

The Pet-friendly Veterinary Practice: A Guide for Practitioners

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KEYWORDS

- Low-stress handling • Patient welfare • Staff safety • Handling tools • Safe restraint
- Chemical restraint • Pheromones

KEY POINTS

- Low-stress handling is important both for the safety of the veterinary staff and for the welfare of the patient.
- Before handling animals it is essential to assess the environment and the patient's response to it.
- Taking the time to create a behavior handling plan makes future visits easier and bonds clients to the practice.
- Understanding how and when to use handling tools is key to making patient visits safer, more humane, and more efficient.

INTRODUCTION

Why Low-stress Handling?

Low-stress handling may be a new concept for many practitioners, but the basic principles follow the oath taken by every veterinarian on graduation to further the prevention and relief of animal suffering.¹ The commitment to ensuring the emotional well-being of the patient should be equal to that shown toward the physical well-being of the animals under a veterinarian's care. Furthermore, because dog and cat bites are a substantial cause of injury in a veterinary practice setting,^{2–4} handling animals in a safe and effective manner is essential in reducing the costs associated with personnel injury. Many clinicians groan in anticipation of a stressful appointment when they see a difficult dog or cat on their schedules, but they should consider how the animal, as well as the client and their staff, are feeling. Recent reports suggest that the perceived fear and distress an animal feels as a result of a veterinary visit is a major

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reason why owners avoid bringing their pets to see the veterinarian.⁵ This article helps veterinarians to change such problematic visits into the positive encounters they can be, as well as preventing problems from developing in the first place. All of this can be accomplished without taking much extra time during the appointment, and saves time and stress during future visits. **Box 1** lists the goals of this article.

BENEFITS OF LOW-STRESS HANDLING

- Enhance patient welfare
- Increase job satisfaction
- Bond clients to the practice
- Reduce time and resources spent on subsequent visits
- Prevent stress-induced aberrations in physiologic parameters
- Avoid personnel/owner injury and associated costs and liability

BEFORE HANDLING

Before touching an animal, several assessments should be made, including assessing the environment, assessing the patient, and self-assessment by the clinician. From this information, clinicians can create a successful handling plan and proceed in a safe and effective manner.

ASSESSING THE ENVIRONMENT AND MAKING IT COMFORTABLE FOR THE PATIENT

When assessing the environment, clinicians must consider how the animal perceives and interprets the associated stimuli. What an animal sees, smells, feels, tastes, and hears can strongly affect its well-being and emotional state.⁶ Animals with previous frightening or painful veterinary visits may be classically conditioned to associate any or all of the surrounding stimuli with a negative emotional response (fear).^{7,8}

MAXIMIZING ENVIRONMENTAL COMFORT

- Visual stimuli
 - Bright and/or constant light can be stressful for animals.^{6,9,10} The presence of a tapetum lucidum allows dogs and cats to perceive light in greater abundance than humans, making what people consider soft lighting seem brighter and aversive.^{11,12} Consider 60 W bulbs in examination rooms and treatment areas to provide softer lighting.

Box 1

Article goals

- Foster a better understanding of canine and feline body language
- Show how human body language affects the behavior of animal patients
- Learn techniques to ease animal stress and fear associated with the veterinary setting, thereby reducing arousal and aggression
- Promote safety for clinicians and staff
- Increase confidence in handling dogs and cats
- Provide tools for safe and effective restraint of fractious patients

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