

Play 'Puppy Doctor'

Help your puppy get used to handling, so she'll be more comfortable at the vet.

September Morn

A visit to the veterinarian might seem like small beans to you, but if your puppy isn't used to being handled all over, it can be scary. You can help by playing "puppy doctor" to prepare her for veterinary exams.

Teach these skills in small steps, allowing your puppy to get comfortable before proceeding. Use a verbal marker (a word like Click or Yes) to let her know she's done right. You'll have both hands on your puppy during this training, so a verbal marker is more convenient than a training clicker and will avoid loud clicks too close to her sensitive ears.

After you say your marker word, reward with a small, pea-sized treat, so you don't fill her up too fast. Any time your puppy freezes or struggles, gently release her and let her calm down. It just means she's not quite ready for the level you've asked for. Go back to what she can handle and wait several sessions before adding more. Mark and treat after each step.

Examination table. Place a non-skid mat on a picnic table or other sturdy surface. Pick up your puppy and set her on the mat. Keep your hands on her to prevent her from jumping off. (Take this mat with you to real vet visits, so your puppy won't slip on the table.) Pet her and talk in a light tone and give a treat every 10 to 30 seconds. Play the other parts of "puppy doctor" on this table so your puppy gets used to being examined on it.

The hug. The veterinary assistant will hug-restrain your puppy, so teach her to accept that. Start with cuddling, holding her snugly against your body with her head facing outward. Do this a few moments and when she relaxes, mark and treat and release her. When she accepts hug-restraints calmly, begin holding her mouth gently closed with one hand for one to three seconds.

Ears. Stroke and massage each ear, occasionally lifting the flap and turning it backward so you can peek inside. When she's comfortable with that, take a longer, closer look, and give each ear a sniff. Wrap a tissue around your pinkie finger and gently wipe inside her ear. Don't poke fingers or anything else into her ear canal — just gently wipe the outer area.

Eyes. Start by gently stroking her closed eyes with your palms. Stroke around her eyes with your fingers. Lift an eyelid slightly upward using the thumb of one hand. Lift the eyelid with one thumb while the other thumb pulls gently downward below her eye. Gradually hold the eye open longer, up to five seconds, and peer into it.

Mouth. Teach your puppy to allow her mouth to be opened and her tongue and teeth touched. First touch the side of her lip. Slightly lift the lip enough to see her teeth, and gently touch her teeth. Now open her mouth very gradually; open it wide enough to look inside. Most puppies open their mouths when you touch the side of the tongue just behind the fang-like canine teeth.

Legs and paws. Massage each leg, from top to paw, ending by cradling the paw without restraining it. If your dog pulls her paw away, pause, then cradle that paw again. Once her paw is relaxed, gently bend and straighten her leg. After you've done the massage, gently play This Little Piggy Went to Market, with each toe.

Playing doctor with your puppy will teach her to accept veterinary handling. She'll be less anxious during exams and your veterinarian will appreciate her cooperation.

September Morn is a professional dog trainer and freelance writer in Washington state.