



Did you know that petting a dog is a “human” thing? We don’t see dogs petting other dogs. If you have a puppy, it is essential that you desensitize them to having different areas of their body handled. In adult dogs, tolerance for being touched or handled may vary significantly. Here are some recommendations for preventing and addressing touch sensitivity.

### Touch Sensitivity

Touch sensitivity is when a dog reacts negatively to the anticipation of being touched or when being touched. The dog may growl, snarl, flinch or show other defensive behaviours. A dog may react defensively to only being touched in certain areas (i.e. paws, ears, mouth) or on many areas of their body.

### What Causes Touch Sensitivity?

If your dog previously enjoyed being petted or touched and now suddenly does not, you should seek veterinary consultation. A health issue causing pain (i.e. illness or injury) can cause a sudden onset of touch sensitivity.

Fearful or painful experiences can also cause a dog to develop touch sensitivity. For example, if your dog had a poor experience while having their nails trimmed, they may associate their paws being touched with fear, pain, or discomfort. Or, if you had to give your dog medication for an ear infection, your dog may find this experience unpleasant and start to anticipate any handling of their ears with discomfort. In some cases, you may not fully understand what caused your dog’s touch sensitivity.

### Addressing Touch Sensitivity

If you have ruled out any underlying pain or medical conditions, you should seek assistance from a certified dog trainer. They can help you gradually desensitize your dog to touch or handling, using reward-based training.

They can also help you prepare your dog for being handled for various husbandry procedures (i.e. nail trims, ear or eye drops, grooming) with minimal or no restraint. This can significantly reduce your dog’s fear, as they can learn to associate physical touch with positive outcomes, such as treats! This is also known as cooperative care.

## Prevention for Puppies

If you have a puppy, you can help prevent the development of touch sensitivity. Desensitizing your puppy to having all areas of their body touched is essential for ease of future handling.

Offer your puppy a tasty treat when you gently touch or handle different areas of their body. It's important to go SLOW. For example, start by reaching your hand towards your puppy's paw, and reward your puppy if they don't react. If your puppy reacts by moving their paw away from you, do NOT punish them. This is your puppy's way of saying, *"Whoa, you're going too fast and I'm unsure about this!"*

Simply move your hand away and try again, and this time don't move your hand as close. Gradually move your hand closer to their paw, rewarding your puppy for every closer approach. Eventually, you should be able to touch and handle your puppy's paw. We want our puppy to associate touch or anticipated touch with good things, like treats and verbal praise!

Consider taking a puppy or cooperative care class, where you can learn how to prepare your puppy for all sorts of handling. This will make husbandry procedures and veterinary visits easy for you and your puppy! Some puppies are also sensitive to wearing harness, collars, or other sorts of equipment, so a certified dog trainer can help you address this issue using reward-based training.

## What to AVOID

Here are some things to avoid when addressing touch sensitivity:

- Forcing your dog to accept touching or petting. This can result in your dog having an escalated defensive reaction, such as snapping or biting. It can also increase your dog's fear of having a certain area of their body handled.
- Punishing your dog for defensive behaviour. This is your dog's way of communicating their discomfort with anticipated touch. Punishing warning signs (i.e. lip licking, growling, avoiding contact) may cause your dog to not show warning signs in future, significantly increasing a bite risk.

### Additional Resources:

The Training Academy at the Edmonton Humane Society offers private consultations for canine behavioural issues. One of our certified dog trainers can help you address your dog's touch sensitivity using reward-based training. For more information, visit our website:

<https://www.edmontonhumanesociety.com/what-we-do/education-training/dog-training/private-consultations/>

The Edmonton Humane Society offers training classes, such as Puppy Basics! This class covers foundational skills, such as bite inhibition, proper interactions, socialization, and basic obedience for puppies. For more information, visit our website:

<https://www.edmontonhumanesociety.com/sessions/puppy-basics/>

### Did You Know?

You can also ask us behaviour questions by emailing:

[askthespecialist@edmontonhumanesociety.com](mailto:askthespecialist@edmontonhumanesociety.com)

It takes approximately \$7 million to keep the Edmonton Humane Society operational for one year and 40% of these funds come from generous donations made by supporters like you. Please [Donate](#).