

Creating a **Pawsitive** Veterinary Experience for Your Pet

If you've ever considered skipping your pet's checkup to avoid sending your furry friend into a tizzy, you're not alone. Many pet parents acknowledge that their dogs and cats show clear signs of distress before and during veterinary visits, even the most routine ones. But that is changing through an increasingly popular and effective movement called Fear Free.

THE FEAR FREE VETERINARY VISIT

Fear Free is an initiative being adopted by veterinary practices across the country to cater to animals' emotional well-being during visits. It involves a series of actions to reduce the stress and anxiety associated with a trip to the veterinarian—from the carrier and car ride to the waiting room and examination. Overall, Fear Free is about pet owners and veterinary teams working together to create a less stressful, more enjoyable atmosphere for everyone.

To become Fear Free certified, a veterinary practice must complete a comprehensive certification course. Based on the practice's size and the team's progress toward implementing Fear Free techniques, you may notice changes of varying levels at your next visit. Some modifications might go unnoticed by you, but that's OK—they were made for your pet!

Colors, Noises, and Smells

Stark, bright colors can be jarring for cats and dogs, triggering a sense of alertness that may lead to panic.

That's why many practices

are painting the walls in softer hues, and doctors and staff are ditching white lab coats and scrubs for light, pastel palettes. You might also notice slightly dimmer lighting in the office and exam room.

Cats and dogs have much more sensitive hearing than humans do, and they can pick up noises at higher frequencies that are farther away. Taking this into consideration, practices are working to diminish background sounds that might frighten pets, like closing kennels, ringing phones, slamming doors, and fellow patients, replacing them with soundtracks made by animal behaviorists to create a more serene experience.

One common Fear Free technique is the use of synthetic pheromones that mimic naturally calming body chemicals. For some pets, these scents provide a sense of peace and induce a noticeable change in demeanor. The products are species specific; dogs cannot smell cat pheromones, cats can't detect dog pheromones, and humans notice neither. Pheromones can be dispersed through diffusers, worn topically by staff, and sprayed onto towels that pets lie on.

Examination Tables

Cold, metal exam tables may be sterile but are far from comfortable. Fear Free encourages veterinarians to create nonslip surfaces (think towel or yoga mat) or forgo the table entirely. Your veterinarian might choose to examine your pet on the floor, in the carrier, or even while the pet sits on your lap.

Reward Systems

It's no secret that pets love treats. Barring any procedure that would prevent



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it, many veterinarians are using food as a distraction and incentive throughout examinations. Animals that associate their doctors with treats are less likely to hide or show signs of fear and aggression.

HOW FEAR FREE AFFECTS YOUR PET

Research shows that repeated negative experiences can have a lasting impact on a pet, so Fear Free's main objective is to change your pet's feelings about the veterinary office and examination process. All aspects of Fear Free work harmoniously to provide thorough care that reduces the risk of physical and emotional trauma.

Although it is always important to find a veterinarian whose education and experience you trust, there may be advantages to working with an office that is also Fear Free certified. In the best-case scenario, your pet will learn to love veterinary visits and will soon cozy up to technicians for extra treats and belly rubs.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Fear Free works best when the initiative begins at home. Based on your cat's or dog's reactions to the veterinary experience, your veterinarian may recommend a specific course of action. However, you can take steps to start off each visit on the right paw.

The Carrier

If you take out your pet's carrier only for veterinary visits, then it should come as no surprise when your cat or small dog instinctively bolts at the sight. Instead, take the time to acclimate your pet to the crate by leaving it in a common space. Leave the carrier door open, and place a blanket and favorite toy inside. Eventually, your curious pet should start to venture in and out at will. As your pet makes more voluntary trips to the crate, shut the door for a few minutes at a time.

Once your pet seems comfortable with the process, close the door and pick up the carrier with your pet inside. Always provide treats both in the carrier and as a reward for each successful test run. For an added measure of tranquility, spray a blanket with synthetic pheromones 10 minutes before the pet enters. The more relaxed your pet becomes with the carrier, the less stressful the start of the next visit will be.

The Car Ride

Another step toward a Fear Free veterinary experience involves reducing your pet's anxiety about car rides. This is easiest with kittens and puppies—their curiosity tends to make them more adaptable—but is feasible for adult pets, too. Again, it's best to start slow. Spend time with your pet in your parked car, offering treats, head scratches, and playtime just as you would in your home. Gradually increase the amount of time your pet spends in the car, then turn on the ignition but stay put. Next, go for short drives, followed by a few jaunts of the same length as a trip to the veterinary office.

The Veterinary Hospital

No one knows your pet better than you do. That's why it's important that you act as an advocate for your cat or dog during veterinary appointments. This starts with understanding and recognizing the signs of fear and stress that your pet displays. Common indicators include a tucked tail, pacing, excessive shedding, growling, and panting, but your pet may exhibit his or her

own behaviors that should raise a red flag. When any are displayed, alert the staff.

While the veterinarian should guide the appointment, you can assist in a few simple ways. For starters, bring your pet's favorite treats and perhaps a familiar toy or two. If you know your dog responds well to a compression vest, he or she should arrive at the office already wearing one. Before entering the practice, check in to see if the veterinarian is on time. If things are running a little behind, ask if you and your pet can wait in your car or in an open exam room to avoid the stress of the waiting room area.

Believe it or not, your own anxiety can affect your pet, too. Be cognizant of how you react to the situation. Don't pull too hard on the leash; speak in a calm, low tone; and act friendly and excited toward everyone at the office. Your pet will pick up on these cues.

If you have more than 1 pet, consider bringing them to each other's appointments. This will help acquaint all your animals with the office and provide companionship for the pet that is the patient. To take it a step further, stop by the practice with your pet when no exam is scheduled. Greet the front office staff, and bring treats as rewards. Receiving affection and food without any poking or prodding will help eliminate negative associations.

If your pet is ultra-anxious and fearful about visits, your veterinarian may prescribe an anti-anxiety medication for the day of the appointment. The medication and dose vary from animal to animal, but follow instructions exactly to ensure the best results.

Finding the right treatment plan for your pet can take time and some trial and error. Be patient. Fear Free is an ongoing method to achieve optimal health for your pet—both physically and mentally. ■

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