

# Multimodal approach to reducing patient stress in clinic

The provision of veterinary care is an essential component of ensuring the good welfare of companion animals. However, a significant body of research has demonstrated that a considerable proportion of dogs and cats exhibit fear and stress during veterinary visits, which can also have negative consequences for their owners. Specifically, a survey of pet owners has shown that 28% of cat owners and 22% of dog owners would seek veterinary care more frequently if their pets experienced less stress during these visits (1). The stress experienced by animals during veterinary visits can distort physiological measurements, impede physical examinations, and pose a risk to veterinary personnel, particularly in cases of aggression. This presents a significant challenge to veterinarians, who must balance the provision of important medical procedures, some of which may be painful, with consideration for the emotional well-being of their animal patients.

There has been a recent increase in awareness of how individual animals, and their owners, experience veterinary visits and how negative experiences can be counteracted. As such, a multimodal approach that incorporates various solutions is recommended to address this issue.

- **Environmental modification:** The environment in which the animal is examined can be modified to provide a more comfortable and calming atmosphere. This can include using scent marketing, pheromone diffusers, calming music, minimizing bright lights and loud noises, and incorporating spatial dividers and elevated places for cat carriers in reception spaces.
- **Positive reinforcement:** Using high value treats and rewards for desirable behaviour and distraction can help alleviate stress in animals and create a positive association with veterinary visits.
- **Fear-free handling techniques:** Gentle, non-threatening handling techniques can be used to minimize stress and discomfort during procedures. This includes desensitization training and providing pets with a comfortable resting place. The Fear Free organisation can provide online education to veterinary professionals, pet professionals, animal welfare communities, and pet owners to help achieve this within clinic. See the following link for more information <https://fearfreepets.com/>
- **Communication:** Clear communication between the veterinarian and pet owner can help reduce stress and anxiety. Explaining procedures and expected outcomes can prepare owners and their pets for what to expect during their visit.
- **Pre-visit preparation:** Educating pet owners on how to prepare their pet for a visit can help reduce anxiety in the animal. This can include practicing handling techniques, using positive reinforcement, administering anxiolytic medication, and reducing food intake to increase food drive before the visit.
- **Technology:** The use of telemedicine can reduce the need for physical visits and minimize stress for both pets and owners.

## References:

Riemer S, Heritier C, Windschnurer I, Pratsch L, Arhant C, Affenzeller N. A Review on Mitigating Fear and Aggression in Dogs and Cats in a Veterinary Setting. *Animals*. 2021; 11(1):158. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani11010158>