blanket can be used to wrap or swaddle the pet or cover its head to help it feel more secure. Injections can be warmed to room temperature, given with a new small gauge needle, hidden prior to use and injected while the pet is distracted with treats, toys or stroking. Smaller volume vaccines and oral vaccines might be a less stressful alternative.

(e) Hospitalization

When pets are hospitalized consider the type of confinement that best suits the pet. Bedding for warmth and comfort, classical music, pheromone diffusers or sprays and aromatherapy may help to calm. Consider whether drugs are indicated to reduce anxiety, manage pain or sedate prior to the visit or prior to caging. For dogs depending on their sociability, the reason for hospitalization, the level of fear, and other sensory stimuli (visual, auditory, olfactory), the best option might be to be housed in a ward with other sociable dogs. On the other hand, dogs might best be isolated or a blanket or towel placed over the door of the cage, if they are stressed by the sights or sounds of other dogs. Food can be placed in manipulation toys or stuffed into chew toys to increase enjoyment and enrichment. An Adaptil diffuser in the dog wards may help to calm.20 Cats that are hospitalized may do best if kept in their own carrier sprayed with Feliway inside a hospital cage.17 Cages should have a perching area or level separate from the litter, a place to hide, bedding, litter and good or toys. Cat wards should be separate from dog wards to minimize sounds and odors. Classical music or pet specific music in the wards or surgery room may further help to calm while white noise or a fan might mute external stimuli.12,13,21

Home care instructions should focus on both medical and behavioral care to minimize stress and prevent potential problems with people and other pets.

Reading and Resources

American Association of Feline Practitioners – www.catvets.com
Catalyst Council – catalystcouncil.org – Cat Resources and videos
Fear Free Certification and continuing education – Fearfreepets.com
Fear free resources - dvm360.com/fearfree
Howell A. See video links at hillviewvets.com
Torelli LM. Ready...set ...for groomer and vet! Animal behavior concepts. abtconcepts.com
Yin S. www.drsophiayin.com
References