

# Training Dogs and Cats to Love Having Theirs Ears Handled

By Dr. Sophia Yin

## OVERVIEW

We can train animals to love procedures and other things that they dislike or even hate by combining the process of **counterconditioning** with **desensitization**.

With **classical counterconditioning** we train the pet to associate the handling with things she likes such as food, treats, petting, or play so that she's in a positive emotional state rather than feeling fearful or angry. We generally combine counterconditioning with **desensitization**, meaning that we start by introducing the handling or aversive stimulus at a level that the pet barely notices and gradually increase the level. The goal throughout the process is that the pet always acts as though she doesn't even notice the handling or stimulus that she previously disliked.

With **operant counterconditioning**, we train the pet to perform a behavior that's incompatible with the undesirable behavior. Ideally the pet earns a reward so that she's simultaneously learning a positive association with the situation. For instance, we may reward a pet to remain stationary and calm while you perform a given procedure.

Many dogs and cats get ear infections or mites at some time in their lives and will require examination and medication. Taking just a few minutes a day for a week or so to countercondition a pet to ear handling can prevent problems down the road. Even pets who already have a bad association will soon learn to enjoy ear handling with good technique on your part. This protocol can be used with both dogs and cats.

### Part 1: Pairing handling with food.



**Fig.A, Step 1a:** Rub the skin or fur near the ear vigorously while feeding treats. Feed the animal long enough so that you can rub the skin for 3-5 seconds. The dog's mouth should be physically on your hand eating treats the entire time. Make sure you start on an area that does not cause the dog to react to the handling.



**Fig.B, Step 1b:** As the dog finishes the treats, remove both the treat hand and the hand that's rubbing the dog.

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**Fig.C, Step 2a:** When you can rub the ear area in this manner several times in a row while the dog eats, begin to rub an area closer to the ear base, or rub the pinna instead. You might need to start with light pressure. Make sure the dog has begun eating the treat before you start rubbing the ear.



**Fig.D, Step 2b:** As always, remove both the treat hand and the rubbing hand before the dog is finished eating. When the dog is good at this step for several trials, move on to the next step. Systematically work your way into the ear and use more rigorous handling, but take care not to move along too quickly and elicit a bad reaction.



**Fig.E, Step 3a:** Get to the point where you can stick your finger in the ear while giving treats.



**Fig.F, Step 3b:** As the dog finishes the treat, stop handling. The dog should be focused on you with the expectation that she will get more treats.

The dog should now be accepting rigorous ear handling while receiving treats. Next, you can handle the ears for 10 or more seconds before pairing handling with treats or you can go directly to operant counterconditioning, where you'll use the treat as a reward for good behavior.

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## Part 2: Switching to operant counterconditioning.



Fig.G

**Fig.G, Step 1a:** First rub around the ear. If you've counterconditioned well thus far, the dog should not react. Stop before she gets irritated.



Fig.H

**Fig.H, Step 1b:** Immediately after stopping, reward her for holding still and allowing you to handle her. You can use a marker word such as "yes" right as you stop handling the ear, if you've already trained it. That way, she knows exactly when she's done something good and what the reward is for. If you say "yes" just as you are finishing the rub, she'll understand that the reward is for holding still the entire time.

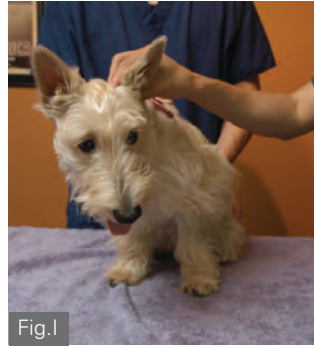


Fig.I

**Fig.I, Step 2a:** Now rub more vigorously but stay below the dog's threshold of tolerance.



Fig.J

**Fig.J, Step 2b:** Stop before she becomes irritated and reward her for holding still when you handle her.



Fig.K

**Fig.K, Step 3a:** At this point, you should be able to stick a finger in the ear for several seconds prior to rewarding with treats.



Fig.L

**Fig.L, Step 3b:** Once you can rub any area for several seconds prior to giving a treat, increase the amount of time you can handle the ear before giving the treat. Eventually you might not need treats, and you can switch to praise or petting.

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