

Pet Health Articles



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Fear Free for Dogs

What does Fear Free Certified® mean?



The veterinary profession now understands that many dogs do not receive the veterinary care they need and deserve. Many pet owners decline to take their dogs for regular veterinary visits because their dog fears the visits.

The veterinary behavior community recognizes that many dogs experience fear, anxiety, and stress (FAS) when faced with a visit to the veterinary clinic. FAS can be a problem at many points leading up to and during a veterinary visit.

Fear Free® is an online certification course that provides veterinary professionals and other animal care providers with strategies and resources to alleviate or minimize FAS during veterinary visits. Individuals within a hospital can become certified by completing the 9-hour online program and signing a pledge.

Entire hospitals may also become Fear Free Certified®. Hospital certification is a more extensive process, and requires the implementation of Fear Free® core concepts throughout the entire hospital and within the hospital culture.

I'd like to know more about FAS and what it might mean for my dog.

Fear, anxiety, and stress (FAS) are responses to stressful events and they result in physiological and behavioral changes. FAS inhibits healing, can contribute to chronic health issues, and can make any required treatment difficult. The stressors that contribute to FAS in the context of veterinary visits include odors, noises, pain, visual stimuli (such as other animals), being surrounded and handled by strangers, and being separated from human family members.

"It is important to remember that the threat causing the stress response may be either real or perceived."

The stress response is the body's attempt to return itself to a more normal state of functioning. It is important to remember that the threat causing the stress response may be either real or perceived.

What are the signs of a dog's stress response?

A dog experiencing FAS will exhibit a stress response in two phases: immediate signs that manifest acutely, and delayed signs that appear later. Signs of an immediate stress response include the following:

- decreased rational thinking
- decreased ability to perceive pain

- fear-based aggression
- increased heart rate
- panting
- blood shunting away from the core/organs and to the muscles (preparing the body for “fight or flight”)
- memory consolidation that will result in “flashback” experiences in the future
- more subtle signs of fear such as dilated pupils, panting, tail tucked, ears back, avoiding interaction, and refusing treats

A delayed stress response is influenced by chronically elevated cortisol levels. Several body systems may be affected:

- **Gastrointestinal system:** Inflammatory bowel disease, ulcers, diarrhea
- **Musculoskeletal system:** Muscle wasting, chronic fatigue
- **Immune system:** Delayed healing
- **Skin:** Poor hair growth, hair thinning
- **Urinary tract:** Feline lower urinary tract disease (FLUTD)

Are there other negative effects of stress on dogs?

When dogs experience FAS in the context of veterinary visits, it creates issues around the visit itself. Dogs with FAS may be more difficult to examine, which may compromise the veterinary healthcare team's ability to make a complete and accurate diagnosis. FAS may cause a dog to react aggressively to members of the veterinary healthcare team, resulting in injury. A dog who needs sedation or anesthesia will require a larger dose of medication, which may create an increased risk to them. In addition, dogs experiencing FAS will have slower post-operative healing, and dogs who are hospitalized due to illness will have a longer recovery time.

"Fear affects learned behavior, undermining training in even the best-trained dogs."

Dogs experiencing FAS can have long-term consequences as well. Fear affects learned behavior, undermining training in even the best-trained dogs. Dogs experiencing FAS may lose connection with their usual trained or calm responses. Fear occurs in the emotional center of the brain, and these dogs cannot “think” their way out of an FAS experience.

Fear also evokes vivid sensory memories, linking the environment and people associated with veterinary visits. Think of this as a post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) of the dog world. Fear-based memories are easily retrieved when the dog is in that situation again.

What can be done for dogs who experience FAS when they go to the veterinary clinic?

Fortunately, many things can be done for dogs who experience FAS around their visits to the veterinarian. Creating a Fear Free® veterinary visit starts before your dog even leaves your home. Your veterinarian can guide you in conditioning your dog to better enjoy time in your car and helping your dog to not associate car rides with “bad” things.

Once at the veterinary clinic, the practice team will create a Fear Free® experience for your dog (and for you). Every dog is different, so your veterinarian will provide insight and guidance about how the examination and visit will go. There may be treats involved. It may be necessary to postpone or reschedule an appointment to avoid causing FAS in your dog and creating a negative memory.

Calming supplements or medication may be recommended to prevent a negative experience and facilitate a pleasant one. The best strategy for your dog will be determined by your veterinary healthcare team in dialogue with you and your family.

Rest assured, it is possible to help reduce or eliminate FAS from your dog's veterinary visits.

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