



Desensitization in Puppies

It is extremely important that your puppy becomes desensitized to having different parts of his/her body touched – especially face, muzzle, mouth, ears and feet. The key is to go slowly and be sensitive to what you’re asking your dog to accept from you. Touch desensitization has a proactive part and a preventative part. Proactive means teaching this concept of acceptance, and prevention means avoiding things that could cause touch sensitivity.

Prevention of Touch Sensitivity

- Never touch your dog’s face any rougher than you want your own face touched. If you have gentle manners with [your puppy](#), generally your puppy will have gentle manners with you, and he won’t mind being touched on the face. Rough handling around the face will cause your puppy to mouth at your hands, avoid hand contact, and dislike being petted.
- Do not grab at your dog’s collar if he’s into “trouble.” Repeated grabbing at his neck will cause him to be “on guard” around that area. Mouthing, flinching at touch, and startle responses can occur, as this will be construed as a dominant, bully gesture.
- Do not smack your dog on the hind end for any reason! If he’s “into something,” call him to you proactively using “come” and “sit” commands, or lead him away by his leash. Any surprise tactile gestures that are negative will cause your dog to view touch as negative.
- Do not perform “dominant DOWN” exercises. These are exercises that ask you to roll your dog over on his back, hold him firmly, and stare at him in the face. This exercise may stimulate defensive aggression, fight drive, or submissive urination in your dog, depending upon his/her personality.

Proactive Teaching

- Touch-desensitization exercise: the goal of this exercise is to desensitize your dog to being touched in various places of his body. These exercises will desensitize your dog’s response to being touched, in addition to obedience and manners training.
- Practice multiple “touching” exercises each week to not only teach your dog touch acceptance, but also to maintain his acceptance of handling throughout his life. It is best to begin this exercise in puppyhood and practice touch-desensitization exercises throughout your dog’s adolescence and into the first year of adulthood.
- Before you begin, you must be aware of certain areas that are “touchy” or sensitive to your dog. These areas are paws, ears, hind end, and tail. Other areas may be sensitive to your particular dog,



but these are the typical areas. They may not only be “ticklish” but areas of contest, as well. Your dog may mouth you upon your touch here, so proceed cautiously.

- When beginning this exercise with your dog, break down your touch exercise into small goals. One night work on touching the head, the next night work on the paws, then belly, then hind end, etc.
- When touching body parts, do so slowly and gently, yet with confidence. After a body part is touched, say “Good dog!” and offer a piece of kibble/treat to thank your pet for his acceptance. Praise and treats makes this exercise of cooperation flow more smoothly, and it also helps your dog to associate it with good things.
- Begin by slowly touching your dog’s head from the side. Do not reach for him from the front. Work your way down his cheeks, to his jaws and muzzle. You may want to maintain control of him by holding his leash. The head inspection includes gently looking in the ears, carefully opening the eyes a bit, and opening the mouth for a tooth, tongue, and gums inspection. Keep in mind that someday you may need to administer pills or ear or eye drops, brush his teeth, or remove something from his mouth.
- When you begin working the legs and paws, you will want to start at the shoulders or hips, work down to the elbows and knees, and end at the paws. Paws are sensitive, so take your time here! You will want to be able to not only handle the paws, but the individual toes and pads as well.
- Next, move to the back, abdomen, and belly. Scan as much of these areas with your hands as you can, praising along the way.
- Your dog’s hind end may be the most sensitive area on his body. He will want to guard this area since it is a zone that is most personal and triggers vulnerability. When touching this area, be in control of his leash, don’t linger there long, and build the amount of time spent there in repeated exercises. Do not avoid touching this area, as there will certainly be a time where the veterinarian will need to take your dog’s temperature.
- Once you’ve spent one to three nights on each body segment, begin combining segments until you are able to perform the touch exercises on the entire body in one evening. This will take anywhere from one to three weeks, depending upon your dog’s acceptance and your approach.

