

# ADULT DOG BODY HANDLING

## Steps for Desensitization to Handling

Appropriate desensitization and counterconditioning to handling is important for all dogs in adulthood to ensure their comfort and minimize fearfulness. Desensitization is the gradual exposure to a potentially scary object, person, animal, or experience that begins at a very low intensity that does not elicit a startle response. Counterconditioning is the pairing of a potentially scary object, person, animal, or experience with something that the dog likes such as food. The goal is that the handling experiences are positive, not neutral or bad. This is accomplished by watching the dog's body language (Learn more: Body Language Handout) and giving highly valued treats. Use our Adult Dog Body Handling Checklist to help guide you through this process.

Dogs must be desensitized and counter-conditioned to handling from familiar caretakers and with people who are unfamiliar to them. This might include people known to the caretakers who the dogs have not yet met. **Note: Careful biosecurity precautions must be undertaken when introducing the dogs to new people and objects. This includes sanitization of surfaces and objects, fresh clothing, and foot baths.**

1. Find at least three different types of treats/ food the dog is excited to eat.
2. Chose a space where the dog is relaxed and comfortable.
3. Let the dog explore and engage as they feel comfortable.
4. Begin the handling protocol. Start with an easy/non-invasive task where the dog is comfortable, for example gently stoking the dog's side or rubbing the chest.



5. Offer the dog high-value treats during the exposure to the handling. When the handling stops, the food goes away. **Note: The dog does not need to earn these by behaving in any way, they are simply building the association that handling is good.**
6. Monitor the dog's behavior and body language for comfort (Learn more: Body Language Handout). If the dog is comfortable, you can slightly increase the duration or level of handling. If you notice that the dog is uncomfortable, go back to where they were comfortable. **Note: If the dog's comfort during handling sessions is not improving or is becoming more fearful, stop and consult your veterinarian.**
7. Keep the handling sessions short and positive!
8. Always aim to end sessions on a positive note unless safety or welfare of those involved inhibits this. You want the dog to leave wanting more!
9. Begin your next session one step behind where the dog was last successful.



**SCIENCESAYS**

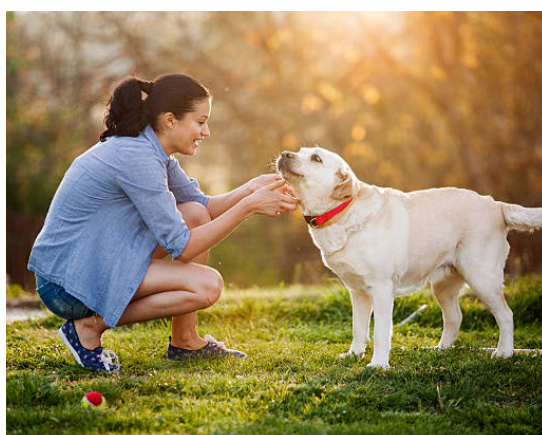
**Regular handling by caretakers can reduce canine stress (Hennessey et al., 1998).**

# ADULT DOG BODY HANDLING

## Quick Tips



- Complete items on the Adult Body Handling Checklist three times: first with primary caretakers, then with additional caretakers, and finally with individuals who are new to the dog.
- During early “real life” experiences that may be painful or scary (e.g. bathing, vaccinating, etc.) feed throughout the entire event to prevent setbacks. Smearing sticky palatable food (e.g. canned dog food, spray cheese, braunschweiger) on the kennel or tub wall, exam table, or on a commercially available product for this purpose (e.g. Lickimat, Bath Buddy) is a practical, handsfree option that meters out the food required for longer interactions.



- It is important to always feed the dog treats throughout the duration of each type of handling. If the dog is not interested in the treats this may indicate discomfort or that the treat is not high-value enough.
- Include a copy of the Adult Body Handling Checklist in the records that accompany dogs during rehoming. New owners can see what’s already been accomplished and where more work may be needed.



### SCIENCESAYS

**Two 5-10 minute structured handling sessions per week for four weeks has been correlated with lower fear at veterinary clinics (Stellato et al., 2019).**



- Incorporate body handling into puppy behavioral wellness programs. The ideal time to teach body handling is prior to the development of any negative associations and between 3 and 12 to 14 weeks of age.
- Progress with adults and fearful individuals often takes longer and requires slower exposure.



### SCIENCESAYS

**As little as 30 seconds of handling per day can increase a dog’s sociability towards humans (Hubrecht, 1995).**