



HANDOVERS FROM DOG GUARDIANS to VETERINARY CLINIC STAFF and OTHER DOG PROFESSIONALS DURING COVID-19

Updated: August, 2020

Due to social distancing requirements due to COVID-19 and the need to keep facility personnel safe from illness (and to make sure that an illness doesn't shutter a clinic or business and stop important services) – most dog care professionals are doing handoffs at the door, instead of inviting dog guardians into the building.

Estimates suggest over half of dogs afraid of visiting the veterinarian (Döring et al, 2009, Edwards et al, 2019) and separating the dog and guardian can make veterinary visits more stressful for dogs. Research has shown being with the guardian improves the well-being of dogs during a veterinary examination (Csołtova et al, 2017)

Many facility owners are asking guardians to call the clinic when they arrive. When the staff is ready to bring the dog into the facility, they usually call the person sitting in the car to discuss current symptoms and then advise when are on their way out to get the dog. Some are identifying parking spots by numbers (or by animal photos..."I'm sitting in the Boston Terrier spot").

Once advised of a dog's arrival, it is easiest to prepare for a transfer outside of the car when weather permits. Dogs can bite hands when under stress (Owczarczak-Garstecka, 2019), so having a stranger's reaching into a car (or dog carrier) need to be avoided as much as possible.

To contribute to a low-stress transfer:

1. Use Carriers for Small Dogs

Take small dogs to the facility in a carrier and advise staff that they will be handed a carrier with your dog's leash tied on top (the facility may prefer to use their own leash inside the clinic). A paper towel or disinfectant wipe can be used by the staff to hold the carrier handle.

When the facility have advised they are ready to pick up the dog, the guardian can take the carrier out of the car and set the carrier on the ground between the open door and the side of the car (rear van/SUV doors can simply be lifted and left open). When the carrier is on the ground, the guardian can stand in front of the carrier, making sure to keep 2 meters/6 feet of social distance as facility staff approach and pick up the carrier, supporting it from the underside while carrying the dog into the building.



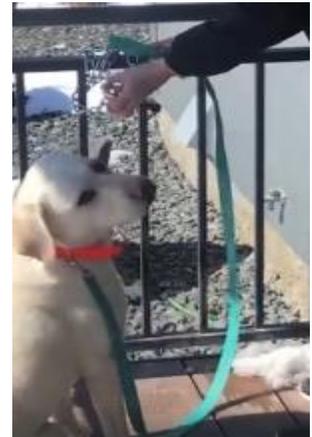
For more on choosing a dog carrier go to the [AKC website](#).

To remove a dog from a carrier inside the clinic, it is recommended to "pop the lid off" on a clamshell carrier or open the door fully. While everyone's time is valuable, it's best to wait a few moments and encourage the dog to exit on their own. Stand away from the door, turn sideways, toss a treat or two on the ground and don't make direct eye contact with the dog. Less optimal methods of removal include tipping the carrier

up to slide the dog out the door or trying to use food as a lure by reaching it inside the carrier. Reaching in to pull the dog out is the least preferred option.

2. Manage Leash Transfers

Some facilities have designated an area where a dog can be walked up to a fixed post and the leash attached. The guardian walks away to an appropriate social distance and the clinic staff then approach and collect the dog. This is a fairly high-risk approach, as dogs who are overly stressed can attempt to back out of a collar (potentially getting loose in a parking lot) or may communicate their desire to increase distance by being aggressive. If this method is used with dogs who are known to be fearful and act aggressively, a pre-visit medication protocol (PVP) that can include calming agents or sedatives may improve safety for everyone.



Rather than having a stranger approach the dog on leash, another option is for the staff of the facility to come outside and stay at least 7 feet away from the car, while the guardian opens the door and lets the dog out. If the dog will take food, once the dog notices the staff the guardian should give several small treats (one after the other). Some people have suggested that staff should throw treats to dogs, however we do not recommend this as the quick hand gesture involved in throwing can make a dog more afraid or may cause jumping and biting at hands to try to catch the treat (and increase arousal and the possibility that someone may get nipped).

As the guardian offers treats, the facility staff can assess the dog's response to their presence. Facility staff should speak to the guardian in a cheerful tone. If the dog appears nervous, the clinic staff may turn sideways and avert their gaze -- presenting a profile to a dog and not making direct eye contact is seen as less threatening than a full front approach (Edwards et al, 2019).

As well as fearful/aggressive dogs, senior dogs may benefit from pre-visit medications to reduce anxiety. Senior dogs tend to be less interested in approaching strangers and many may have an underlying pain condition (like arthritis) that makes them more wary (Kubinyi and Lotchev, 2020, Mills et al, 2019).

In general, while there is some mild risk to staff from handling the dog guardian's leash, it is much safer to avoid removing and replacing a leash in the parking lot. Some facility staff are placing slip leashes carefully over the dog's head (while leaving the remaining leash on), and asking the guardian to approach and remove their own leash. Other clinics are using short leashes that they can attach directly to the handle of the dog's regular leash. In all cases approach the dog slowly and avoid looming over them. If the dog is taking treats from the guardian, carefully drop a treat on the ground near you to encouragement to come towards the staffer while the guardian moves away. If the dog is pulling back and refusing to leave the guardian, the staffer may try to softly call the dog (trying a medium-pitch "come" or the "pup, pup, pup" call used by many dog breeders). If that does not work, the



clinic staff may ask the guardian to walk at the opposite side of the dog until reaching the clinic door (while maintaining social distance). If dogs are extremely fearful and unwilling to walk, or is using aggressive behaviour, the ASPCA suggests bringing a large crate on a wheeled cart to the car and having the dog's guardian encourage the dog into the crate so it can be rolled inside. Unless it is critical, rebooking the appointment and adding PVP medications to calm the dog may be the wisest choice in these situations.

3. Help Dogs Feel Great About Masks

Most dog people know that the appearance of a leash makes a dog happy because it consistently predicts a walk. Take advantage of same approach to make sure a dog's sight of masks makes them happy by teaching the dog that mask predicts that good treats are about to arrive. Hold the mask in one hand and offer the dog several small treats (one at a time). Then move away from the dog, putting the mask on and dropping several treats on the ground. Slowly let the dog get more familiar with a person wearing a mask at home and take it on and off so the dog considers it the same as clothing. For a few days running, every time the mask appears, wait a second and then give the dog treats. When the mask gets put away SO DO THE TREATS. Repeat this several times until the dog's body language indicates they are anticipating treats and are not afraid. If the dog appears increasingly afraid, stop and contact a dog behaviour professional. To learn more about dog body language, visit the [ASPCApro.org website](https://www.aspcapro.org).

4. Help Dogs Feel Great About Transfer

To assist a dog in getting more confident regarding leash transfers, guardians can enlist family members to practice. Only try this step if the dog is not overly fearful or aggressive! While in the home, put the dog on leash and approach the family member, passing the loose leash with one hand (without tightening it) while giving the dog a treat with the other. Once the dog is eagerly anticipating "leash pass = treat", you can add a small amount of tension to the leash. Slowly increase the amount of tension until the dog has to slightly resist the pull in order to reach the treat and also increase how fast the guardian and family member are approaching each other and making the transition. Then practice the same exercise outside on the street (starting slow and loose and – again – slowly increasing speed and pressure). This can help mimic the real-life, sometimes rushed atmosphere of the veterinary clinic parking lot.

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