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## DOG'S BEHAVIOUR IN A VETERINARY OFFICE

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**Abstract.** A dog, just like a human, has the ability to feel many emotions directly related to a given situation. Out of all the emotions a dog experiences, fear is the one that causes unpredictable behaviour. The undisputed source of stress for a dog may be a visit to a veterinary office and related medical procedures, separation from the owner, but also pheromones left by other animals. The aim of this study was to determine the dog's stress level in a veterinary office depending on its age. The material was collected by an electronic survey in February 2021 among 381 dog owners. The analysis of the results concerning the dog's behaviour was carried out according to the age groups of dogs and the five-point scale of answers. In the second part of the study, the occurrence of certain dog behaviours was checked depending on the owner's stress level. The final stage of the research was the use of selected music as a factor reducing stress in dogs and observation of their behaviour (in January and February 2022). The most common stress behaviours reported by the owners were: lowered body posture, tail tuck, retracted ears, and trying to escape, nose licking. Our own research proved that the calmer the owner is, the lower the frequency of stress reactions in the dog. It was found that dogs exposed to calming music while waiting in the waiting room for an appointment showed fewer stress reactions than dogs waiting in the waiting room without music.

**Key words:** dog's stress behaviour, veterinary office, dog's owner stress.

## INTRODUCTION

The domestic dog (*Canis familiaris*) has been a faithful companion to humans for around 100,000 years. Such a long-term relationship has led not only to numerous changes in the dog's behaviour, but also to a reciprocal emotional impact, which may be interpreted differently by both partners (Kamieniak et al. 2015, 2016). The dog owner can learn to interpret the dog's behaviour and react appropriately to it. The best and easiest method of determining the mental state of an animal is its observation in various situations. It is worth noting that the dog's behaviour depends on many factors, such as age, sex, life experience, breed, and even the mother's physical condition during pregnancy.

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A dog, just like a human, has the ability to feel many emotions directly related to a given situation. We can distinguish here, among others, joy, excitement, but also fatigue, nervousness, frustration, boredom, or fear (Kokocińska 2016). Out of all the emotions a dog experiences, fear is the one that causes unpredictable behaviour. There are five known basic responses to stress: fight, flight, immobility, fainting, and letting go. Very strong, sudden stress may affect the dog's behaviour and its subsequent perception of certain stimuli (Olczak et al. 2014). Stress in a dog may develop as a result of overload, understood as excessive exploitation of stimuli, suffering, and also in a situation related to adaptation (Mariti et al. 2012).

The undisputed source of stress for a dog may be a visit to a veterinary office and related medical procedures, separation from the owner, but also smells/pheromones left by other animals. A visit to the clinic can also be stressful for the dog owner. So, the question arises whether the owner's behaviour during a visit to the office may affect the dog's reactions. MRI studies have shown that the dog experiences emotions that are the same or very close to human emotions. Therefore, the dog understands and is able to interpret whether the owner's statement has a positive or negative emotional charge, but also what is the mood or intention of the person who communicates with the dog. Positive emotions are treated by the dog as a rewarding stimulus, while negative emotions cause avoidance of possible threats. Therefore, the animal strongly adapts to the reaction to specific emotions (Dudzińska et al. 2016).

The aim of this study was to determine the dog's stress level in a veterinary office depending on its age. An attempt was also made to determine the frequency of various stress reactions, to determine the level of stress of the dog's owner, as well as to determine the correlation between the stress of the owner and the dog's reactions. Moreover, the influence of music on the behaviour of the dog in the waiting room was examined.

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

The research we presented was carried out in several stages. The first was to conduct an electronic survey in February 2021 among 381 dog owners (Table 1). The questionnaire consisted of 41 questions (including four open-ended questions). In the first part of the questionnaire, various aspects of the behaviour of both the owner and the dog during the visit to the veterinary clinic were examined. The second part of the questionnaire concerned the characteristics of the surveyed population of respondents, i.e., information on sex, age, and place of residence. A 5-point scale was used to assess the frequency of occurrence of a given behaviour: never – 1, rarely – 2, sometimes – 3, often – 4, always – 5, to assess the level of stress: low – 1, moderate – 2, medium – 3, high – 4, very high – 5.

345 women and 36 men participated in the study (Table 1). The majority of the surveyed population was aged 18–23 (60.1%), most of the respondents declared secondary education (54.6%) and the rest a slightly less higher level of education (42.5%). Most of the respondents came from cities with more than 300,000 inhabitants (28.9%).

The tested dogs ( $n = 394$ ) were divided into four age groups: dogs up to one year of age ( $n = 43$ ), dogs from 1 to 3 years of age ( $n = 100$ ), dogs from 4 to 7 years of age ( $n = 125$ ) and dogs over 7 years of age ( $n = 126$ ).

The analysis of the results concerning the dog's behaviour was carried out according to the age groups of dogs and the five-point scale of answers, which results directly from the structure of the questionnaire. Due to the different size of the age groups of dogs, the focus was only on the percentage frequency of the given responses and their variability in particular age groups. First, we examined which dog's behaviour indicated by the owners as "sometimes", "often" and "always" occurred most frequently. Even such a simple observation indicates a recurring trend among dogs of all ages.

Table 1. Dog owner population's characteristic

Feature	Segment	n	%
Gender	women	345	90.6
	men	36	9.4
Age	18–23	229	60.1
	24–30	76	19.9
	31–36	24	6.3
	37–45	30	7.9
	46–50	11	2.9
	51–60	10	2.6
	over 60	1	0.3
Education	primary	6	1.6
	secondary	208	54.6
	higher	162	42.5
	vocational	5	1.3
Residence	village	99	26
	city to 20 000 residents	50	13.1
	city of 20 000–100 000 residents	78	20.5
	city of 100 000–300 000 residents	44	11.5
	city over 300 000 residents	110	28.9

In the second part of the study, the occurrence of certain dog behaviours was checked depending on the owner's stress level. The frequency percentage of responses was analysed again, but this time the responses were grouped depending on the indicated stress level of the owner. Therefore, the percentage assigned to each dog behaviour determines the frequency of that behaviour in the subgroup marked with a given stress level. Thanks to this, we can observe increases and decreases in the percentage of behaviour depending on the owner's stress level.

The final stage of the research was the use of selected music (classical and nature sounds) as a factor reducing stress in dogs, and observation of their behaviour. The observations were carried out in January and February 2022 in one of the veterinary offices in Szczecin. The owner of the office agreed to play music in the waiting room. The behaviour of dogs previously included in the survey addressed to dog owners was observed. The behaviour of 50 dogs was described in total. The breed, age and sex of the dogs were not considered when analysing the results. The main idea behind this stage was to evaluate the influence of music on dogs' behaviour.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Behaviour of the dog in the veterinary office

As many as 97.6% of the owners declared the ability to recognize the initial signs of stress in their dog. The most common stress behaviours reported by the owners were: lowered body posture, tail tuck, retracted ears, and trying to escape, nose licking (Table 2), which is also one of the calming signals (Olczak et al. 2014). The respondents indicated the formation of dandruff as the least frequent symptom of stress in dogs.

Table 2. List of dogs' behaviour in the veterinary office depending on age [%] (never – 1, rarely – 2, sometimes – 3, often – 4, always – 5)

Dog's reaction	Dog's age																			
	group 1					group 2					group 3					group 4				
	dogs up to 1 year (n = 43)					1–3 (n = 100)					4–7 (n = 125)					7+ (n = 126)				
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Escape attempt	37%	35%	14%	12%	2%	32%	23%	15%	12%	18%	30%	22%	19%	16%	12%	25%	16%	21%	21%	17%
Yawning	47%	28%	16%	7%	2%	47%	18%	17%	11%	7%	44%	26%	17%	10%	2%	45%	21%	17%	13%	4%
Heavy breathing	44%	23%	12%	12%	7%	42%	18%	16%	12%	8%	31%	24%	22%	15%	7%	20%	30%	16%	17%	14%
Whining	44%	26%	9%	16%	2%	55%	23%	9%	4%	9%	55%	21%	6%	13%	5%	52%	23%	11%	10%	5%
Barking	51%	26%	19%	2%	2%	75%	14%	8%	1%	2%	64%	22%	6%	4%	4%	71%	18%	6%	2%	4%
Growling	95%	2%	0%	0%	2%	77%	13%	6%	3%	1%	75%	12%	6%	3%	4%	63%	19%	5%	6%	6%
Trying to bite	77%	12%	7%	2%	2%	83%	10%	4%	2%	0%	73%	14%	6%	6%	2%	62%	19%	12%	4%	3%
Tearing out	12%	33%	21%	23%	12%	18%	23%	22%	19%	18%	22%	26%	18%	19%	14%	21%	15%	18%	20%	25%
Turned tail	23%	28%	16%	16%	16%	20%	12%	13%	18%	37%	22%	17%	17%	25%	19%	13%	14%	17%	21%	33%
Formation of dandruff	93%	7%	0%	0%	0%	84%	9%	3%	2%	2%	82%	6%	5%	3%	2%	84%	6%	5%	2%	2%
Not interested in treats	47%	23%	21%	7%	2%	36%	18%	21%	14%	11%	35%	18%	19%	13%	14%	40%	15%	11%	13%	20%
Salivation	77%	16%	7%	0%	0%	63%	15%	15%	4%	3%	70%	11%	7%	7%	3%	79%	10%	6%	5%	1%
Depressed body	33%	33%	9%	21%	2%	20%	17%	19%	31%	13%	21%	19%	25%	23%	12%	25%	21%	17%	21%	17%
Nose licking	26%	33%	30%	9%	2%	24%	34%	17%	15%	10%	26%	29%	23%	12%	10%	23%	32%	20%	13%	11%
Retracted ears	23%	33%	23%	9%	12%	18%	20%	16%	25%	21%	16%	18%	26%	26%	13%	17%	24%	23%	20%	16%
Scratching	44%	40%	16%	0%	0%	63%	23%	12%	2%	0%	56%	28%	13%	2%	2%	62%	24%	10%	2%	2%
Freeze motionless	51%	37%	7%	5%	0%	40%	26%	11%	16%	6%	53%	18%	18%	6%	5%	52%	17%	10%	13%	7%
Willing to undergo treatment	21%	19%	33%	21%	7%	30%	28%	16%	15%	11%	23%	22%	31%	15%	8%	37%	22%	17%	10%	13%
Relaxed	30%	21%	21%	19%	9%	51%	19%	11%	11%	7%	47%	22%	13%	15%	3%	58%	19%	10%	7%	6%

The level of stress in the veterinary office in dogs up to the age of one was low, as many as 73% of the dogs tested almost never reacted with stress. The owners indicated the retraction of the ears and tucking of the tail as the most frequent stress reactions, and no drooling or dandruff was noted. Slightly higher levels of stress were observed among dogs 1–3 years old, with about 21% of dogs showing frequent stress reactions. The most common symptoms were lowered body posture, ear retraction and tail curling. No barking, growling, biting, or dandruff was noted in this group. Likewise, approximately 21% of dogs between the ages of 3 and 7 responded with fear to an office visit. The most frequently reported stress reactions in this group of dogs were the same as in the younger groups, dandruff, growling, and biting were rarely reported. In the group of dogs over 7 years of age, fear was observed in 23% of dogs, and escaping was added to the stress reactions.

Interestingly, there were some differences in the frequency of these reactions between the studied age groups of dogs (Table 2). The greatest differences were observed between dogs in the first year of life and dogs over 7 years of age. In senior dogs, all the indicated stress reactions occurred more often than in dogs in their first year of life, which in turn were more often relaxed in the office and more willing to undergo treatments. This phenomenon can be explained by the so-called a period of curiosity occurring in puppies, in which the dog is interested in new phenomena, and therefore stress behaviours occur much less frequently or do not occur at all (Horoszewicz et al. 2017). It is also worth mentioning that at the same time, between the age of 6 to 12 months, there is a period of remembering negative stimuli, which coincides with a storm of hormones. This may cause reactions of fear, and signals that previously did not cause any symptoms (Horoszewicz et al. 2017). Only in the period of maturity (1–4 years of age) does the dog know what gives the pleasure and what causes stress. Therefore, the senior dog already has positive or negative associations with a given situation, and therefore the dog can show dissatisfaction earlier and more intensively. In addition, from the age of 7, the dog has a decrease in melatonin production, which could explain the dog's greater levels of stress. It turned out that this hormone, in addition to endocrine functions, also has a sedative, anticonvulsant and analgesic effect (Zań et al. 2013).

### **The influence of the owner's attitude on the dog's behaviour in the veterinary office**

Almost half of the respondents (43%) described the level of their stress as high, with relation to visiting a veterinary office. The remaining respondents declared low and very low stress levels (Table 3). Dog owners reported trying to calm the dog down during their visit by talking in simple, short sentences, usually in a very gentle tone. In addition, the owners often used other relaxation techniques, such as gentle stroking or positive reinforcement in the form of rewarding the dog after the visit/treatment.

There are known results of studies in which it was found that stroking a dog calms it down, which lowers its cortisol level and blood pressure. At the same time, the secretion of oxytocin into the amygdala increases, which is responsible for deepening the bonds between individuals and regulates social behaviour (Olczak et al. 2014). It is also known that a dog only needs physical and verbal contact with a trusted person, which favours an increase in the level of oxytocin and a decrease in the level of cortisol (Rehn et al. 2013). In addition to direct contact, sedative pheromones are also of great importance. Their effectiveness have been proven in reducing stress in dogs and cats in situations such as the owner's departure, travel, hospitalization, or a visit to a veterinary office (Bidzińska and Góral-Radziszewska 2016). These experiments suggest that the use of pheromones may reduce anxiety associated with the treatment procedures of dogs and cats.

Only 23% of the owners used methods such as shouting and holding down with force, which did not help the dog in any way.

Table 3. The owner's stress level during a visit to the office (stress level: low – 1, moderate – 2, medium – 3, high – 4, very high – 5)

Feature	Stress level										
	1		2		3		4		5		
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	
Gender	woman	107	31.0	84	24.0	72	21.0	53	15.0	28	8.0
	man	15	42.0	8	22.0	4	11.0	4	11.0	4	11.0
Age	18–23	74	32.0	50	22.0	50	22.0	34	15.0	19	8.0
	24–30	22	29.0	23	30.0	13	17.0	12	16.0	6	8.0
	31–36	10	42.0	4	17.0	3	13.0	4	17.0	5	13.0
	37–45	11	37.0	8	27.0	6	20.0	4	13.0	2	7.0
	46–50	3	27.0	2	18.0	3	27.0	2	18.0	1	9.0
	51–60	2	20.0	4	40.0	1	10.0	2	20.0	1	10.0
	60+	2	100.0								
	Residence	village	31	31.0	23	23.0	20	20.0	15	15.0	8
city to 20 000 residents		17	34.0	12	24.0	9	18.0	6	12.0	6	12.0
city of 20 000–100 000 residents		32	41.0	12	15.0	10	13.0	18	23.0	6	8.0
city of 100 000–300 000 residents		13	30.0	14	32.0	8	18.0	6	14.0	3	7.0
city over 300 000 residents		29	26.0	31	28.0	29	26.0	12	11.0	9	8.0
Total		122	32.0	92	24.0	76	20.0	57	15.0	32	8.0

Our own research proved that the calmer the owner is, the lower the frequency of stress reactions in the dog (Fig. 1). Of all the signs of stress that a dog shows, the most significant are heavy breathing, growling, trying to bite, trying to escape, and retracted ears. The results of this study proved that these traits showed a clear dependence on the influence of the owner's behaviour on the dog. The following correlation was noticed: the more stressed the owner, the higher the frequency of the mentioned stress reactions (Fig. 1).

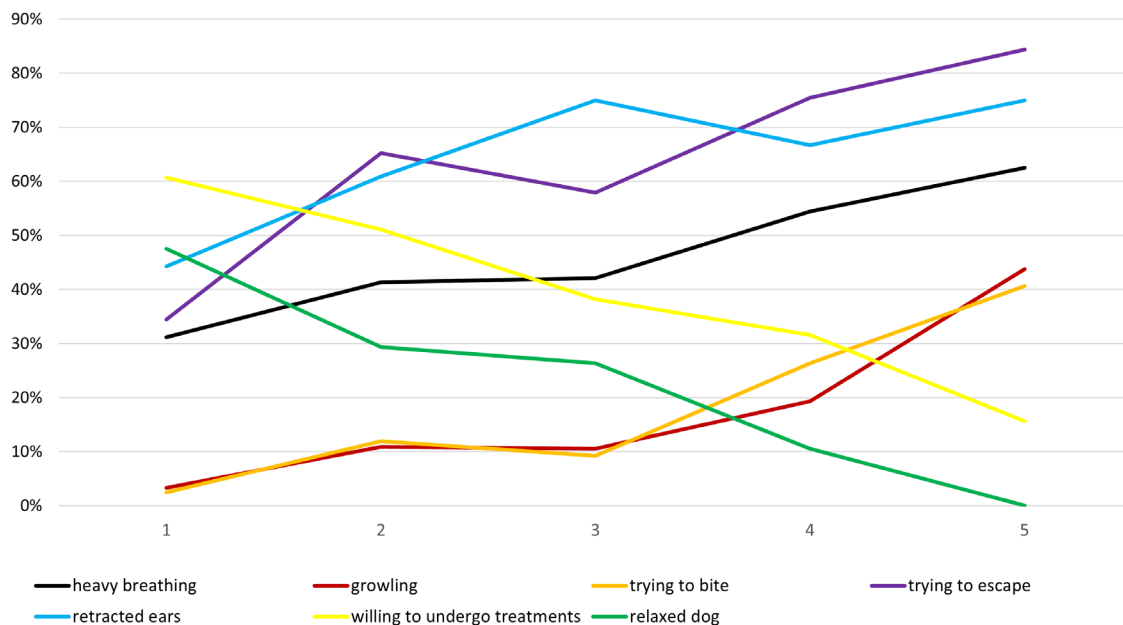


Fig. 1. Percentage variability of selected dog behaviours in the veterinary office depending on the owner's stress level (stress level: low – 1, moderate – 2, medium – 3, high – 4, very high – 5)

Calm behaviour in dogs, i.e., willing to undergo treatments and being relaxed, should also be considered. In both cases, we can see a downward trend, the more stressed the owner is, the less often the dog is relaxed and willing to undergo treatments. The opposite situation was observed when the owner is not stressed, then the vast majority of dogs (60%) willingly participate in the procedure and half of the dogs show signs of relaxation. Magnetic resonance imaging studies show that dogs probably feel the same or very similar emotions to humans. Moreover, certain stimuli stimulate the same areas of the brain in them. For this reason, the dog understands well whether the statement has a positive or negative emotional charge and what are the intentions and mood of the observed person (Dudzińska et al. 2016). Since observing positive emotions is understood as a rewarding stimulus, and in the case of negative emotions the dog avoids possible threats, reacting to emotions is a highly adaptive behaviour. Additionally, thanks to mirror neurons, dogs are able to react very quickly to the expression of a human face. Thanks to them, upon seeing a certain activity, the dog reads the verbal and non-verbal intentions of another individual, and of a different species (Dudzińska et al. 2016). The amazing abilities of the dog to read human emotions, moods and gestures meant that these two species developed very strong, multidimensional bonds (Kamieniak et al. 2016).

During the research, there were also cases where, despite the low stress of the owner, the dog waiting for the visit showed an aggressive or clearly reluctant attitude (18 dogs). Similar results were obtained by Ottenheimer et al. (2013), who analyzed the relationship between social behaviour, dog personality and cortisol in companion dogs. Research shows that there is a positive correlation between the level of cortisol and the adoption of a reduced body posture in a dog (Olczak et al. 2014). This may be related to dogs alerting each other with alert pheromones that are secreted from the interdigital glands. Both in cats and dogs, during a stress reaction, an alarm pheromone is released into the environment, and information about the danger and fear is communicated to other nearby animals (Bidzińska and Góral-Radziszewska 2016).

### **The influence of music on the behaviour of dogs in the waiting room in a veterinary office**

Various methods of reducing stress have been developed to ensure the wellbeing of dogs. In addition to the previously mentioned stroking of the dog, speaking in a gentle tone or using pheromones, music therapy should also be mentioned. Classical music has been shown to elicit positive responses in both animals and humans. During research, it was noted that music increases dogs' willingness to cooperate with humans. Animals were much easier and more willing to establish contacts with people (Cyroń et al. 2018). Therefore, the soothing effect of music can be used in such stressful environments as e.g., veterinary clinics, helping to alleviate the symptoms of stress and improve the mental condition of patients (Cyroń et al. 2018).

Based on the results of our own research, it was found that dogs exposed to calming music while waiting in the waiting room for an appointment showed fewer stress reactions than dogs waiting in the waiting room without music (Table 4).

Nearly 70% of the owners of the dogs said that the music calmed their dog down, and 76% said that the music in the waiting room also reduced their stress. Only 16% of owners believe that music did not reduce their stress and 2% of owners did not notice any effect of music on their dog's well-being. Almost all of the indicated stress reactions occurred less frequently with the background music turned on (Table 4). The greatest differences were observed in the case of an escape attempt, where in the office without music, 34% of the examined patients showed this behaviour, while with background music only 4%. The same relationship was observed for depressed body posture, nose licking, and shaking. Moreover, it was observed that dogs hearing background music were more likely to lie still while waiting for an appointment in relation to dogs in the office without music.

Table 4. The influence of music on the behaviour of dogs in the waiting room in a veterinary office [%]

Dogs' reaction	Calming music while waiting in the waiting room	Waiting in the waiting room without music
Lie still	32%	12%
Interested in other animals	24%	6%
Welcomes people	30%	18%
Desire to play	18%	8%
Escape attempt	4%	34%
Yawning	12%	20%
Heavy breathing	22%	36%
Whining	20%	20%
Growling	0%	2%
Trying to bite	0%	4%
Turned tail	20%	38%
Depressed body posture	2%	26%
Nose licking	44%	66%
Retracted ears	42%	50%
Shaking	34%	56%
Hiding	18%	32%

The obtained results show that the music used in the waiting room of a veterinary clinic can contribute to reducing stress in dogs, but also in their owners. In order to analyze this phenomenon in detail, extended observations on a larger number of patients should be carried out. In the next stages of research, introducing music during the medical examination may be considered.

## CONCLUSIONS

The conducted research has shown that the most common stress reactions are observed in dogs over seven years of age. In addition, it was found that the stress experienced by the owner increased the frequency of the stress response in dogs in the veterinary clinic. An interesting and inexpensive way to reduce stress for both the dog and its owner is to use classical music / nature sounds in the waiting room of the veterinary office.

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## ZACHOWANIE PSA W GABINECIE WETERYNARYJNYM

**Streszczenie.** Pies podobnie jak człowiek posiada zdolność odczuwania wielu emocji mających bezpośredni związek z daną sytuacją. Spośród wszystkich emocji odczuwanych przez psa strach jest tą, która powoduje trudne do przewidzenia zachowania. Niekwestionowanym źródłem stresu dla psa może być wizyta w gabinecie weterynaryjnym i związane z nią zabiegi medyczne, odseparowanie od właściciela, a także feromony pozostawione przez inne zwierzęta. Celem niniejszej pracy było określenie poziomu stresu psa w gabinecie weterynaryjnym w zależności od jego wieku. Materiał zebrano, przeprowadzając ankietę w wersji elektronicznej w lutym 2021 roku wśród 381 właścicieli psów. Analiza wyników dotyczących zachowania psa prowadzona była z podziałem na grupy wiekowe psów oraz przy użyciu pięciostopniowej skali odpowiedzi. W drugiej części badania sprawdzano występowanie określonych zachowań psa w zależności od poziomu stresu właściciela. Ostatnim etapem badań było zastosowanie wybranej muzyki jako czynnika zmniejszającego odczuwanie stresu u psów i obserwa-

cja ich zachowania (w styczniu i lutym 2022 roku). Najczęstszymi zachowaniami stresowymi zgłaszanym przez właścicieli były: obniżona postawa ciała, podkulanie ogona, cofnięte uszy, wyrywanie się i próba ucieczki, oblizywanie nosa. Badania własne dowiodły, że im większy spokój zachowuje właściciel, tym mniejsza częstotliwość występowania reakcji stresowych u psa. Na podstawie wyników badań własnych stwierdzono, że psy poddane działaniu muzyki uspokajającej podczas oczekiwania w poczekalni na wizytę wykazywały mniej reakcji stresowych niż psy oczekujące w poczekalni bez muzyki.

**Słowa kluczowe:** reakcje stresowe psa, gabinet weterynaryjny, stres właściciela psa.