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Many times dogs  
that are intolerant  
of handling  
can improve  
with behavior  
modification.

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Some pets resist  
handling because  
it is painful or  
unpleasant to them.

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## DOGS THAT ARE INTOLERANT OF HANDLING

*Written by Drs. Suzanne Hetts and Daniel Q. Estep,  
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You try to clip your dog's toe nails and he struggles to pull away from you. You try to put a collar on your dog and she flails around, whines, growls and grabs your hand with her mouth. You try to pick up your puppy and he struggles free, runs and hides from you. Our dogs don't always cooperate with our every day handling, but for their safety and welfare, we need them to tolerate, if not like, these things.

### What Causes Pets To Be Intolerant Of Handling?

Frequently, animals struggle, resist and are intolerant of handling because they are afraid. This fear could have arisen as a result of one or more bad experiences. For example, a dog may have had a toe nail clipped too short causing pain, or a dog could have been grabbed and held by the neck or rolled on his back and pinned because the person felt the dog needed to be shown "who is boss." Some dogs are more fearful of handling not because of specific events but because they have a more fearful temperament. This can arise from genetic predispositions, poor early experiences with people or a combination of the two. You can learn more about fears and phobias in animals by reading the Pamphlet for Pet Parents on this topic.

Some dogs are intolerant of handling not because of fear but because they view the handling as a violation of some social code. These animals show few if any signs of fear and quickly escalate to threats or aggression to those that try to handle them. Some people refer to this as dominance aggression. You can learn more about different kinds of aggression by reading the Pamphlets for Pet Parents on aggression.

Finally, some pets resist handling because it is painful or unpleasant to them. Lifting a dog with arthritis in his back may cause pain, and as a result, creates a real reluctance to being lifted or carried.

Sometimes dogs are resistant to handling for a combination of reasons. The painful dog becomes fearful after several attempts at handling him, and runs at the sight of people approaching him.

### How Do We Manage Pets that are Intolerant of Handling and Encourage Them to be More Tolerant?

First and foremost, never force your dog to experience handling unless it is absolutely necessary for her health or safety. Forced handling can result in fear, aggression and further intolerance of handling. This can be dangerous to you and your dog.

For dogs that are painful when handled, talk to your veterinarian about treatments for painful conditions. Pain associated with conditions such as arthritis or hip dysplasia can usually be treated. If medical treatments aren't helpful, try to find other ways to achieve the handling, such as lifting your dog in another manner, giving her step-stools or ramps to walk up and down, or luring her where you want her to go with a tasty food treat.

As with the painful dogs, those that are fearful or uncomfortable when

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handled should be handled in other ways or lured into doing what you want by giving them something pleasant. For those that are fearful and must be handled, your veterinarian may be able to prescribe anti-anxiety medication.

Dogs that treat your attempts to handle them as a social violation and that threaten or aggress when handled are dangerous and have a serious behavior problem. They should not be handled and you should talk to your pet professional about help or a referral to a qualified certified applied or veterinary behaviorist or other behavior consultant to help you with the problem. You can find out more about trainers and behavior consultants in the Pamphlet for Pet Parents of the same name.

Dogs that are fearful or uncomfortable with handling can be made more tolerant with carefully planned behavior modification. The idea is to do the handling in short, very controlled exercises that start with a level of handling that causes no fear or discomfort and then gradually increasing the handling over many sessions. The handling during the exercises should be paired with something pleasant such as food treats, play or gentle massage. For example, for a dog that is uncomfortable being brushed, you might start by feeding her a little bit of tuna as you “comb” your fingers through her fur. The combing becomes more intense and gradually involves a real comb or brush. You may need the help of a qualified behavior consultant if your dog is very fearful or it is a long-standing problem.

#### **How Can We Prevent Dogs from Becoming Intolerant of Handling?**

Your dog should be handled in a pleasant way several times a day from the first day you have her. If your dog is acclimated from the first to brushing, nail clipping, picking up and holding, teeth brushing and looking into eyes, ears and mouth, she will find the handling just another part of her interactions with you and will continue to be tolerant. This acclimatization is especially important and successful if you begin when your dog is just a puppy. Read the Pamphlet for Pet Parents on socialization for more information.

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Ask your pet professional for more information about dog behavior or visit [www.HelpingFido.com](http://www.HelpingFido.com)

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