FROM YOUR VETERINARIAN

Understand your **pet's fear**

Our practice is committed to low-stress handling techniques. Here's why—and how you can help reduce your pet's stress.

Any time your pet feels threatened, whether that threat is real or imagined, changes occur immediately within his or her body to prepare for fight or flight. These changes occur because your pet's nervous system releases a variety of stress hormones that have profound effects across many different systems in the body.

The release of these hormones results in the immediate availability of energy and oxygen intake and decreases blood flow to areas not critical for movement. This can also inhibit digestion, growth, immune function, reproduction and pain perception. When your pet is under stress, the memories of any events occurring during that time will be very powerful, and how your pet is handled during veterinary visits may have long-standing consequences for our future ability to handle him or her.

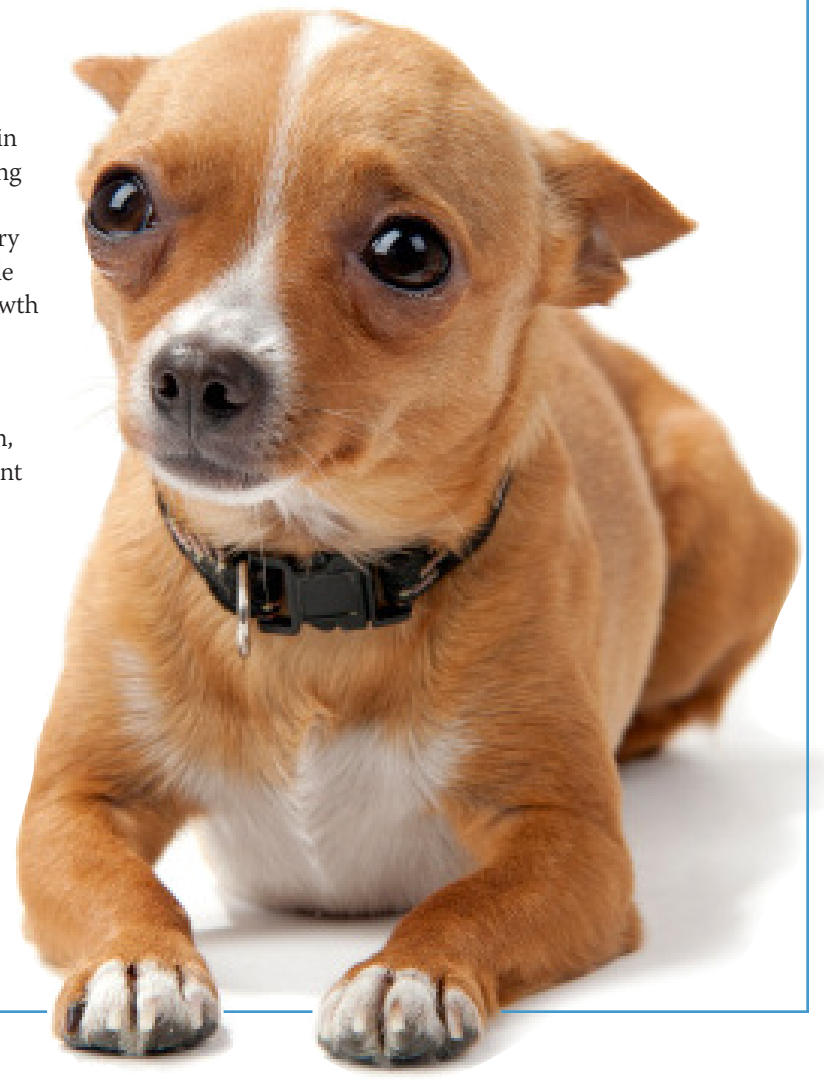
Why we choose lower-stress handling

When stressors are unremitting and the stress response continues, virtually every system within the body can be pathologically affected to varying degrees—cardiovascular, metabolic, reproductive, gastrointestinal, immune and integumentary (skin). The results can include myopathy (muscle disorders), fatigue, hypertension, decreased growth rates, gastrointestinal distress and suppressed immune function, with subsequent impaired disease resistance. Chronic stress can even lead to structural and functional changes in the brain, and, when extreme conditions persist, permanent damage can result.

Why we may stop a visit and ask you to return later

When pets show subtle signs of fear or anxiety during a veterinary visit, if we proceed without attempting to ameliorate the stress, we may not change the pet's behavior at that time, but the animal will learn from the experience and will likely behave in a more fractious manner at the next visit. Anything we do to relieve the stress of the visit will pay off in future visits being less difficult for your pet. Remember that frequent, distressing experiences can negatively impact an animal's overall health and well-being. Also, by continuing with a procedure when an animal is showing signs of anxiety, we are teaching the animal that its normal means of communication is meaningless. If we do that, what recourse might that animal have but to develop other less tolerable means of communicating its discomfort?

To avoid this scenario, when we identify signs of fear—especially during elective procedures—we may stop the visit and ask you to return at a later time when the pet is less stressed. Choices may include giving your pet medication for decreasing anxiety before the next visit or training sessions to teach your pet that veterinary procedures can be painless—and even fun!



SOURCE: VALARIE V. TYNES, DVM, DACVB