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Social visits to the vet for dogs

By Mona Miller, DVM



For some dogs, a trip to the veterinary hospital can be a scary experience, and this makes it more challenging to accomplish the goals for the veterinary visit, as I discussed in my previous article

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(<http://www.lamorindaweekly.com/archive/issue1218/pdf/Fears-and-anxieties-in-pets.pdf>). All vet staff prefer that all dogs enjoy their trip to the hospital, with lots of petting and treats to provide comfort and trust that we are just trying to help them.

Some dogs are innately wired to be more wary, anxious or fearful, just like some humans. For these dogs, exposing them to a veterinary hospital more, rather than less, is an effective strategy to take the "sting" out of the experience. I consider this to be similar to pediatric dentistry visits - those first few years provide a positive experience to the child, so that he or she learns to trust the dentist and allows more involved procedures at a later age with a minimum of fear.

I recommend "social visits" as a way to expose the dog to the vet hospital without a lot of focused attention on the dog. Basically, this is a trip to the vet during which nothing, and certainly nothing scary, happens to the dog - other than the sensory stimulation and some attention from the vet staff that is quiet and positive. I discuss this with clients as soon as I see signs of anxiety or fear, and sometimes that's as young as a puppy. Think about it - if you're anxious in general, and you don't know what is happening around you - that someone is getting close to you (for an exam), and injecting you (with a vaccine), or drawing blood (which also involves close contact and restraint), and these things happen every time you go to a certain place (vet hospital), you will be afraid every time. And it escalates. Often, my clients tell me that they don't want to subject their dog any more often than necessary to a vet trip because the dog is so afraid. However, I believe that's exactly what should happen - increase the number of visits, and to ensure that the "poking and prodding and close contact" occur only a fraction of the time. If trust has been established that these are friendly people who talk quietly and give out treats, then the sensory overload and fear is diminished. If the close contact and injections happen every 10th time, for instance, then the pet is more likely to tolerate it for that particular visit.

Social visits are meant to take the sting out of the vet experience, and desensitize to the overwhelming sights, sounds and smells that a dog experiences when he goes to the vet. Usually, these don't need to be scheduled, and ideally are best done during the "quiet period" of the vet workday, which for most hospitals is during the lunch break. If your dog has a favorite food, it's a great idea to bring this with you, to reward your dog for being brave and confident during the social visit. If a dog is particularly nervous about getting on the scale to get weighed, or walking through the doorway into an exam room or into a back hallway, this is a great time for him to practice. When you get to the vet, you simply tell the receptionist that you're here

for a social visit for Freddy. The vet staff will spend a few minutes and approach Freddy, give him a treat, practice with him getting on the scale, etc. Sometimes, when you approach the vet hospital, you'll be able to tell that this might not be a good day - perhaps there are too many dogs in the waiting area. Even so, getting Freddy out of the car and walking him by the hospital is still very beneficial - in that he's experiencing the sights, smells and sounds without the close contact.

Anxiety and fear can be a lifetime problem, and modifying the body's reaction to perceived fear can take quite a long time. Repetition and habituation are key components for success. From my perspective, doing social visits once weekly for six months is not too much. Having said that, empathizing with other full-time parents and working professionals, I recommend that you pick a frequency that is reasonable and still makes sense for positive conditioning. Perhaps you can commit to twice monthly for six months, or even once monthly for 10 months. Talk to your veterinarian about social visits, and remember to put on the dog's Thundershirt before going out on a vet hospital social visit!

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