

Stop Ear Fear: How To Help Pets Stay Calm During Ear Care



By Mikkel Becker, CBCC-KA, KPA CTP, CDBC, CPDT-KA, CTC

From a pet's perspective, ear handling and care can be unsettling and downright scary unless it's conducted in a way that allows the pet to feel safe and comfortable. But why do pets fear ear cleaning and care?

For an animal with fear, anxiety, or stress (FAS), ear care may seem threatening, especially if sensitive ear tissue is handled in an uncomfortable way. It may also seem like an invasion of personal space.

When ear care is a struggle, FAS can increase over time, leading to avoidance or even aggression as the pet attempts to escape unwanted attention. That puts animals and humans at risk. The following tips can help you improve a pet's experience with ear cleaning or other grooming techniques and make it easier to care for him.

Send The Right Signals

Pheromones diffused in the treatment area can increase happy, feel-good emotions. Using a veterinarian-approved pheromone, spritz the area 10 to 15 minutes beforehand to send chemical signals for the pet to unwind and calm down.

Deploy Distractions

To reduce his focus on the care that's taking place, draw a pet's attention toward something he enjoys. For most animals, a tasty, lickable treat delivered from a food puzzle or multiple tiny bites of a soft treat in rapid repetition is the gift that keeps on giving. For some pets, positive distractions may also include petting and praise.

If possible, a helper whom your pet likes and trusts can provide the distraction and ensure the pet remains comfortable while another person performs care. Follow handling or care with an enjoyable occurrence such as a meal or play with a favorite toy.

Go Slowly

Distraction alone isn't always enough to divert a pet's attention. To better prep your pet for ear care, start with simple, brief touch and build slowly from there. For instance, if your pet enjoys being petted on the chest or neck, start there.

Follow one to five seconds of petting with a lick of soft food such as cream cheese or Greek yogurt. Pea-size bites of deli turkey are also great rewards.

Gradually progress to touching higher on the pet's neck, moving slowly toward the ear. Move forward only if the pet remains happy and relaxed. Work up to touching and handling the outside of the ear with one hand, handling the inside of the ear, gently holding the ear with one hand while using the other hand to lightly touch inside the ear. Gently grasp the outside of the ear and massage the ear canal as you would after administering eardrops.

Continue to reward your pet throughout the process. Frequent, pleasurable rewards given immediately after handling and care can help to change the pet's emotional outlook in a positive way.

Separately, create a positive association with the sight of the medication bottle and delivery method such as a cotton ball or wipe by laying a treat trail toward it or giving the pet a food reward when he looks at or investigates the item. Without dispensing any medication, touch the bottle, cotton ball, or wipe to the ear, and reward the pet immediately.

Keep sessions short, ranging from 30 seconds to five minutes. End each session in a positive way, not by throwing up your hands and stomping off because you're having difficulty. Instead of punishing or scolding your pet, ask your Fear Free veterinary team about ways to improve your pet's cooperation.

If you progress too quickly and note signs of FAS such as ears shifting back, mouth or facial muscles tightening, or holding the tail close to the body, take a break and go back to a previous step with which the pet was comfortable. Build up more gradually next time. A calm pet holds ears slightly forward, has a relaxed mouth and eyes, and holds the tail in a neutral position.

As the pet stays calm, work toward administering the ear solution. Success may take multiple sessions over a couple of days or a week or more, but slow and steady leads to more lasting change.

This article was reviewed/edited by board-certified veterinary behaviorist Dr. Kenneth Martin and/or veterinary technician specialist in behavior Debbie Martin, LVT.

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