

# Improving CLIENT Compliance

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How frustrating is it when clients return for a re-evaluation appointment two weeks after the recommended time and report that the prescribed medication did not improve the pet's condition? It's especially disheartening when further questioning reveals that very few of the recommendations made at the initial appointment were followed. No matter how solid the treatment plan, the outcome may not be successful if the pet owner does not comply with these recommendations.

Compliance, by definition, is the willingness to follow a prescribed course of treatment. In real life, compliance depends upon pet owners understanding and following recommendations made by veterinarians and team members for diagnostic tests, treatment, and preventive health care. Noncompliance is often related to a failure in communication: The importance of a test or medication to the pet's health has not been understood or the message from individual team members has been inconsistent.

Multiple studies show that compliance increases when clients trust the veterinary practice.<sup>1-3</sup> Gaining clients' trust and respect is influenced by their interaction with everyone in the practice. Key factors include the client's impression of the initial telephone conversation when scheduling an appointment, the cleanliness of the waiting and the examination rooms, and whether team members truly listen to their concerns and interact with their pet in a caring and calm manner.

Client compliance is not just the veterinarian's responsibility; a consistent message must be delivered by all team members including receptionists and technicians. To achieve a consistent experience, specific standards of patient care should be



determined and time invested in educating the entire team on these standards and their importance. Clients will then hear the doctor's recommendations delivered by all hospital team members. A client's trust and subsequent compliance is achieved through interactive discussions with the veterinarian and direct involvement in their pet's care. Address the client's primary complaint during history taking even if it is not the major problem. Let clients talk without interrupting so they know their concerns have been heard.

Use simple terms a client can understand during any discussion. Offering too many options too quickly often confuses and frustrates the pet owner. Elicit feedback with open-ended questions to determine whether the client fully understands the pet's problem and the recommendations made. Always inform the client of the expected outcome and how a recommendation benefits their pet's well-being.

## Improving Client Compliance (continued)

Clients accept recommendations more readily when they understand the benefit to their pet's health. Now more than ever, pets are part of the family. Once you've recommended treatment, ask clients if they foresee any problems complying with the plan. For example, if they express concern about their ability to perform an elimination dietary trial, look for a resolution. Paramount to stellar compliance is to never assume that clients know how to do something we consider routine, such as pill their pet or clean and medicate their pet's ears.

Provide written instructions to go home with the client or be emailed. A veterinary technician can review the instructions before the client leaves the clinic. Many manufacturers provide complimentary client brochures and have how-to videos available. Clients tend to be more at ease with technicians and more likely to ask for clarification from them. An AAHA survey determined that a client remembers only 10% of what was discussed during an appointment and only half of that information is recalled accurately.<sup>4</sup> Thus, repetition of information in different forms (including written instructions) leads to better compliance.

Schedule recheck appointments before the client leaves the clinic. The receptionist can suggest a date based on the veterinarian's recommendation. If a client cannot commit to an appointment before leaving the clinic, a reminder to contact the owner to schedule the appointment can be entered into the computer.

Two to three days after the appointment, contact the client. Follow-up calls by the veterinary team can address any concerns and show that you care. It is also a successful method to ensure medication is being administered as prescribed. Asking specific questions about the pet's home-care plan will assure the client that this is not just a formality call. Assure the client you want them to telephone or e-mail if they have further concerns. Also encourage the

owner to keep a diary of any changes seen in the pet's health and to write down questions to ask at the re-evaluation appointment. These suggestions help the client feel greater involvement in the pet's ongoing care. If a recheck appointment was not made after the initial examination, try to schedule one. Inform the client of why this appointment will ensure the best outcome for their pet.

Ask clients to bring all prescribed medications and topical products to follow-up appointments. Finding pill vials containing too many tablets or shampoo bottles that are almost full explains the reason for a lack of response to prescribed therapy. It also facilitates a discussion with the client on any difficulties encountered in following the initial recommendations. Be nonjudgmental, both verbally and nonverbally (body language, facial expressions) when discussing compliance with at-home care. A defensive client is less likely to communicate freely with the veterinarian or return for further care.

In summary, compliance improves with excellent communication and empowerment of pet owners as active caregivers for their pets. Reinforcing recommendations through clear and concise discussions, written instructions, visual demonstrations and videos, and follow-up contact all help to increase client compliance. Compliance leads to healthier pets and happier clients, and more return visits. And successful outcomes mean greater job satisfaction for hospital team members so it's a win-win for all.

### REFERENCES

1. AAHA Hills Compliance Study: The Path to High Quality Care. American Animal Hospital Association; 2003.
2. AAHA Pfizer Compliance Study: Taking Quality Care to the Next Level. American Animal Hospital Association; 2009.
3. Shaw J, Adams C, Bonnett B. What Can Veterinarians Learn from Studies of Physician-Patient Communication about Veterinarian-Client-Patient Communication? J Am Vet Med Ass 2004; 224: 676-684.
4. Richard M. AAHA Compliance Study 2002.

Client support materials available at [www.dechra-us.com](http://www.dechra-us.com).