

Anxiety in your Pet – Dr. Krystal Harris, DVM (Practice Limited to Oncology)

We all want to avoid stress in our lives and in the lives of our pets, but that should not lead to avoiding regular health care. For our pets, regular trips to the veterinarian are a must, similar to routine visits to see our own doctors and dentists. If our pets are stressed or anxious about these visits, this negatively affects their quality of life, so here are a few strategies to help lessen fear.

Recognition- How do pets show fear or anxiety? There are obvious signs like unwillingness to walk into the clinic or hiding under your legs. More subtle signs of fear are just as important and should be recognized and discussed with your veterinarian early on. These more subtle signs may include avoiding eye contact, barking, biting, ear or lip position, dilated pupils, panting, shedding, self-grooming, licking lips, yawning, or not accepting treats.

The majority of pets show fear on the exam table and this is something we should do all we can to prevent. Dogs that have recently been to the clinic have been shown to have higher anxiety on subsequent visits, indicating that they perceived the experience as negative. Many of the procedures at the vet clinic are perceived as invasive and unpleasant by our pets- vaccinations, nail trims, blood draws, and physical restraint. Fear and anxiety can induce symptoms on its own such as diarrhea, abnormal heart rhythms, and high blood pressure. So what can we as veterinarians and as owners do to minimize our role in inducing fear?

The first step to making your pet more comfortable in the hospital may include bringing things from home like a favorite toy, blanket, or treat. Treats should be given during or immediately after exams and procedures to provide positive reinforcement. Some pets are so fearful that they are unwilling to eat even the tastiest of treats in the hospital. These pets would benefit from intervention prior to their next visit.

Pheromones such as Feliway and Adaptil, are available as sprays, wipes, diffusers, and collars. Applying these on a collar, blanket in your pet carrier, or in the exam room may help promote relaxation in these environments.

There are many supplements on the market to reduce anxiety- Solliquin, Zylkene, Anxitane, Novifit, and Senilife to name a few. These supplements have different active ingredients among them but may mimic the calming proteins we know to be found in things like turkey (L-tryptophan) or green tea (L-theanine). In pets that show signs of anxiety and fear on a regular basis at home, these supplements and/or diets containing these ingredients should be used daily. If your pet is experiencing symptoms of stress or anxiety on a frequent basis, this can have negative long term implications on their health and even shorten their life span.

If you have tried the measures above and your pet is still fearful the next step is a one-time dose of a behavioral medication 1-2 hours prior to a scheduled veterinary visit. Advances in veterinary medicine have uncovered numerous therapy options that are effective at reducing stress without sedative effects. Pre-treating with these medications will hopefully allow your veterinarian to perform a full comprehensive exam without symptoms of anxiety confusing actual symptoms of disease. Many clients I meet have a minimalist approach when it comes to medicating their pet. No one, including your veterinarian, wants to over-medicate or sedate your pet for routine care. We do want to do everything possible to make sure your pet has a positive experience at the veterinarian and be an advocate for their health and well-being.

