

Risk factors that predict a dog's fear at the vet

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A new study led by researchers from the University of Adelaide has found up to 40 percent of owners report their pet dogs are scared while being examined by a vet while, globally, up to one in seven dogs to show

severe or extreme fear during an examination.

But some risk factors may help predict their fear including a dog's breed group, weight, age of other [dogs](#) in the household, history of roles or activities, the owner's level of experience in [dog ownership](#), and where the dog was bought from.

The study was based on 26,555 responses to the [Canine Behaviour and Research Questionnaire](#), in which dog owners were given examples of mild-moderate fear, including avoiding eye contact, crouching or cringing with tail lowered or tucked between the legs, whimpering or whining, freezing, and shaking or trembling.

Extreme fear was described as exaggerated cowering, and/or vigorous attempts to escape, retreat or hide.

Dr. Susan Hazel, senior lecturer in the School of Animal and Veterinary Sciences, said it was widely known that dogs can be very fearful about going to the vet, but it wasn't clear how common the problem is.

Researcher Petra Edwards, Ph.D. candidate with the University of Adelaide's School of Animal and Veterinary Sciences, said owners with dogs that are afraid of their vet may avoid taking them frequently for check-ups, or wait until a health issue is severe. And scared dogs may be harder to diagnose, take longer to undergo a standard physical exam or pose a risk of injury to themselves, the vet staff and their owners.

"It was a shock to find up to one in seven (14 percent) dogs reported to show severe or extreme fear during vet visits, but even 41 percent of dogs showing mild to moderate fear in the same context," she said.

The study showed some unexpected results for the factors that were identified as most important in predicting fear, including that dogs with

histories of breeding or showing roles were less likely to be fearful of the vet in comparison to companion-only dogs.

"We think this might likely reflect the importance of high levels of handling and grooming practice that dogs involved in showing or breeding roles may receive from a young age. This means that fear of the vet may not even start at the vet, but with experiences that occur at home," Ms Edwards said.

However, the effect size of 7 percent indicates the identified [risk factors](#) only explained a small proportion of the [fear](#) at the vet, meaning the environment or specific experiences of an individual dog are more important than factors such as breed and age.

Ms Edwards hopes the research will promote more thoughtful, proactive processes and education around human-animal interactions, clinic environment or animal management.

"I imagine that there's likely not a one-size fits all answer, but hopefully with time, practice and research we can find many answers that we can adapt to each individual to help ensure the majority of our dogs can feel safe and comfortable with their vet care," she said.

Provided by University of Adelaide

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