

“A stress free visit to the veterinarian”

You could tell by the sweaty palm prints on the exam room table that “Spotty” was a very nervous little Cocker Spaniel. “Clancy”, the long haired calico cat was acting more like a ferocious lion than a mellow house cat, despite his owner’s repeated claims of tranquil behavior at home. And judging by the frantic barking, panting and incessant pacing of “Prince” the Australian Shepherd, one could be pretty sure he was not having a great day.

How did your pet handle his last veterinary visit? Chances are it was a bit stressful for everyone involved. Understandably, some pet owners resist bringing their pet to a veterinarian because of the anxiety it causes. Rest assured your veterinarian understands that the veterinary hospital environment is scary for most pets. With their keen animal senses our pets hear, smell, and see things in the hospital environment that can be frightening and stressful to them. Both veterinarian and pet owner alike need to constantly remind ourselves that the animal can’t, and won’t, understand we are there for their well-being, to protect them from illness, or to help them overcome an existing medical problem.

Veterinary hospitals take many steps, on many levels to address the issue of stress in their patients; some are more affective than others. To follow are some suggestions you can try that may, in some small measure, help reduce the anxiety and stress (both human and animal) associated with your next trip to the veterinary office.

Don’t wait until your pet is “really” sick

I’ve said many times in this column that animals hide their symptoms of illness. If you think your pet has a problem, get an appointment set up right away. If the problem resolves before the appointment date you can always call and cancel. On the other hand if the problem worsens, and you then try to get an appointment, you may not be able to get one in a timely way, and your pet’s care may be compromised by the delay- not to mention the amount and cost of the care may be considerably more.

Make an appointment

For non-emergency concerns, most veterinary offices use an appointment schedule to plan the day’s patient visits. O.K., I admit it, veterinarians aren’t always on schedule (we try, we really do), but waits would likely be considerably longer if we saw patients on a “drop-in” basis. For most pets (as well as their owners) longer waits mean more stress. If you are on a tight schedule yourself, when making the appointment, ask if there is a time of the day when the hospital is less busy and more likely to be on schedule. I know certain times of the day are better than others at our hospital.

Things you should bring with you to the appointment.

These are important as they can reduce the amount of time you and your pet need to be at the animal hospital, thus reducing stress.

-If your pet has a gastrointestinal problem: bring a fresh stool sample.

-If your pet has a urinary problem: Don’t bother trying to collect a urinary sample as most veterinarians like to collect a fresh sample during

the visit. Just be sure not to walk your dog before the visit so there will be plenty of urine to collect.

- If your pet has skin problems: resist the natural temptation to bathe your pet before the exam. The doctor will want to see the full extent of skin problems, and bathing before the visit may change the appearance of those symptoms and ultimately disguise the underlying problem.

-If your pet is on medications: bring all the prescriptions with you. This way we can assess if any of the medications may be contributing to the problem, or if any drugs need to be changed, refilled, or discontinued.

-If your pet ate something that she was not supposed to (plant, chemical, drug, etc.): bring a sample, wrapper or some identifying information about the material eaten. I recently had a pet owner do exactly this. Having specific information on the chemical her pet had eaten allowed us to find out that her curious puppy was not in danger. This saved the pet owner hundreds of dollars in precautionary care that would have had to be performed if we hadn't had that information.

Keep your pet restrained or confined while in the reception area.

This is really important for everyone's safety. Cats should always be in carriers, and dogs on short and secure leashes, or in carriers. Your pet's safety as well as the safety of others is at stake.

Bring something familiar

If your pet has a favorite toy or blanket, it may be helpful to bring it along on your visit. Just as with small children, having something familiar nearby can ease some of the inevitable stress. Along the same lines, some families will bring their pet in to the office just for a friendly visit. This allows the pet to meet with the staff without anything "bad" happening and maybe get treat or two. This helps them understand that a visit to the veterinary hospital can be fun and rewarding. If you plan to do this, call ahead to be sure it's a good time to visit, otherwise your efforts may be counterproductive

If veterinarians had things their way, the veterinary hospital environment would be quite, un-crowded and on schedule, with a relaxed and comfortable atmosphere. Because of the nature of animal medicine this ideal may not always be attainable. Nonetheless, with a small amount of effort, by both the veterinary office and the pet owner, maybe "Spotty", "Clancy" and "Prince" won't need a day or two to recover from their recent trip to the vet.

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