

PETS DEVELOP PHOBIAS JUST LIKE WE DO, BUT YOU CAN HELP CONQUER THEIR FEARS



FEAR FACTOR

It's a scene played out in vet clinics all across the country ... the reluctant patient that tries to duck, weave and deceive their way out of their date with the doctor.

So, why do they have such a strong fear of a place that's there to help rather than hurt them? The fact is, our pets find fear in a number of seemingly harmless locations and situations.

Signs of fear and stress

- ▷ Trembling
- ▷ Tail between legs
- ▷ Loss of bladder control

- ▷ Drooling
- ▷ Panting
- ▷ Wide eyes

So, how do you help them stress less? Firstly, let's look at why they worry. Fears are all too frequent for pets because of something called "single event learning". One bad experience at the vet (or the grooming salon, etc) can see them develop a permanent dislike of the doctor.

The serious and seemingly irrational phobias develop when we reinforce that initial fear by inadvertently rewarding it.

Take a nervous dog into the vet clinic, for example, and he might remember the vaccination he had there last time and be a little anxious as a result. But if we pat him and give him a treat as a way of putting an end to his trembling, all that affection tells him his fearful response is actually the right one.

Add an aggressive dog or another needle into the mix, and we have major issues. So, what started as a small worry becomes a full-on phobia.

Most common sites of stress

- ▷ Vet clinics
- ▷ Car trips
- ▷ Bathrooms and laundries
- ▷ Grooming salons
- ▷ Parks

WHAT TO DO

Step 1 Don't reward the fear. Instead of giving them treats to ease their anxiety, ignore it. Show them that fearful behaviour gets them nowhere.

Step 2 Distract them. When you do notice fear as you approach a site of stress, stop and distract your pet. By making them sit or "drop", you take their focus away from their surroundings, and their fears.

Step 3 Congratulate them. If they are now calm and displaying none of the signs of stress, then it's time to congratulate them on their new-found composure. Treats and pats are OK when you're rewarding the right thing.

Step 4 Make fun, fear-free visits. Make quick and fun visits to the vet (park, salon, etc). Let them walk in and walk out. Getting the vet to give a treat and just pat your pet will get them on the good terms necessary for future meetings of the medical kind!



ask Dr Chris

▷▷ Our vet Dr Chris Brown answers your questions

GRASS PAINS

Q Every day, the moment my three-year-old fox terrier Benny gets home from the park he starts licking his paws and his belly. Is it a nervous thing?

Sandy, via email.

A It sounds like Benny is certainly irritated, but it's not the worries of the world that are getting him down – it's the weeds and grasses from the park.

You see, on a normal walk, there is something unique about his paws and belly: they're the only parts of his body that come into contact with plants. What's more, they don't have a covering of hair to protect them. So, in a dog with a "contact grass allergy", you end up with the response of licking.

Obviously, the park is a big part of his life, so we can't just ban Benny from there. Instead, think about how you can exercise him differently.

For starters, keep him away from long grass. Also, avoid wet grass after rain or dew. It irritates the skin a lot more. Then, wash his feet and belly once you get home. This removes the allergens before they have a chance to lead to all that licking. Finally, using footpaths wherever possible will keep the allergies at bay.



WRAP UP ANXIETY

The Anxiety Wrap is a fitted jacket that applies gentle pressure to nerve receptors that send calming messages to the brain. Everything from aggression to shyness to thunderstorm fears and even car sickness can apparently be helped by this so-called "wonder jacket". Rrp \$80-\$103. Phone 1800 228 463, or go to www.anxietywrap.com.au

Creature feature

▷▷ Some people have been known to have a "gutful of golf", but never a python – until now! Augusta the carpet python apparently mistook golf balls for chicken eggs and swallowed the four balls that had been placed in a nest as a way of encouraging a hen to lay more frequently. Thanks to surgeons at Queensland's Currumbin Wildlife Sanctuary, all the balls have since been removed in a world-first operation.

