

The Ladder to Successful Veterinary Visits

How the Fear FreeSM treat ladder is strengthening the human-animal bond

by Sarah Rumble

The first time shepherd mix Dexter visited Bigger Road Veterinary Clinic, his owner, Milissa Sexton, brought a muzzle.

“We’d never seen Dexter before. [Sexton] said the veterinarians she had worked with in the past always had her muzzle Dexter because they couldn’t work with him,” says John Talmadge, DVM, co-owner of the AAHA-accredited animal hospital in Ohio.

But Sexton was in for a pleasant surprise when Dexter’s muzzle was replaced with a hot dog.

“We told her we wanted to try a few different things, so we asked her to put a compression shirt on Dexter. Then, because Dexter was so fearful, we immediately started with some high-reward treats. We broke out the cheese and the peanut butter and the hot dogs. We quickly figured out that Dexter loves hot dogs,” Talmadge explains. “We were able to get a complete exam, vaccinate him, and draw blood from a back leg, and the whole time we had the owner and one of our techs up front giving him hot dogs. We told Dexter’s owner that it wasn’t a muzzle Dexter needed, it was hot dogs.”



The treat ladder and other Fear Free concepts are changing veterinary medicine for pets, pet owners, and veterinary practitioners.



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Dexter's story is the Fear FreeSM treat ladder concept in action.

The Treat Ladder

While it may be called a treat ladder, Talmadge says the concept is about more than just food. "The treat ladder is using a variety of tools—and some of them are food related—but it's a number of tools that we may use to reduce the fear, anxiety, and stress in pets when they come in," Talmadge says.

"It may be getting a cat out of the waiting area as quickly as possible and into an exam room. It can include pheromones that we use in the exam rooms to try to calm the pets. It can include compression shirts that we'll use on some dogs that are really fearful. It might include calming music that we play in the exam rooms," explains Talmadge.

But sometimes, even after those basic Fear Free techniques are implemented, animals are still fearful. When that happens, it's time to move up the ladder to something a little tastier for Fido.

"Our starter treat for any exam is a frozen peanut butter cup, unless the owner or the dog has food allergies. Some dogs will reject the

peanut butter, or they might be so fearful or reactive that peanut butter is just not a high enough reward," says Natalie Marks, DVM, co-owner of AAHA-accredited Blum Animal Hospital in Chicago. "[For] those cases, we have cream cheese cups. We also have cheese itself—whether it's in slice form or string cheese form. And, turkey hot dogs and pretzel sticks with bacon-flavored spray cheese."

Marks says the treat ladder is a protocol that can be modified per hospital. It helps veterinary healthcare teams to recognize when higher reward treats are needed with certain pets in order to reduce fear and anxiety related to the veterinary visit.

Cats also benefit from the treat ladder concept. "We start out with little bowls of tuna with tuna juice, but we can work our way up to baby shrimp," says Marks.

Customizing the Ladder

At Bigger Road Veterinary Clinic, the team begins with basic biscuits, but recognizes that different pets will respond differently to different treats.

Talmadge explains, "For some pets, basic biscuits are plenty. If the biscuits aren't enough, then we start to break

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Lucy enjoys a Fear Free nail trim from Fear Free certified veterinary assistant Amanda Campos of Blum Animal Hospital while being distracted by a frozen peanut butter cup.



Formerly a very fearful patient, Noah was able to get through an exam free of fear, anxiety, and stress for one of the first times thanks to the help of Fear Free intervention and some tuna cups at Blum Animal Hospital.

out some of the higher rewards in the ladder. We use hot dogs. If the hot dogs aren't enough, we break out the cheese."

The treat ladder will vary from hospital to hospital and from pet to pet.

"We call it a ladder, but it has to be personalized to the pet. Some pets prefer peanut butter to cheese. Some prefer the cheese. Some would rather have hot dogs," says Talmadge.

Marks says her team at Blum Animal Hospital has created a treat menu for clients. At the front desk, clients can read the laminated "menu" that explains the Fear Free initiative, describes what it means for them and their pets, and offers a list of available treats for dogs and cats.

Keeping Track

For the treat ladder to be successful, proper documentation is vital.

"It's really a personalized approach and figuring out what it is that the pet best responds to and then we capture that in our behavior logs, so when they come in next time we already know what worked well for the pet in the past and we can go right to that on the next visit," Talmadge explains.

Marks says universal coding is also important. "If a patient does better on the floor, does better without mom in the room, really liked the turkey hot dogs last time, hated the peanut butter. . . . This is read by the staff every time that patient comes in and it's tailored to them."

The Big Picture

The treat ladder and other Fear Free concepts are changing veterinary medicine for pets, pet owners, and veterinary practitioners.

"It's definitely made my life a lot easier in terms of vet trips. I don't dread going to the vet anymore. Just last time, Dexter was giving the vet tech kisses, and he's usually terrified

of any stranger," Sexton says. "So it's nice to see him opening up and letting people at the vet touch him."

"There's a definite need for this," says Marks. "There's a definite need to change the way people are thinking about veterinary visits but also recognizing and understanding dog and cat behavior. It's just better medicine. It creates a better human-animal bond. Overall, it just benefits everyone."

In other words, it's leaving a better taste in everyone's mouths. ❄

Through a strategic alliance, AAHA is proud to provide the corporate home for the Fear Free Certification Program. AAHA believes that veterinary visits don't have to be stressful for pets and their people; by giving veterinary professionals the tools and education they need to reduce the stress associated with veterinary visits, more pet owners will be able to get their pets to the veterinary hospital for the care they need. AAHA is proud to be a part of this transformative initiative to make sure pets are getting the veterinary care they need. Learn more at fearfreepets.com



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