

# Low-Stress Handling – VT VMA – Feb 2023

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## Low-stress / Fear-free

- Why bother?
  - In the veterinary workplace, the biggest hazard is animal restraint
  - Most animals are fearful and may react aggressively → resulting in injuries!
  - Most veterinary clinic injuries are due to dog and cat bites

## The Science...

- Fear / anxiety results from:
  - Transportation to the hospital
  - Novel (unfamiliar) hospital environment – scents, sounds, and sights
  - Unfamiliar people and animals
  - Handling / restraint
  - Unpleasant and sometimes painful procedures
- One negative experience can condition a fear response
- Learned fear results in fidgeting, escape attempts, and/or aggression at subsequent visits
- Stress associated with veterinary hospital visits has been demonstrated to increase:
  - Urinary cortisol
  - Blood pressure
  - Temperature, heart rate, and respiratory rate
  - Blood glucose in cats

## Signs of fear and anxiety in cats

- Body postures
  - Crouching
  - Lowered head
  - Ears out / lowered or flattened
  - Arched back
  - Paws drawn in towards body
  - ***Tail swishing!***
- Facial changes
  - Dilated pupils
  - Ears flattened
- Vocalizations
  - Meowing
  - Growling
  - Hissing
  - Spitting

### **Feline body language**

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bvsfB7sf4QU&list=PLQD3XCKxm29HQ8h3364LMwcPxuvkL9gJ&index=17>

### **Signs of Fear and Anxiety in Dogs**

- *Yawning*
- *Lip licking*
- Brief body freeze
- ‘Whale eye’
- Head turn
- Shaking
- Tense jaw
- Low tail carriage
- Piloerection

### **Managing Fear & Anxiety in the Clinic**

**Two groups are selling programs to reduce stress during veterinary visits**

- Low Stress Handling
  - Begun by Dr. Sophia Yin
- Fear Free
  - Begun by Dr. Marty Becker
- Both have paid online courses

### **Low-Stress Veterinary Visits**

- Benefits
  - Reduced fear for the pet
  - Reduced anxiety for the client
  - Earlier detection of diseases
  - Increased client confidence in veterinary team → better lifelong care for the pet
  - Fewer injuries to pet, clients, and veterinary staff
  - Enhanced efficiency, productivity, and job satisfaction for veterinary team
- [http://www.catalystcouncil.org/resources/health\\_welfare/cat\\_friendly\\_practices/](http://www.catalystcouncil.org/resources/health_welfare/cat_friendly_practices/)

### **Low-stress veterinary visits for dogs**

- Make it a fun, positive experience for dog and owner
  - Give LOTS of yummy treats (beware of food allergies)
- Offer Adaptil® bandanas at check-in

- Use medication when appropriate BEFORE the visit
- Have reactive or aggressive dogs wait in the car and/or enter from side lobby directly to a room
- Separate comfort rooms for reactive dogs
  - Keep pet with owner during visit to avoid causing separation anxiety
- Use calming caps (ThunderCap)
- Work WITH the patients, not against them!

### **Wrong Way to Approach**

- Staring directly at dog, using hard eye contact
- Approaching from the front
- Approaching from above/ leaning over
- Touching sensitive places:
  - Top of head, belly, feet

### **Correct way to approach**

- Approach in a friendly (not forceful) manner

### **Towel wrap for dogs**

### **Counterconditioning to injections**

### **Counterconditioning to nail trims**

### **Work as a team *with* owners**

- Why do we take patients “to the back?”
- Is the patient better without the owner?
- Are they in the freeze stage of fight, flight, freeze or fidget?
- Owners can:
  - Pet
  - Feed
  - Comfort patient

### **Pheromones**

- Chemical signals
  - Urine, skin, paws, etc.
- Feliway® (Sprays, wipes, diffusers)
  - Synthetic analog of feline facial hormone
  - Emotional stabilization
  - Reassures cat in a stressful situation
- Adaptil® (Sprays, collars, diffusers)
  - Synthetic analog of canine appeasing hormone emitted by a bitch at whelping

### **Studies on the use of transmucosal dexmedetomidine in dogs**

- Dexmedetomidine facilitated handling and restraint of aggressive dogs.
    - *Cohen & Bennett. Can Vet J 2015;56(11):1144-1148.*
  - In-hospital administration of dexmedetomidine reduced signs of stress during veterinary exams.
    - *Hauser et al. J Vet Behav 2020;39:77-85.*
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### **What about cats?**

#### **Reducing stress for cats**

- Teach cat to love its carrier – feed cat in carrier for a week ahead of visit
- Teach cat to love car rides
- Spray carrier with Feliway® 20 min before journey
- Put towel over carrier
- Secure carrier in car

### **The Carrier**

- For the cat, the fear and anxiety begin with the carrier

### **Carrier Protocols**

- Use easy to open, top-loading cat carriers
- Leave carrier out for the cat to explore
- Place soft bedding in the carrier
- Encourage cat to investigate with treats, catnip, or toys
- Spray or wipe inside of carrier with Feliway®

- Spray or wipe inside of carrier with Feliway® the day of appointment
- Entice cat into the carrier
- Cover the carrier with a blanket or towel

### **Travel Anxiety**

- Is it anxiety or nausea or both?
- Acclimate to carrier (CC/DS)
- Crate, seatbelt, calming cap
- Pheromones (Feliway® or Adaptil® in the carrier and in the car)
- Pharmaceutical intervention
  - When appropriate
  - Give BEFORE traveling

### **Low-stress veterinary visits for cats**

- Separate waiting areas / cat wards
- Provide towel sprayed with Feliway at check-in (to cover carrier)
- Shelves for carriers (well above dog level)
- Schedule appointments to minimize waiting time
- Schedule cats separately from dogs
- Allow owner and cat to wait in exam room
- Encourage owners to bring an item from home (with familiar scent)
- Use towel for restraint (do NOT scruff)
- See Feline Friendly Handling Guidelines

### **The best place to examine a cat**

#### **Handling & Restraint**

- Minimal handling and restraint is always best
- Patience is crucial!
- Use a “hands-off” approach
- Move slowly and carefully
- Use smallest gauge needle possible (ultra-thin wall)
- Best to prevent and avoid stressful or confrontational encounters

- It is extremely difficult to placate a pet who is fully aroused

### **Feline Patients**

- 1<sup>st</sup> rule is: **TAKE YOUR TIME!**
- A frightened cat can remain highly aroused up to 30 min
- Stop the examination / procedure at first signs of tension or agitation
- Allow cat to retain sense of control

### **Patience with Patients**

- 2<sup>nd</sup> rule is: **START AGAIN!**
- Once cat returns to baseline arousal, continue with the exam / procedure

### **Studies on the use of trazodone for cats**

- Efficacy of a single dose of trazodone hydrochloride given to cats prior to veterinary visits to reduce signs of transport- and examination-related anxiety
  - *Stevens et al. JAVMA 2016;249(2):202-207.*
- Use of oral trazodone for sedation in cats: a pilot study
  - *Orlando et al. J Fel Med Surg 2016;18(6):476–482.*

### **Study on the use of gabapentin in cats**

- An oral dose of gabapentin 2 hours prior to vet visit reduced fear aggressive behaviors during a PE
  - *Kruszka et al. JAVMA 2017;259(11):1285-1291.*
- An oral dose of 100-mg gabapentin given to cats 90 minutes before traveling significantly reduced stress-related behaviors during transport and examination, and decreased aggression and increased compliance during examination.
  - *van Haaften et al. JAVMA 2017;251(10):1175-1181.*

### **Educate your clients**

- AAFP client and veterinarian resources
- If the owner struggles at home to get the cat in the carrier, the cat will be anxious before even arriving at the clinic
- Travel anxiety in cats is reduced if they are comfortable in their carriers