

# Handling

Handling dogs in order to restrain, groom or medicate them is something that many of us take for granted, however the reality is this can be scary and confusing for our dogs!

## Why do some dogs feel uncomfortable being handled?

Lots of dogs love to be stroked and enjoy a good fuss but might become worried about more formal handling. Dogs don't necessarily understand why we have suddenly changed the way we are touching them, and why we are now firmly holding parts of their bodies still, such as their ears or paws. This can result in them becoming worried or frightened, especially if handling is uncomfortable or painful for them, or has been in the past.

A dog who is happy and confident being handled should choose to remain with you while you hold and look at different parts of their body. There should be no tension within their face or body, and they should readily and willingly cooperate with you.

When dogs become worried about something, they generally choose to move themselves away from it to a place where they feel safer. However, when we're handling or examining a dog we usually hold them still, so they can't get away! When dogs feel as though they're unable to move away from something worrying, this limits the ways in which they can behave. Dogs that are worried about handling can show a variety of behaviours:

- 🐾 Some dogs might want to run away and avoid the situation altogether, so they may become very wriggly and squirm around in an attempt to get free.
- 🐾 Some dogs might freeze and remain very still instead – hoping you'll get the hint and leave them alone. Freezing and tolerating being handled doesn't mean they're enjoying it, so if your dog behaves like this it's important to recognise they're afraid and stop what you're doing.
- 🐾 Some dogs might feel they have no other means of telling you to let them go than to growl or even snap if they feel very threatened.

## Preventing problems

Puppies need to meet a range of different people during their 'socialisation period' (between about 3 and 12 weeks of age) so they accept contact with people as a normal and positive part of life. They need to learn about all the different things that people do when handling dogs - like being handled all over, picked up, their feet being handled and cleaned, ears examined, coat groomed, and nails cut. This will give them the best chance of coping well with various types of people interacting with them and handling them throughout their life.

To make sure they see people as consistently positive, the introduction of new experiences needs to be gradual and controlled. It's also important that puppies are not already anxious or fearful when they interact with people, as this will increase the risk that they will associate contact with these negative feelings.

Dogs Trust's Dog Schools across the UK provide the perfect opportunity for puppies to learn these vital social skills in their puppy classes. See [www.dogstrustdogschoo.org.uk](http://www.dogstrustdogschoo.org.uk) for your nearest class!

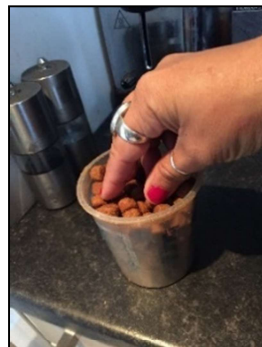
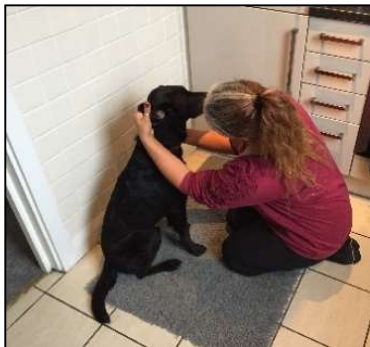
## What to do

If your dog is in pain they are more likely to show fear and respond aggressively. If you think they have a health issue, its best to take them straight to the vet.

When introducing handling, it's important to recognise the signs that tell you that your dog may be feeling uncomfortable and know how to respond appropriately. Our **Body Language** handout will help you become familiar with common signs of fear or anxiety to look out for.

If you notice any signs that your dog is becoming worried about how you are handling them, then stop. Consider how to make your handling easier for them, such as reducing the length of time you are handling them for or handling them in a gentler manner. Think about which part of their body you were handling when they responded in this way and, after taking a break, start again at a part they do seem to enjoy being handled. There's no rush, and the more time you take to build their trust and confidence the happier they'll be!

- ❗ Only practise handling when you and your dog are both feeling relaxed. Start in an environment where your dog feels comfortable. Begin touching your dog on a part of their body where they're used to being touched and enjoy it - this will be different for every dog!
- ❗ Give your dog a tasty treat just after you have touched a part of their body. For example, touch their ear, remove your hand, give them a treat, and then repeat. Your dog will soon learn that having their ear touched means they're about to get a delicious treat and learn to see this as a good thing! But take it slowly – they might only be comfortable being touched for a very brief moment to begin with, and that's fine.



- ❗ Keep your handling slow and relaxed using prolonged, calm movements. Make sure you handle each part of your dog's body by moving it as naturally as possible. If you always examine your dog's body in the same order, they'll know exactly what to expect which will give them confidence. Keep it brief! Touch your dog for just a second or two and then have a break before moving to the next part of their body.
- ❗ Once your dog is readily accepting brief handling, you can gradually start to build up the length of time you are handling them for. Gently hold or stroke each body part for a little longer and always follow up with a tasty treat. Remember, going at your dog's pace is key to them putting their trust in you!
- ❗ When you're able to handle different parts of your dog's body without them reacting in a worried manner, you can start to practise in different places. This is important so your dog feels confident being handled outside the comfort of their own home. Go right back to the beginning and start by touching them briefly before giving them a treat. Again, build their confidence in this new place by gradually building up the length of time you handle them. You can then introduce new people in the same gradual way. Give them clear instructions on how to touch your dog, exactly where and for how long. Remember, to begin with, this will just be a gentle fuss in a place your dog enjoys being touched, and always followed by treats.

- ❃ You might want to introduce grooming equipment to your dog - this is a good idea if you have a long haired or curly coated breed! Make sure you are using equipment that is best suited to your dog's coat type. Starting with a very gentle, soft brush can be useful. As with introducing your hands, start by placing the brush onto your dog's body for a moment then removing it and giving them a treat. Continue with the step-by-step process as slowly as you did when introducing your handling. If your dog shows any sign of worry then stop and give them a break! Go back to a step at which they were relaxed.
- ❃ Help your dog build up a positive feeling about their local veterinary surgery by taking regular walks to the practice. Go at a quiet time if possible, take your dog's favourite treats and let them sniff around and make it a fun experience. Ask to pop your dog on the weighing scales while you're there, and give them lots of treats to make it a pleasant experience for them!

If your dog already has a severe or established fear of handling, or is already showing signs of aggression when being handled, contact your vet for a health check to rule out a medical problem that might be affecting your dog's behaviour. Your dog might benefit from a professionally qualified and experienced behaviourist providing advice on the gradual introduction of handling where a dog is showing a fearful response.

**Dogs Trust provide lifelong behavioural support for all our adopted dogs. If you need help for your**

**Dogs Trust dog please email: [postadoptionssupport@dogstrust.org.uk](mailto:postadoptionssupport@dogstrust.org.uk)**



**Your nearest Dogs Trust Dog School Team are also happy to help  
and can be contacted via: [www.dogstrustdogschoo.org.uk](http://www.dogstrustdogschoo.org.uk)**

The advice contained in this handout is of a general nature and is no substitute for specific behavioural or veterinary advice. If you are worried about your dog, then do consult your vet.