

THE UNIQUE NEEDS OF A PARTNER & THEIR SERVICE DOG IN THE VETERINARY SETTING:

Putting It into Perspective

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Service dogs are not therapy animals or emotional support animals. Unlike service dogs, therapy dogs and ESAs are not trained to perform a specific task. Of these three categories of assistance/therapy animals, only service dogs are granted public access and are protected under the ADA.

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Many service dogs are trained by private, non-profit organizations, but there are no legally-mandated training programs that a dog must complete in order to become a service dog. In fact, partners can choose to train their own dog without the help of a trainer.

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Assistance Dogs International is a highly regarded voluntary accrediting body for non-profit service dog training organizations that sets standards and establishes guidelines for the training, placement, and utilization of service dogs.

Not Your Average Client & Patient

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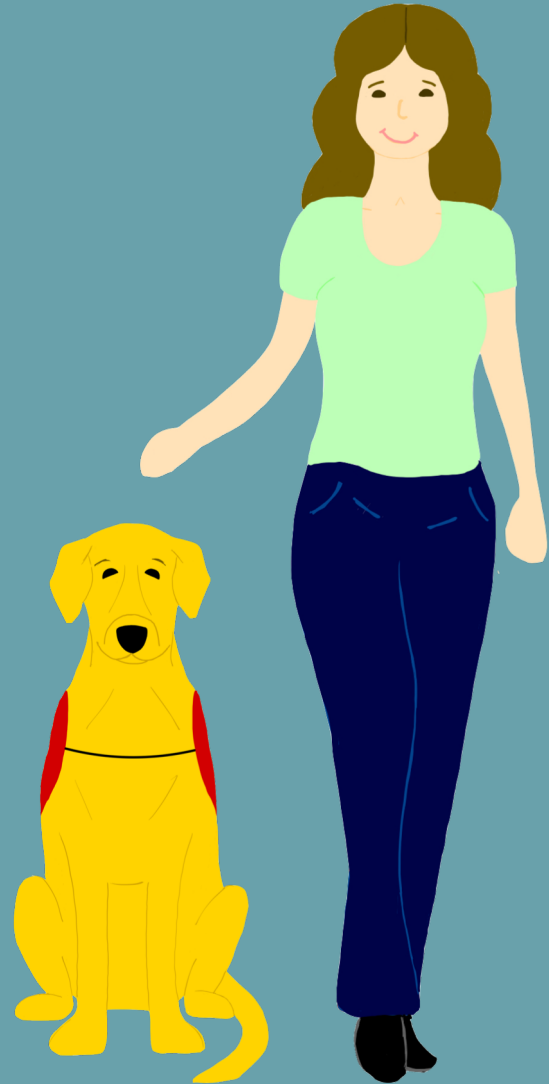
A partner and their service dog spend nearly 24/7 together for years and, therefore, are very attached to each other. Going without one another for an extended period of time can be highly stressful for both individuals.

The pair's bond is so strong that the partner oftentimes notices when something is wrong with their dog long before most pet owners would.

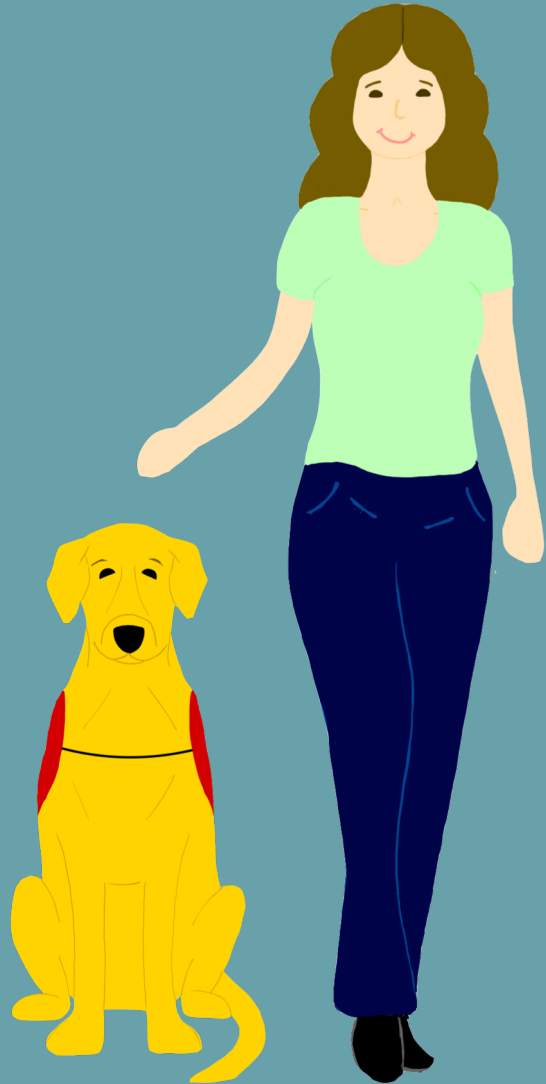
WHY SHOULD THE VETERINARY COMMUNITY CARE?

Take a moment to put yourself in their shoes.

This is Sam.



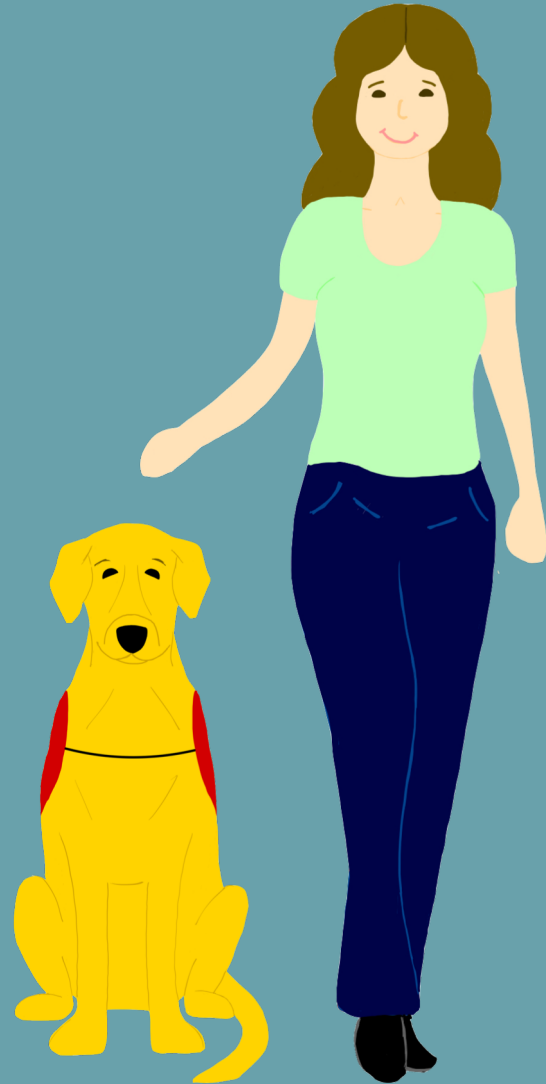
This is Sam.



Sam has a disability.

She has weakness and poor fine motor skills on her left side.

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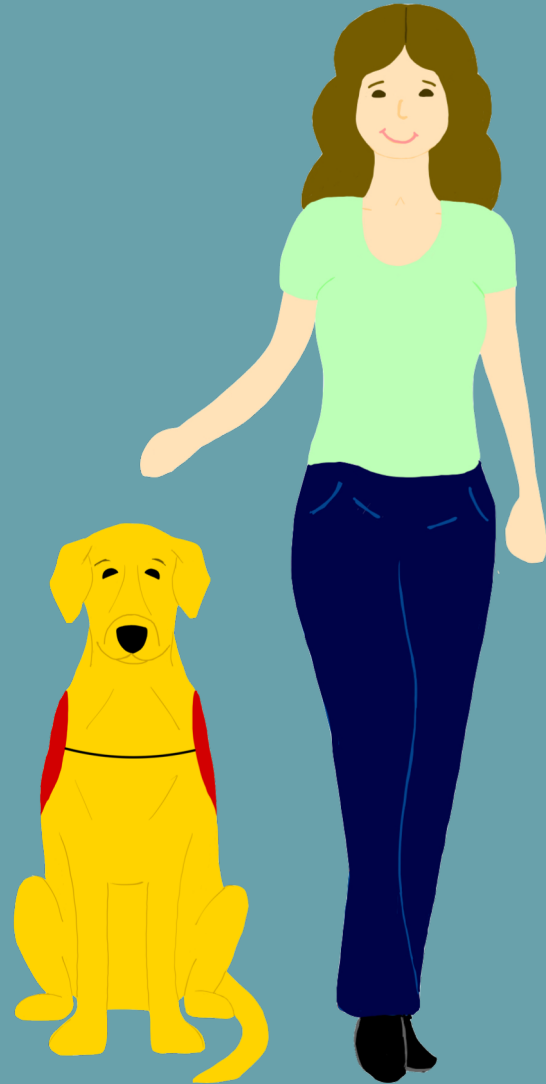
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Her name is Ellie, and she is a 4-year-old female Labrador Retriever.

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Her name is Ellie, and she is a 4-year-old female Labrador Retriever.

Ellie helps Sam out.

Ellie is trained to pick things up off of the ground, carry items in her mouth, open and close doors, and bark to alert others when Sam falls.

Sam noticed that Ellie wasn't acting normal yesterday.

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So, Sam and Ellie have an appointment with their veterinarian today.

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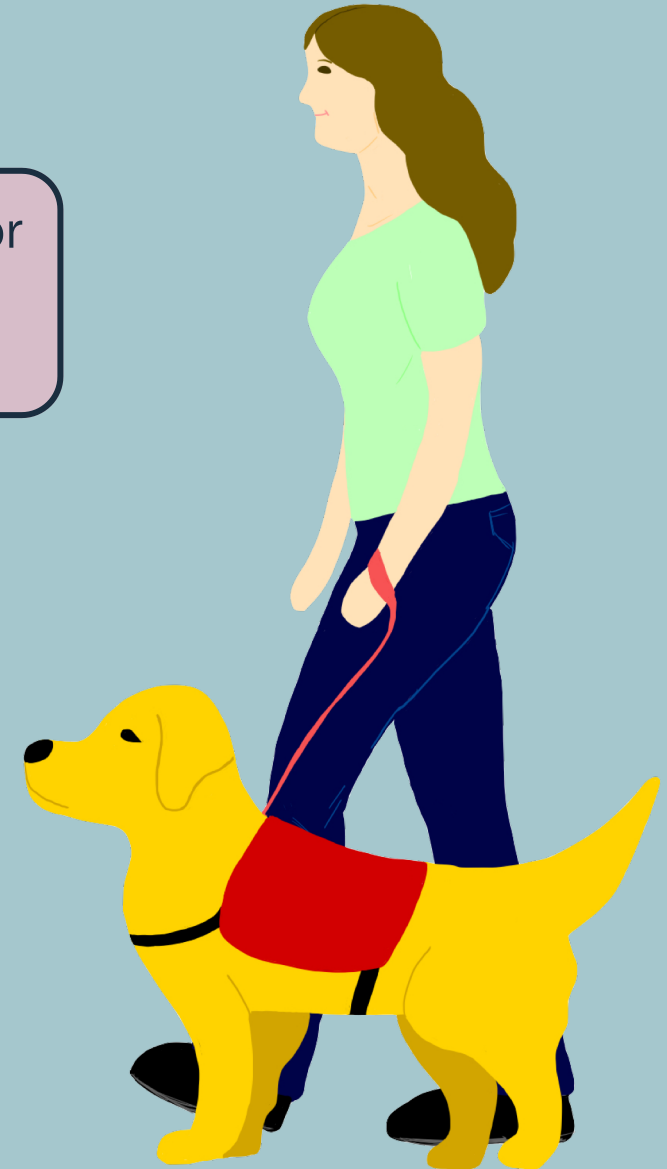
When Sam reaches the entrance, she finds that the door is quite heavy. She looks for a push button to automatically open the door, but she does not see one.



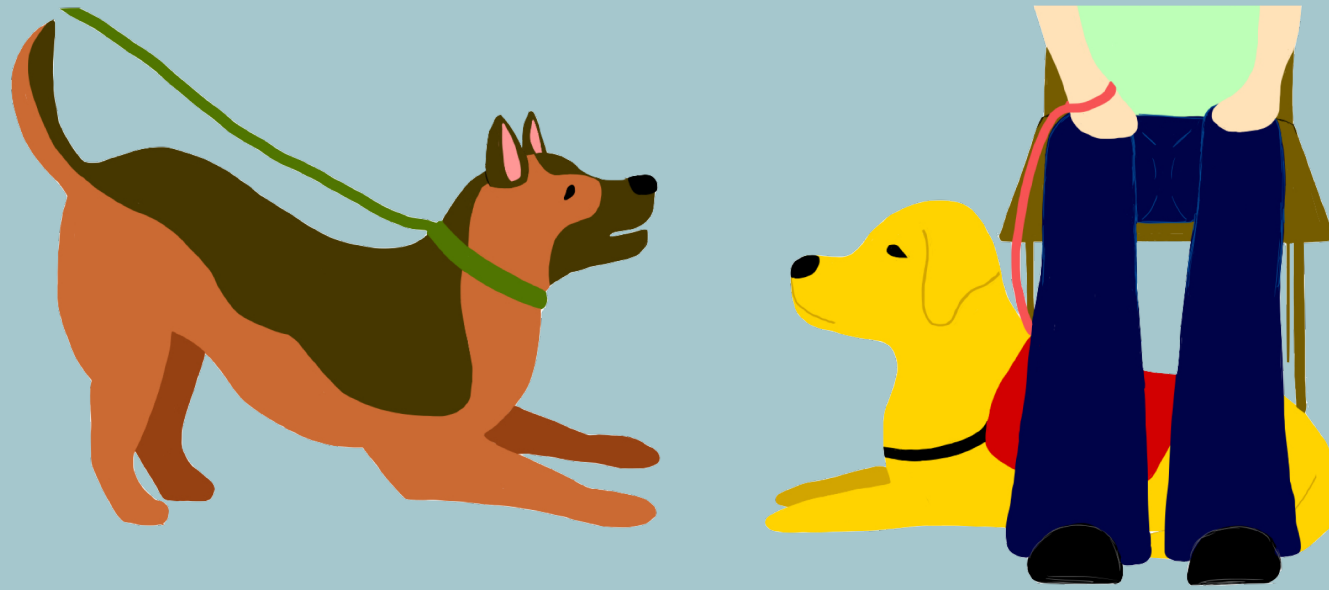
Sam and Ellie arrive at vet clinic for their appointment.

When Sam reaches the entrance, she finds that the door is quite heavy. She looks for a push button to automatically open the door, but she does not see one.

After struggling to open the door for a moment, another client exiting the building holds the door for Sam and Ellie.

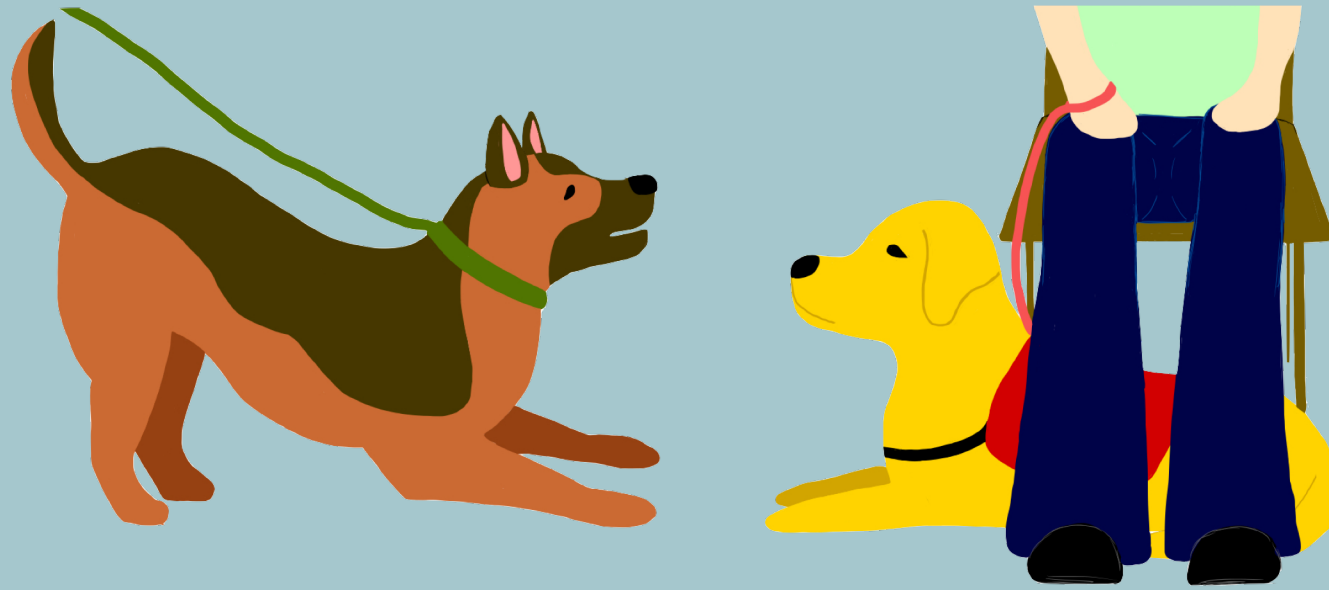


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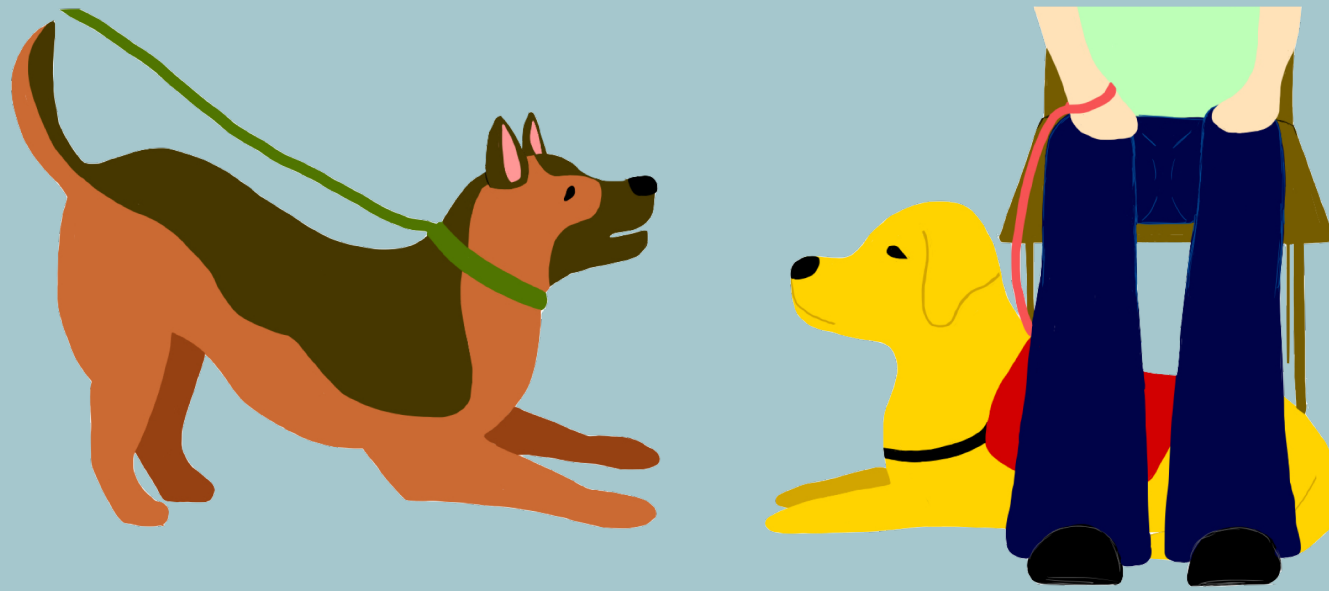
The lobby is pretty full, but the pair tries their best to sit away from other people and pets.



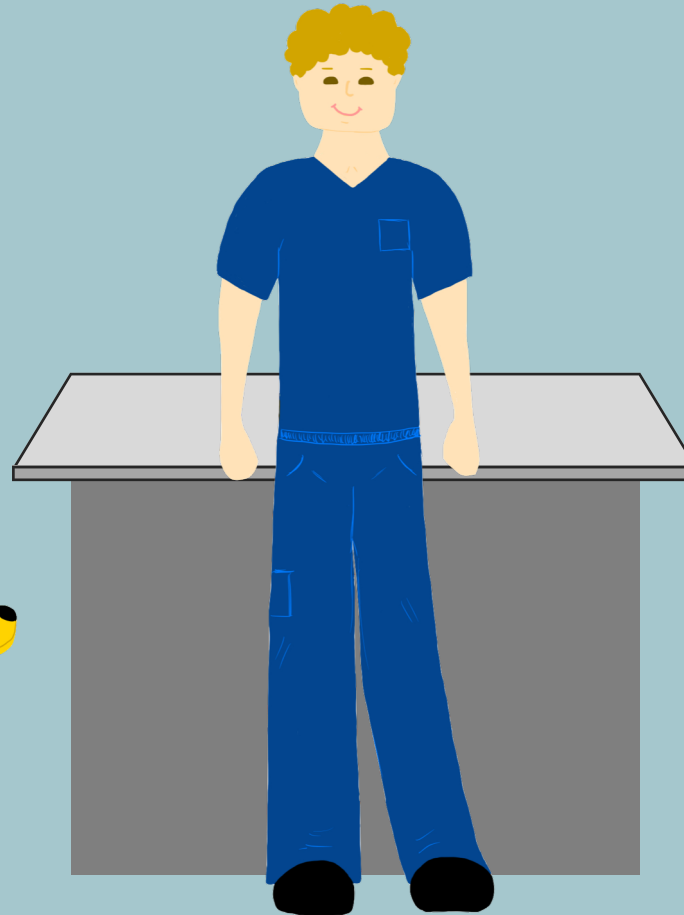
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Even still, Ellie is repeatedly approached and sniffed by excited dogs during their wait.



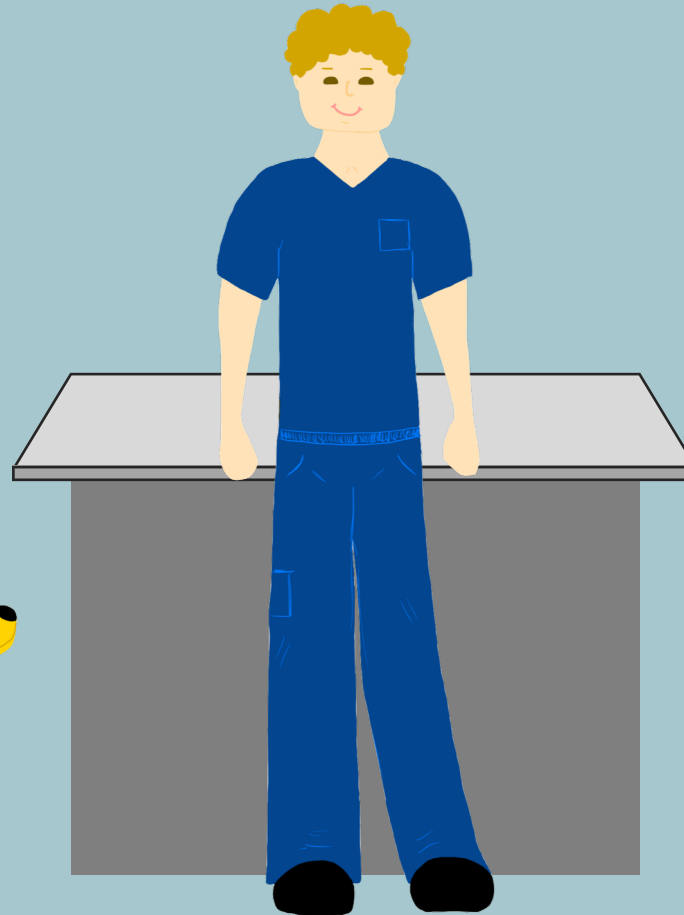
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Upon entering the room, the tech crouches down and excitedly calls Ellie's name using a baby voice.

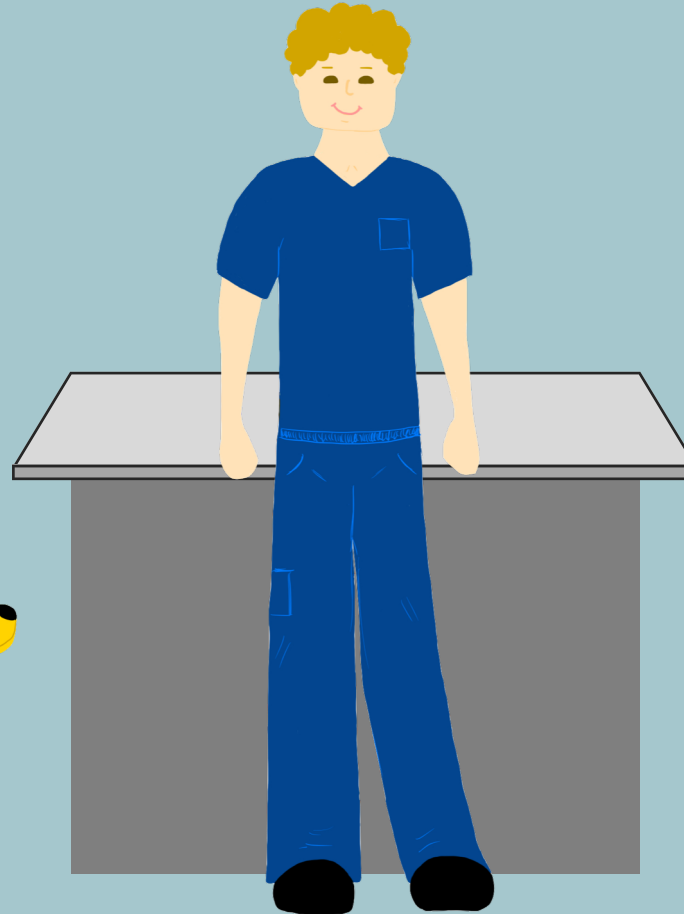


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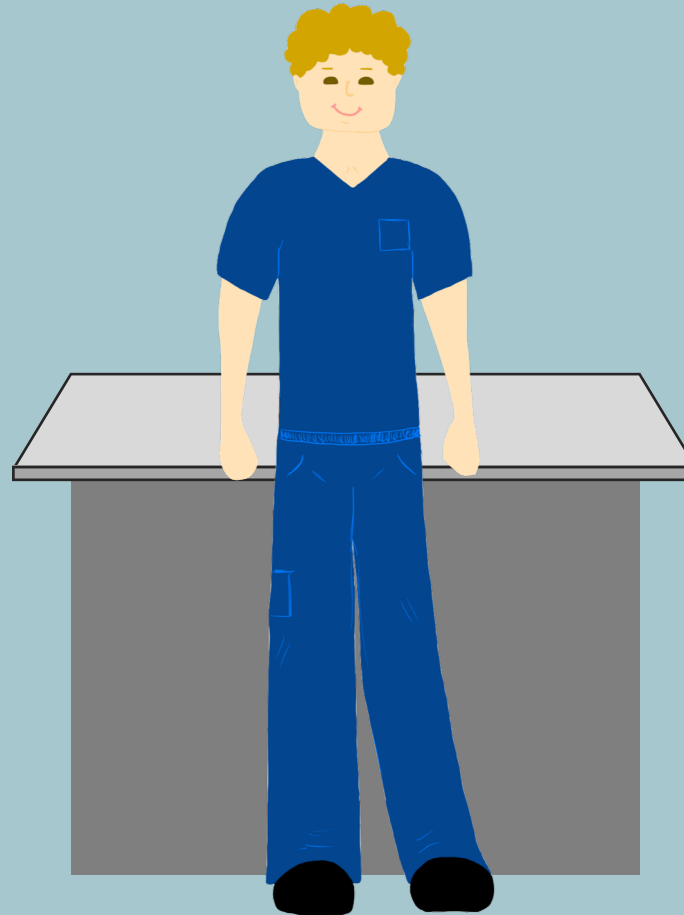
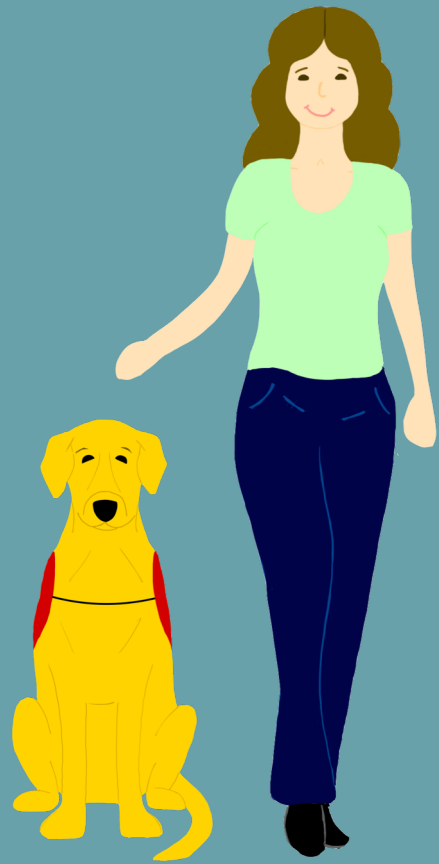
Before Sam can fully sit down, Ellie begins wagging her tail and approaching the tech, causing Sam to nearly lose her balance.



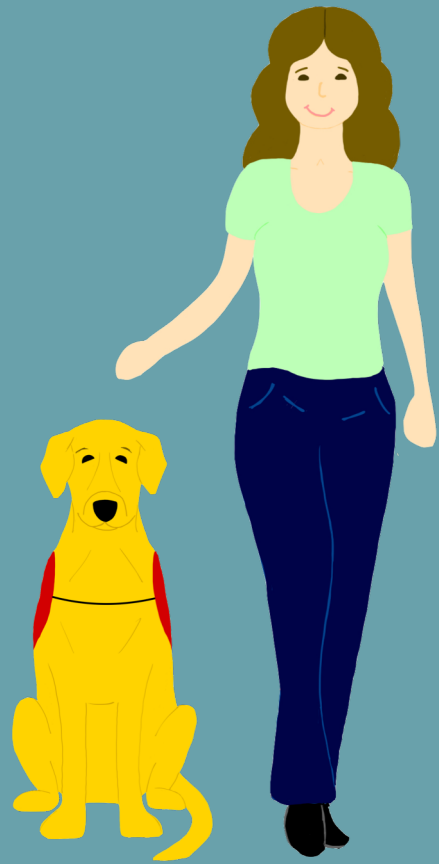
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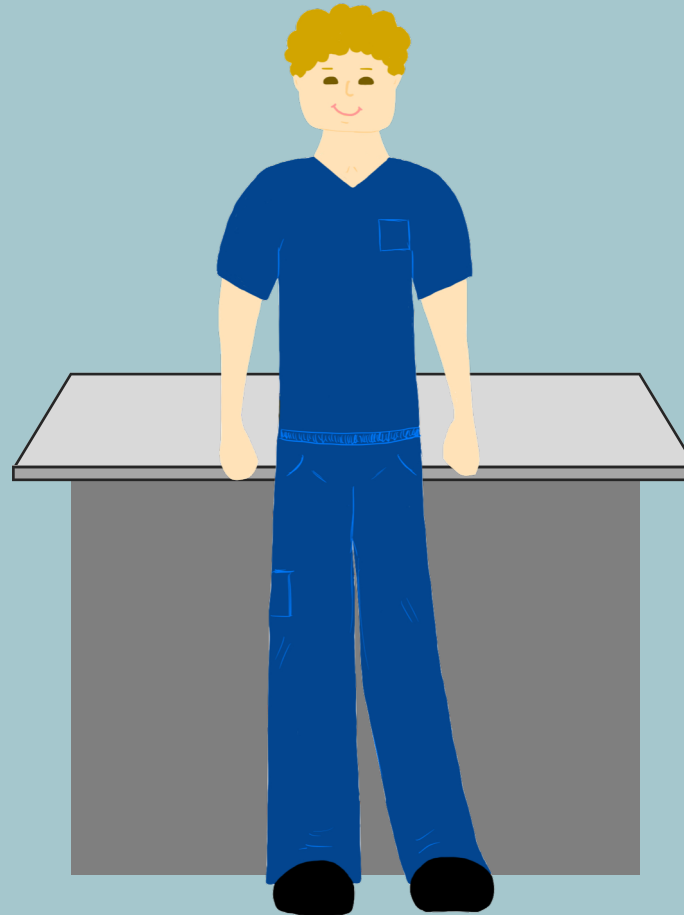
The tech begins asking questions about Ellie's history.
“What are Ellie's clinical signs...When did this start...Has this ever happened before?”



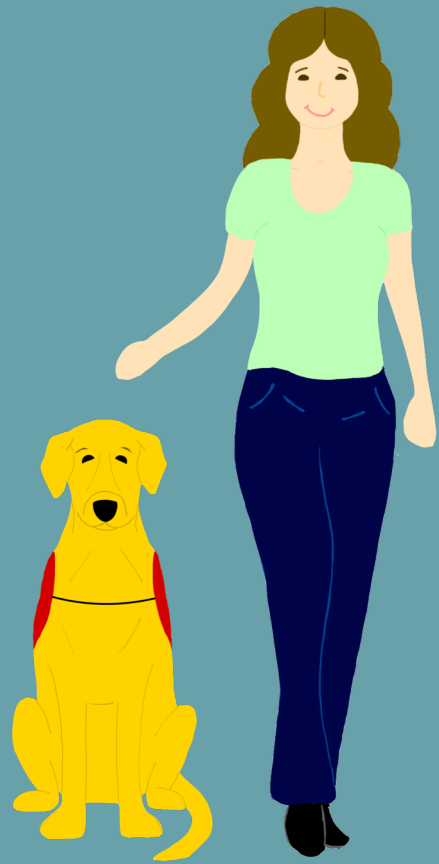
Sam explains Ellie's recent problems and answers his questions.



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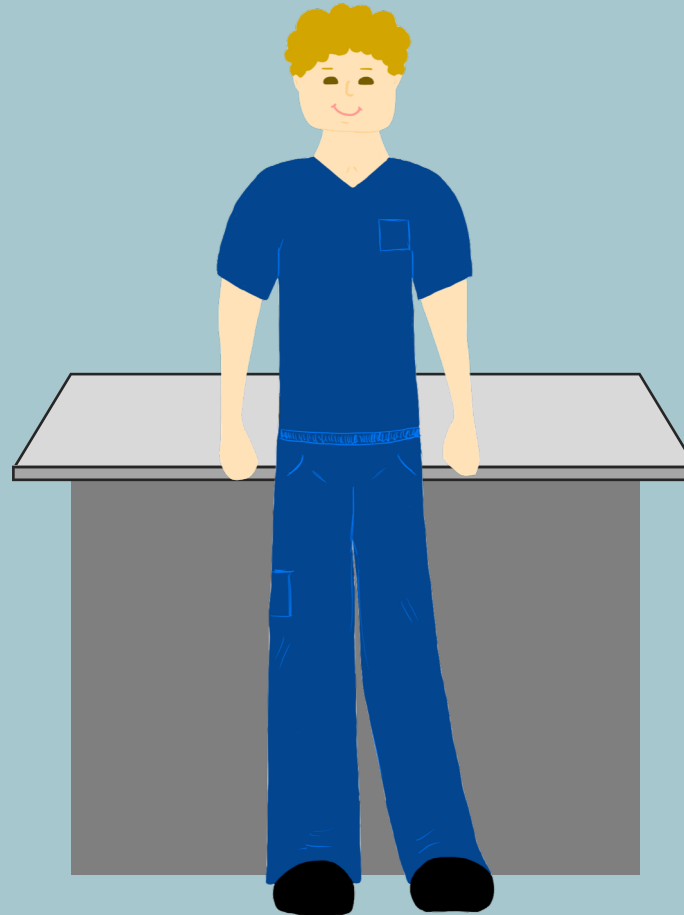


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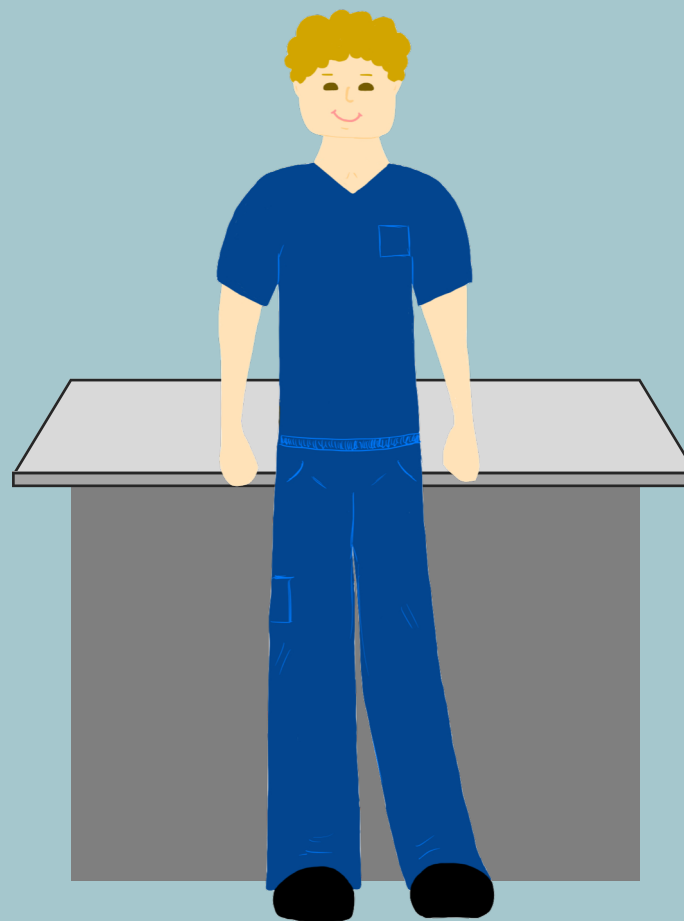
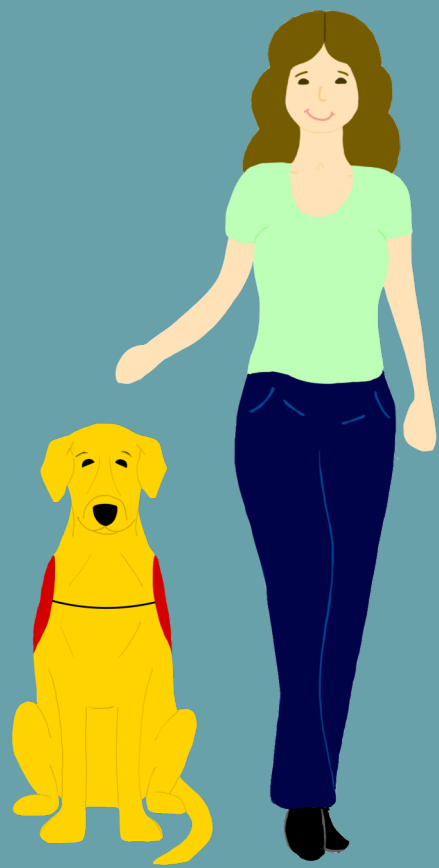


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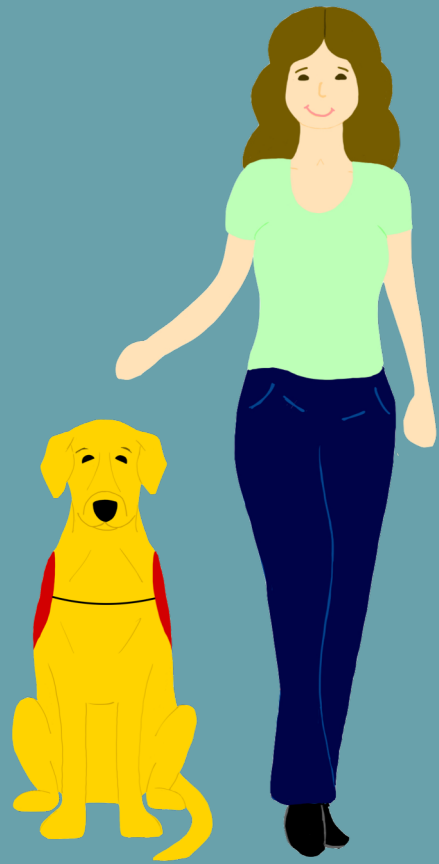
But then he asks...



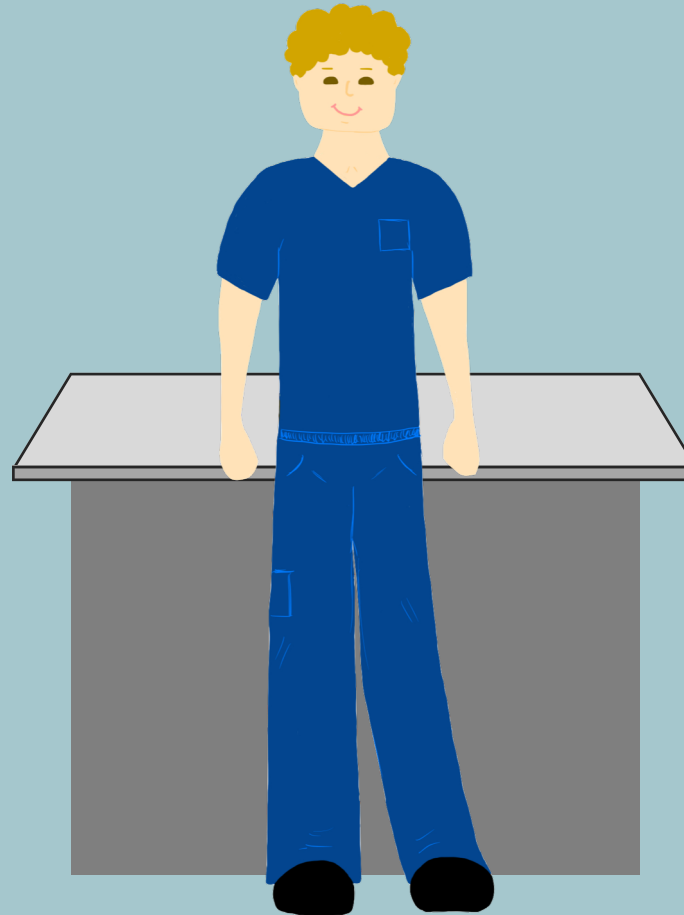
“What does Ellie do for you as a service dog?”



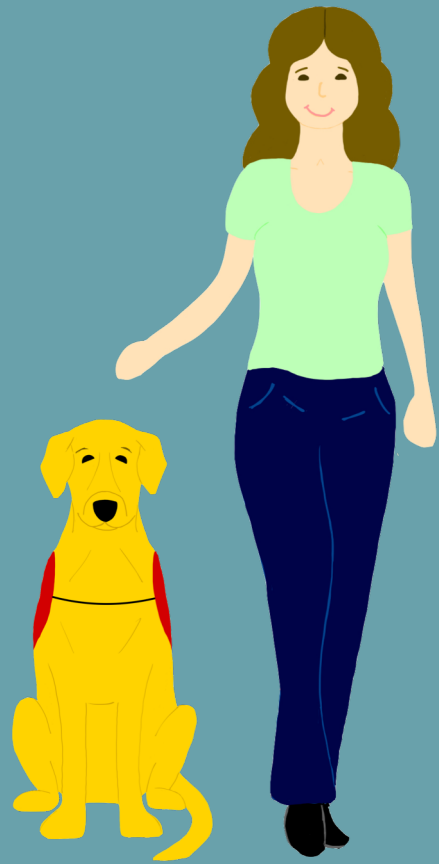
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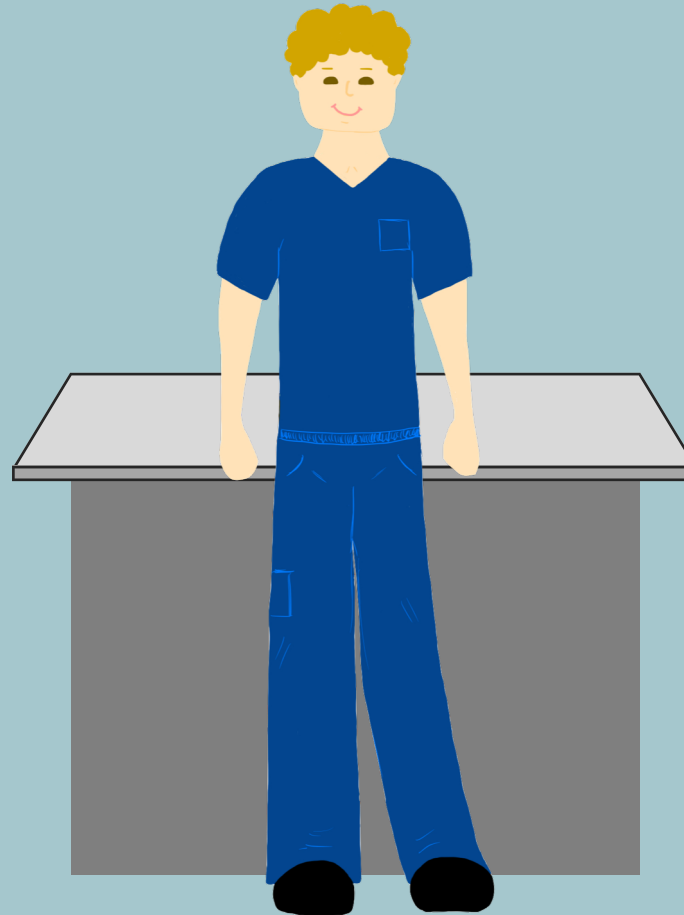


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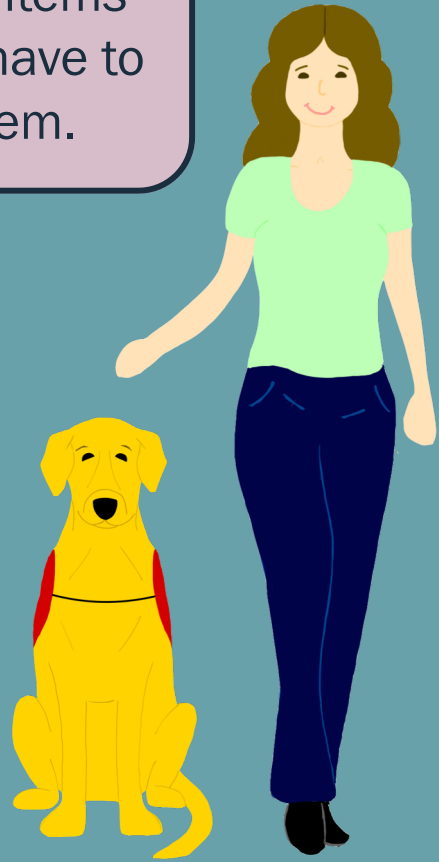
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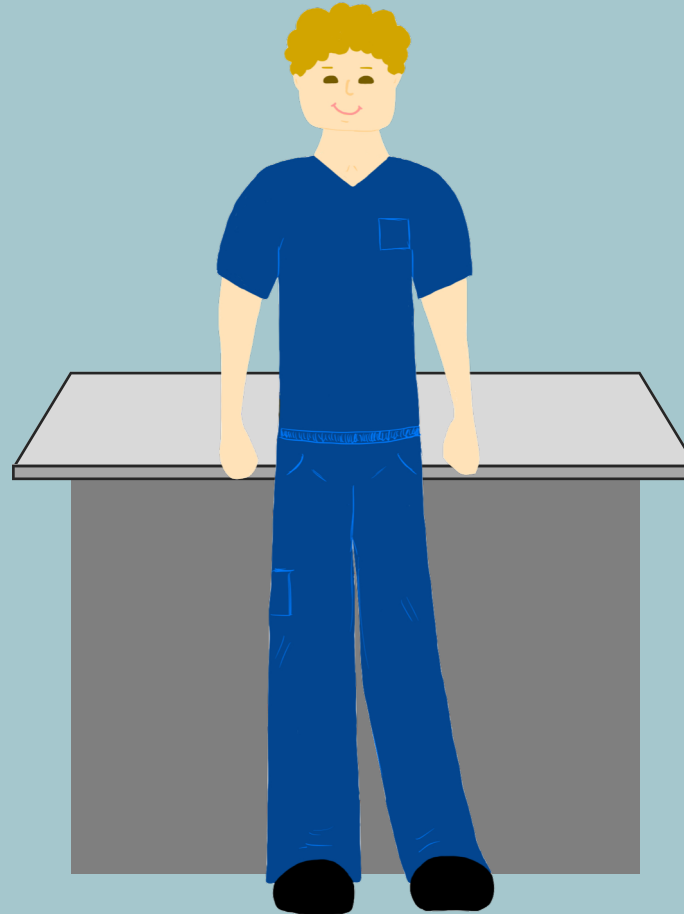
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Sam hesitates and then says,
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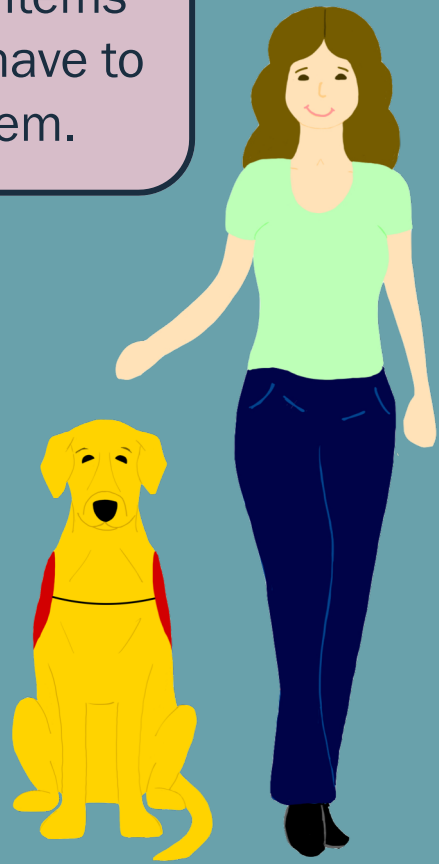
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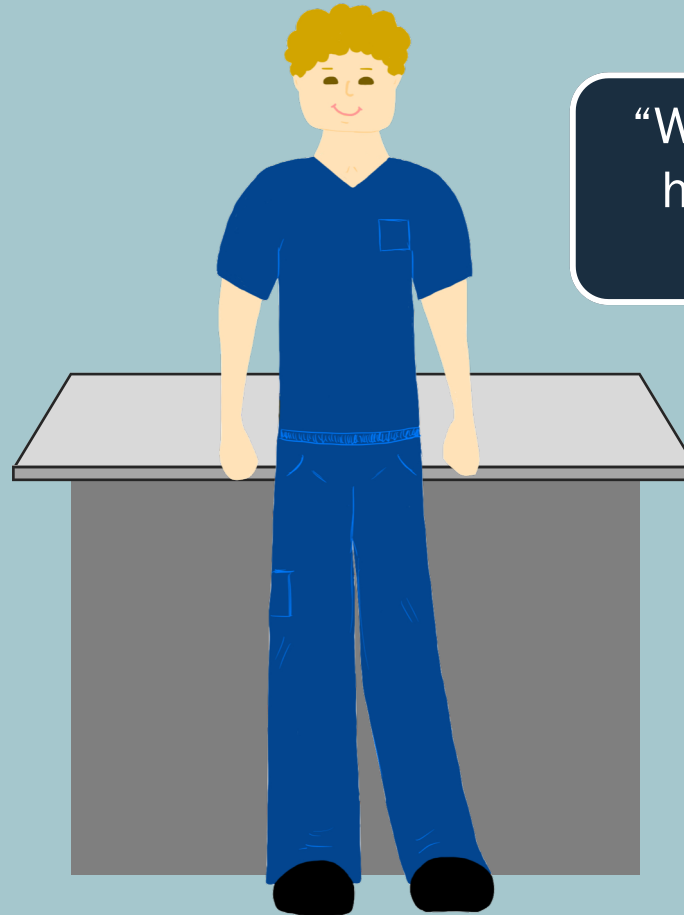
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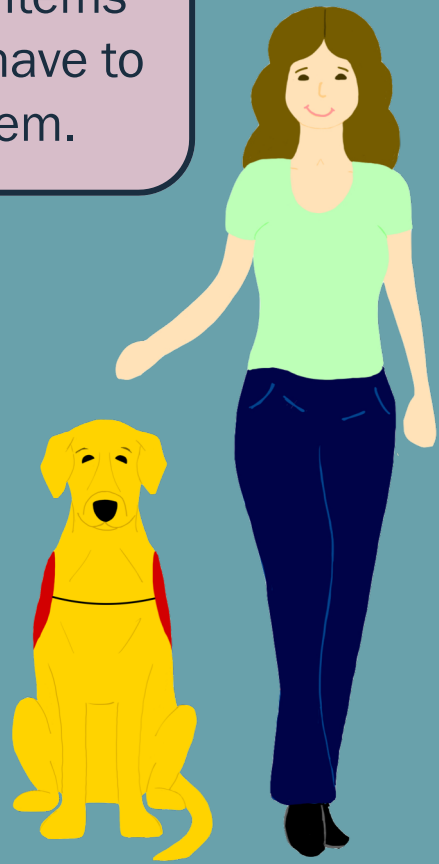
“Well, what disability do you have that keeps you from bending over?”



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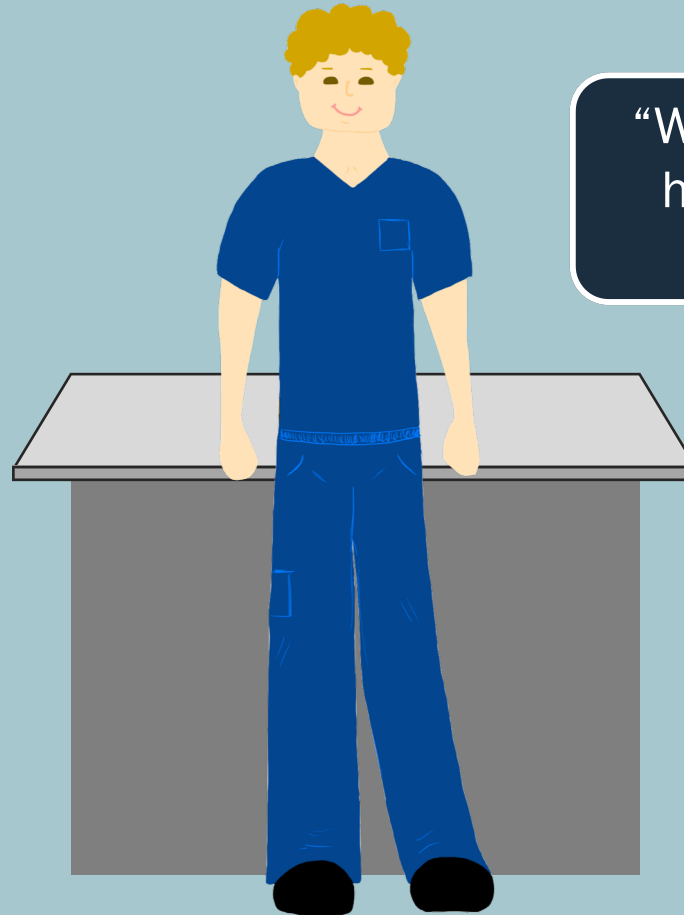
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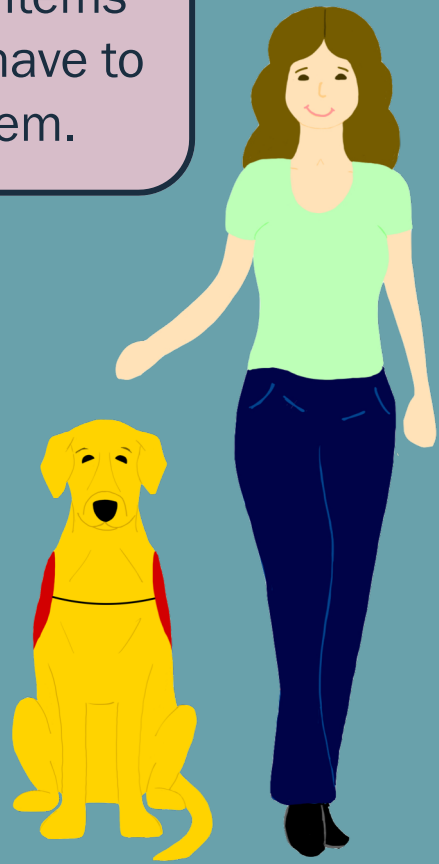
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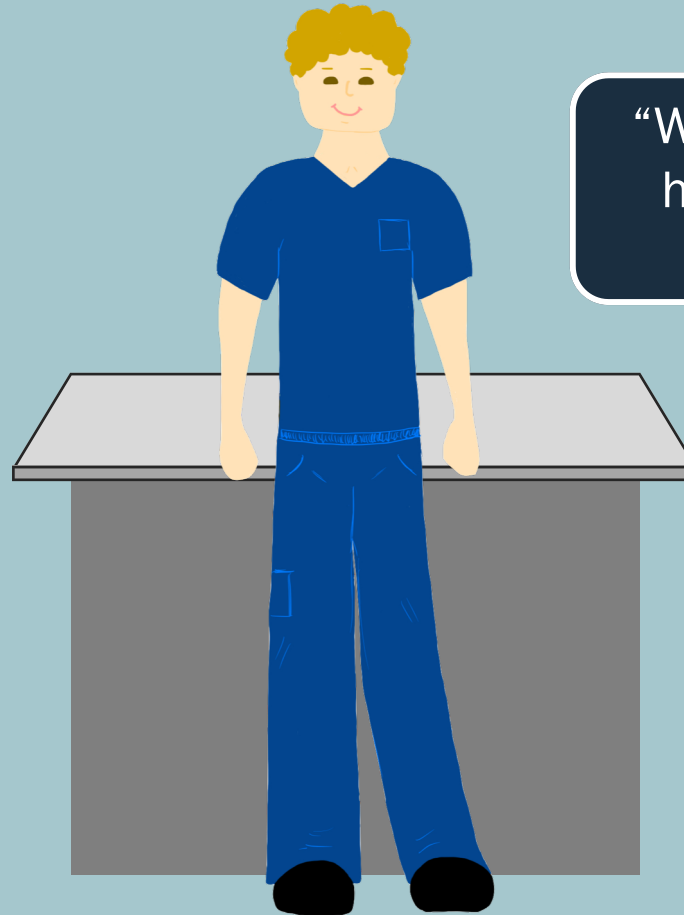
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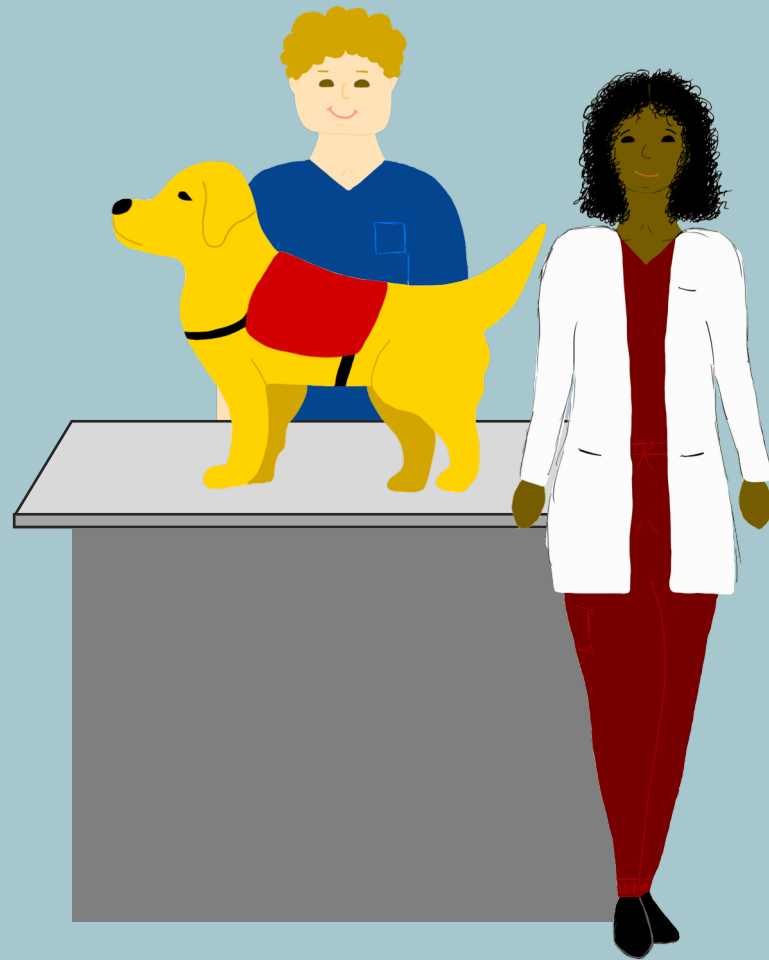
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The tech goes back to asking questions about Ellie’s health.

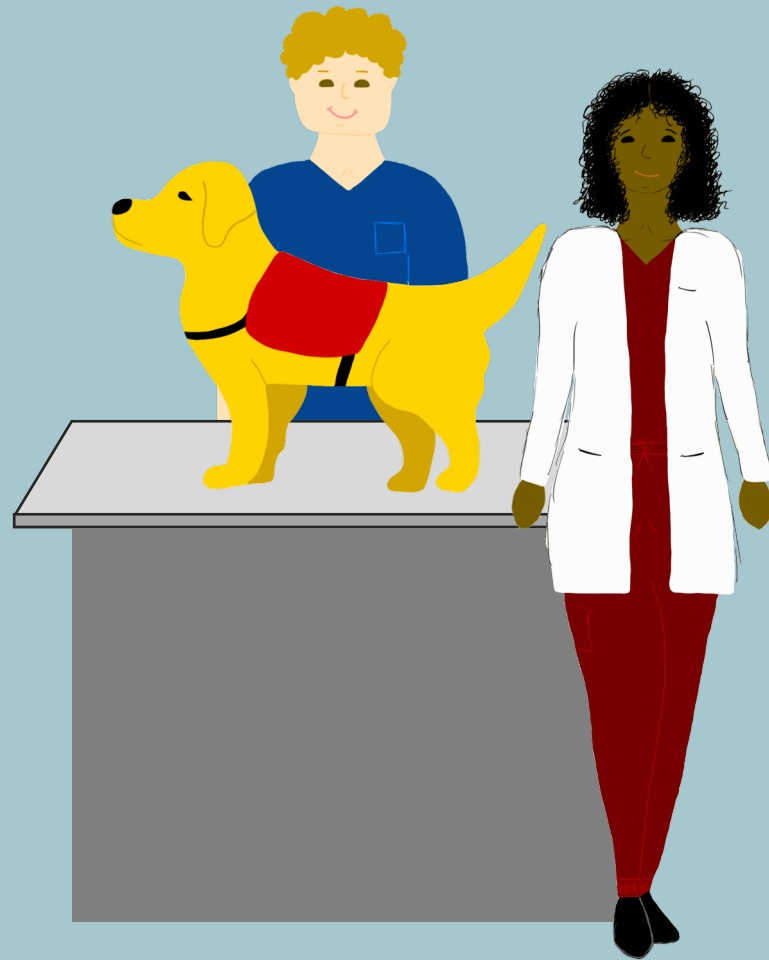
A few minutes later, Dr. Martin enters the room.



The tech takes Ellie's leash and places her on the exam table.



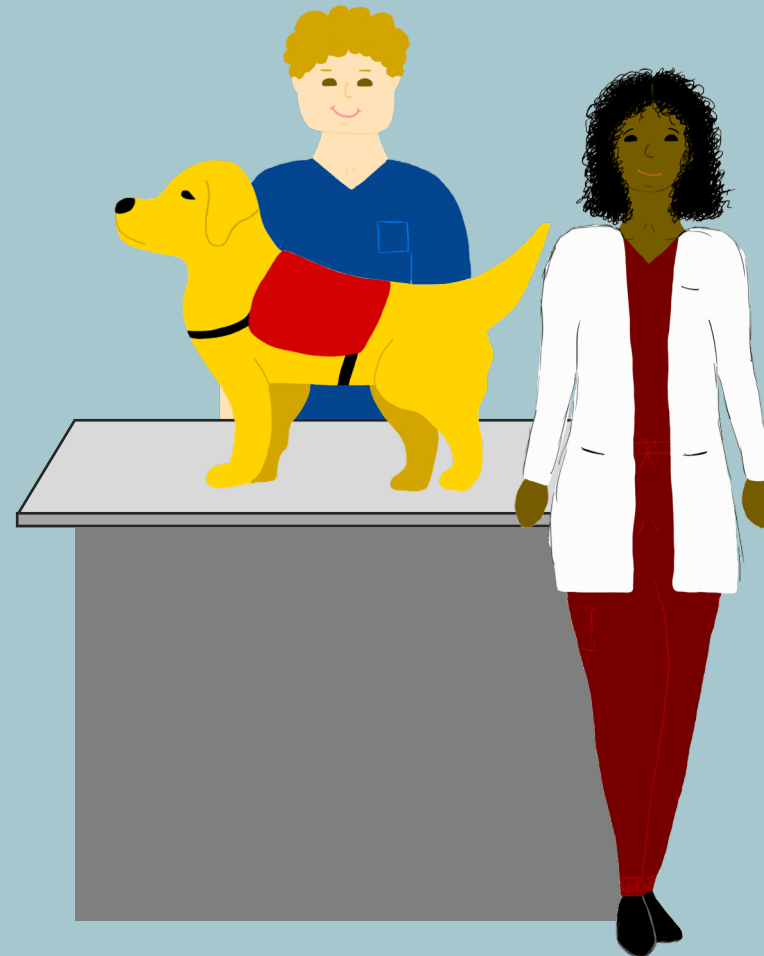
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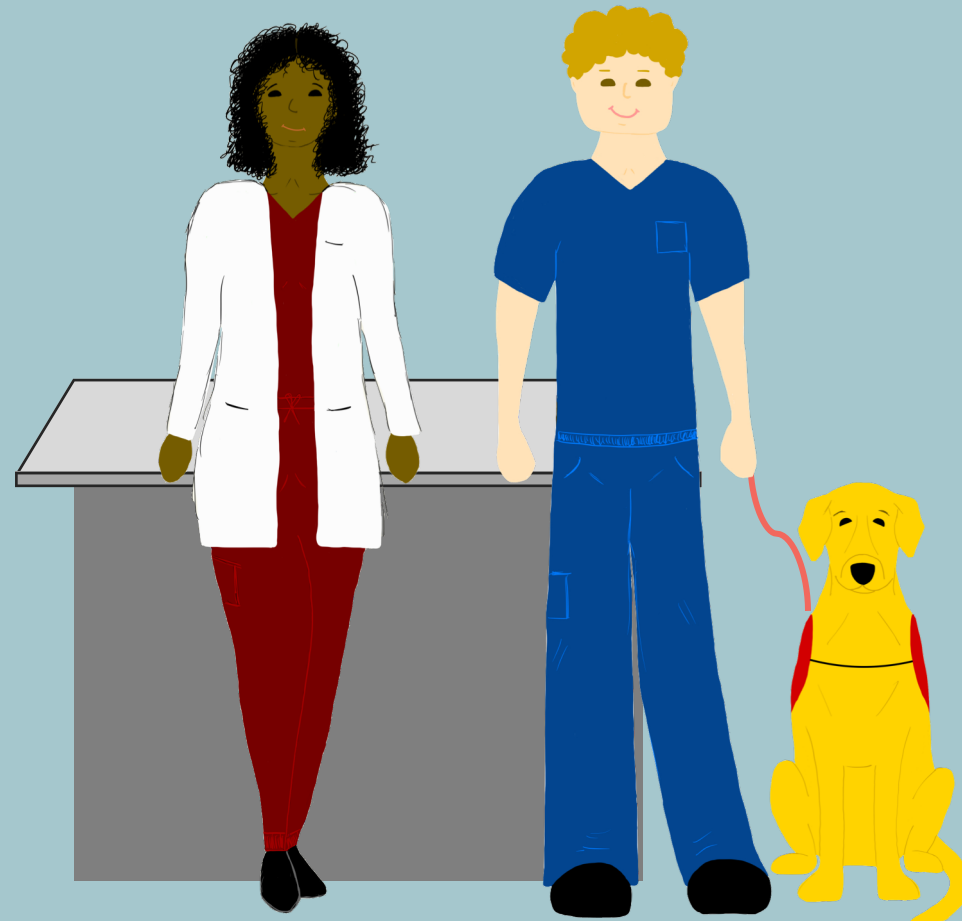
Dr. Martin leaves Ellie's vest on and works around it as she performs her exam.

Upon completing her exam, Dr. Martin says, “Ellie has gained a few pounds since her last visit, but otherwise, she looks great. However, her clinical signs do suggest that she might have a urinary tract infection. I’m going to have my tech take Ellie outside, so we can collect a urine sample. We’ll bring her back in a few minutes.”

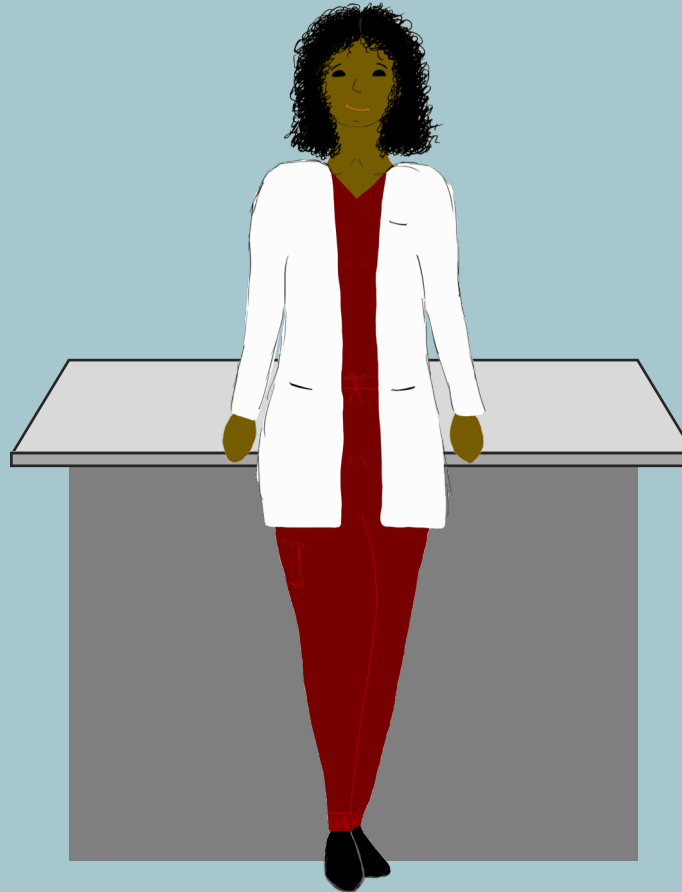
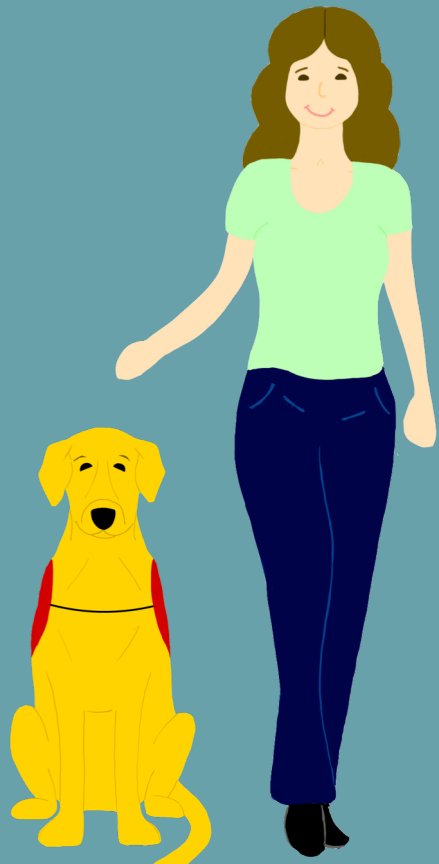


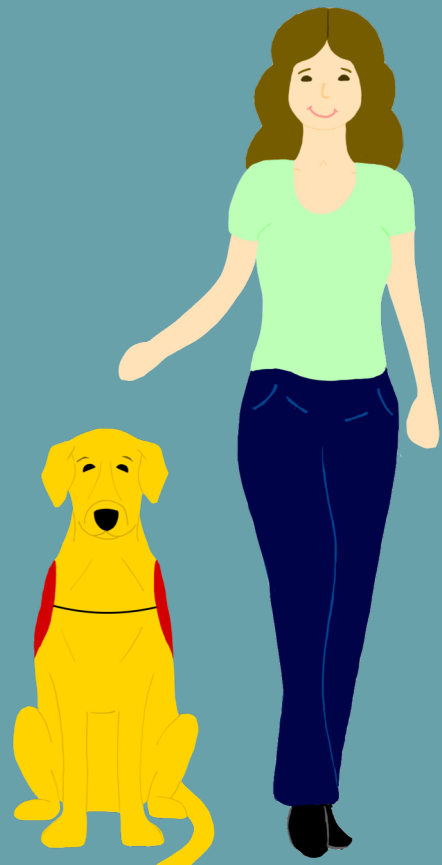
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Dr. Martin and the tech then lead a confused Ellie out the door, leaving Sam alone and anxious until Ellie returns.



A little while later, Dr. Martin enters again and explains that Ellie's urine shows clear evidence of a UTI.



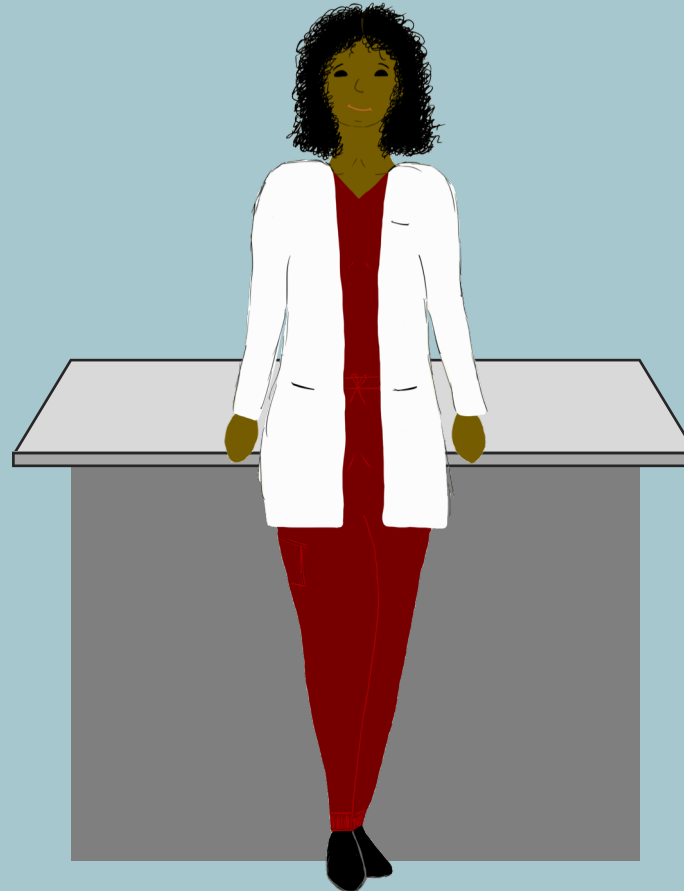
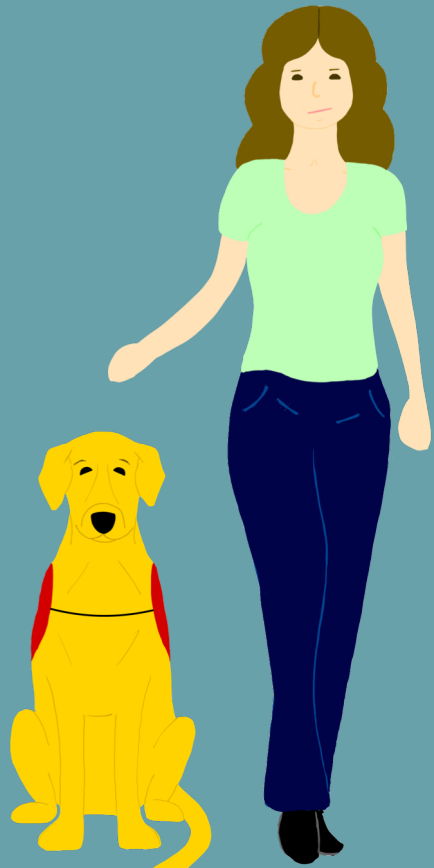


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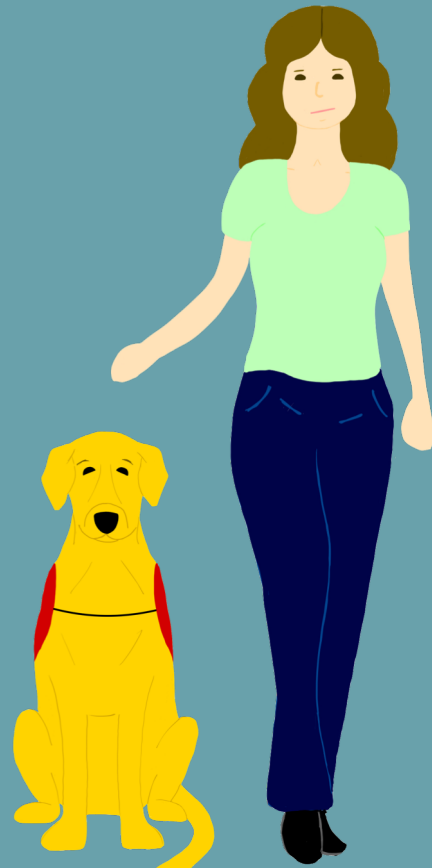
"I'm going to send you home with a week's worth of amoxicillin tablets. Just give one tablet to Ellie twice a day starting tonight. It should be super easy, and Ellie will be feeling better again in no time."



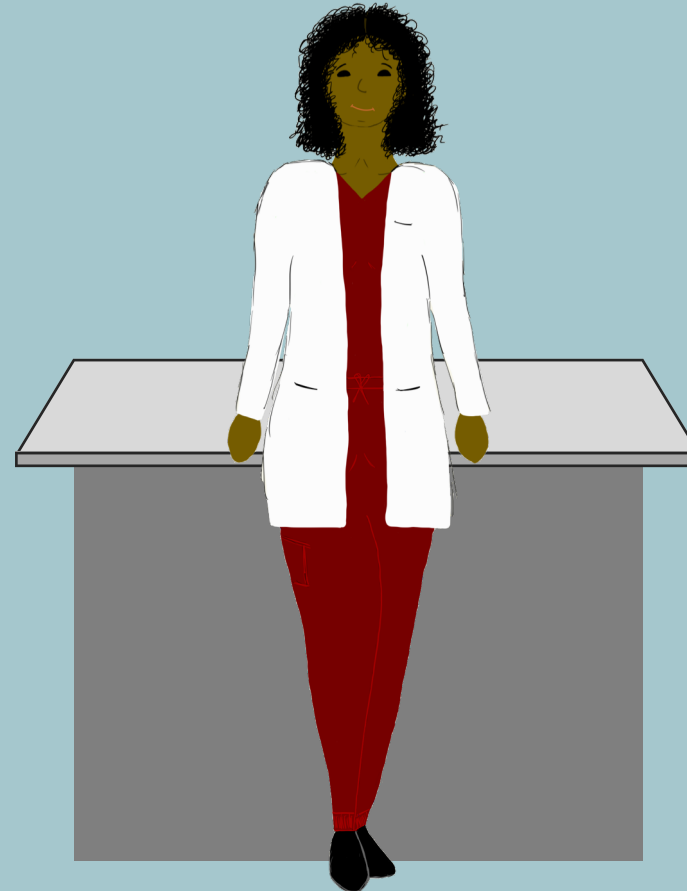
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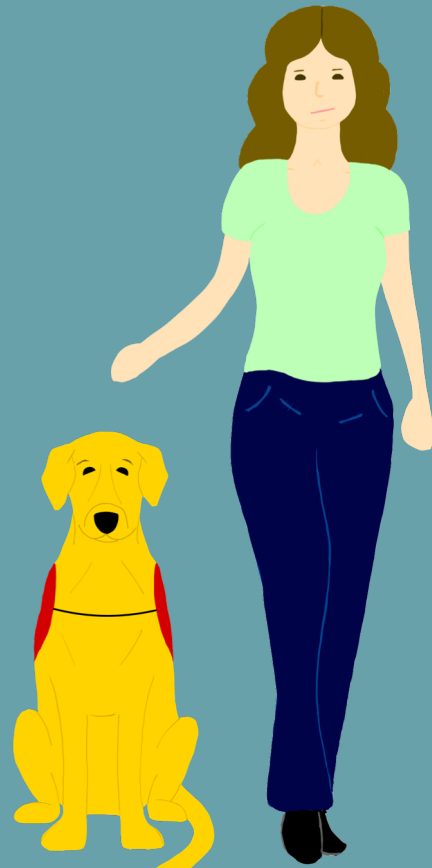


“Try putting the tablet in a pill pocket, cheese, or some other treat. Worse comes to it, you can just pill her.”

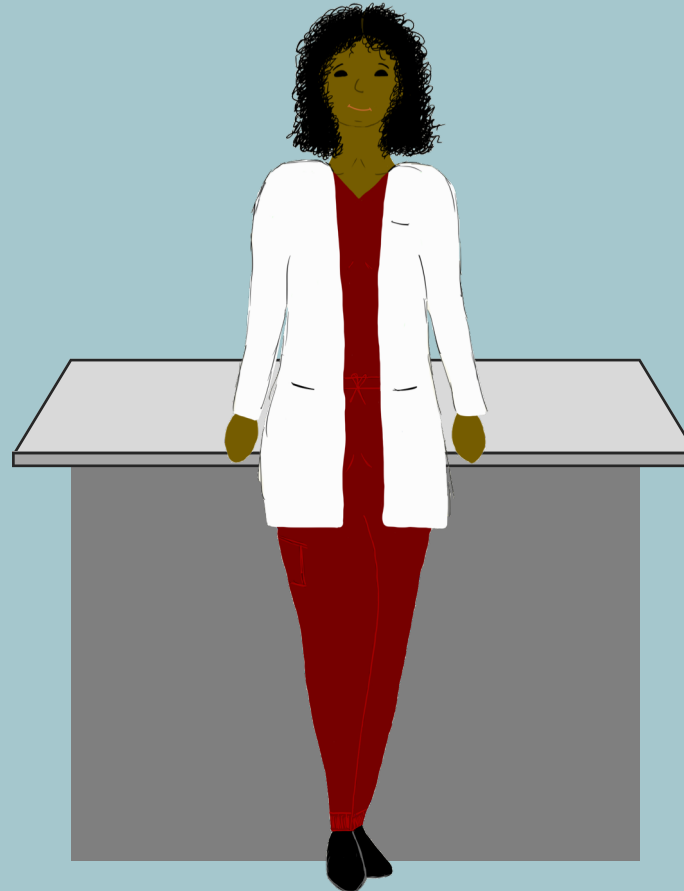


“It’s great to hear that Ellie will be okay, but I’m worried about the treatment because she doesn’t take pills very well.”

“Umm...I’ll try my best.”

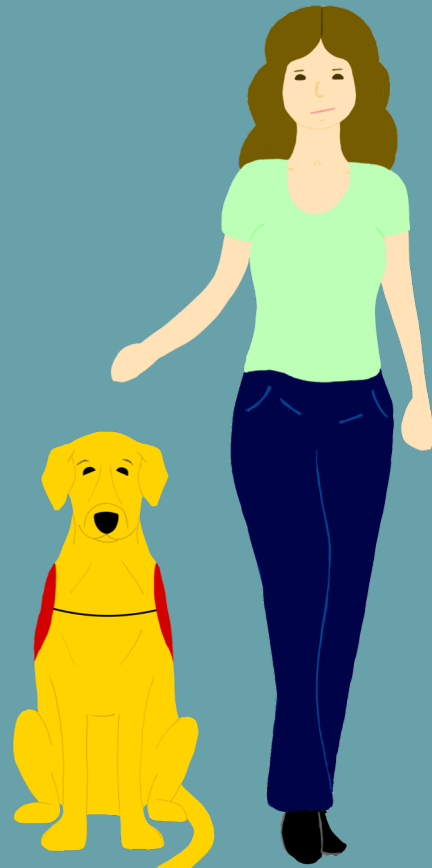


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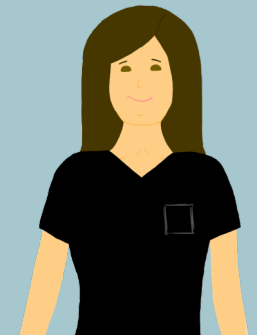
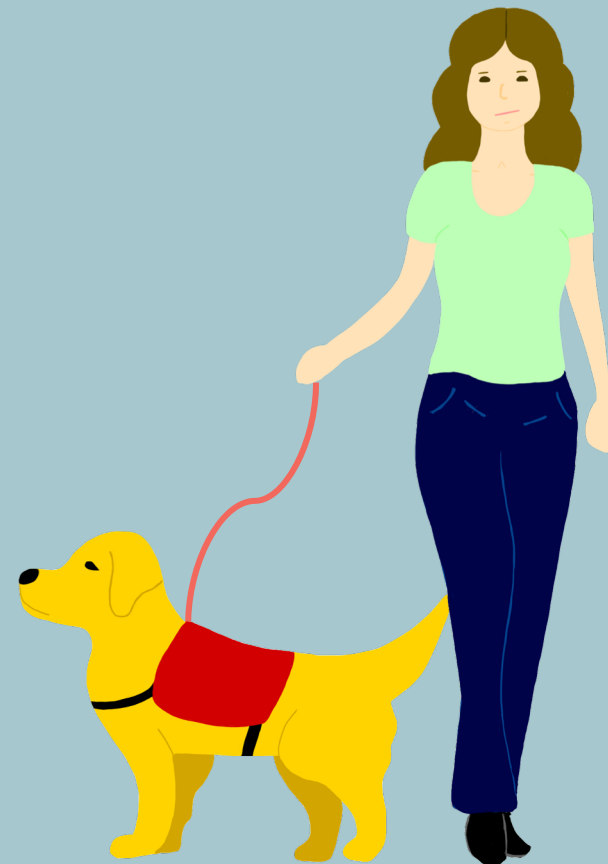
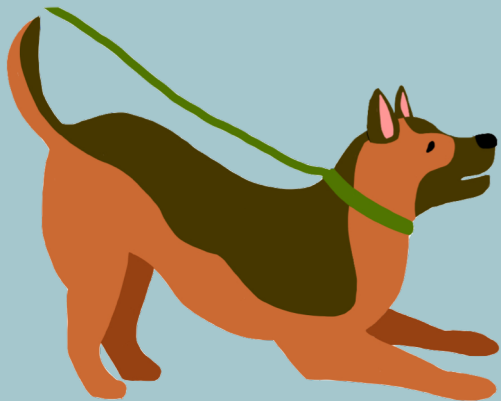


“Try putting the tablet in a pill pocket, cheese, or some other treat. Worse comes to it, you can just pill her.”

Great! Let’s recheck Ellie in a week. You can schedule that appointment with the receptionist when you check out.

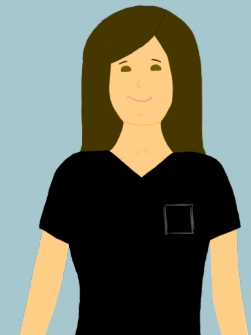
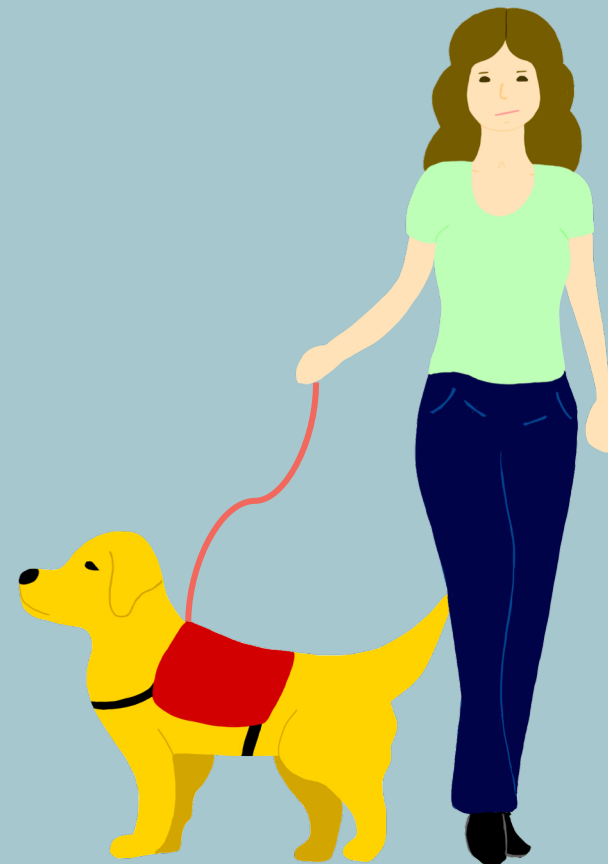
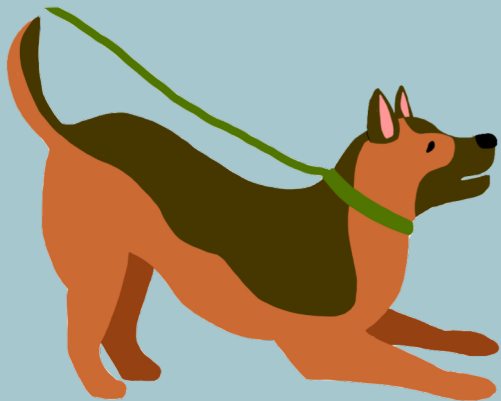


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"Alright. Here is Ellie's medication. We have her scheduled for a recheck next Wednesday at 10 am. Have a nice day!"

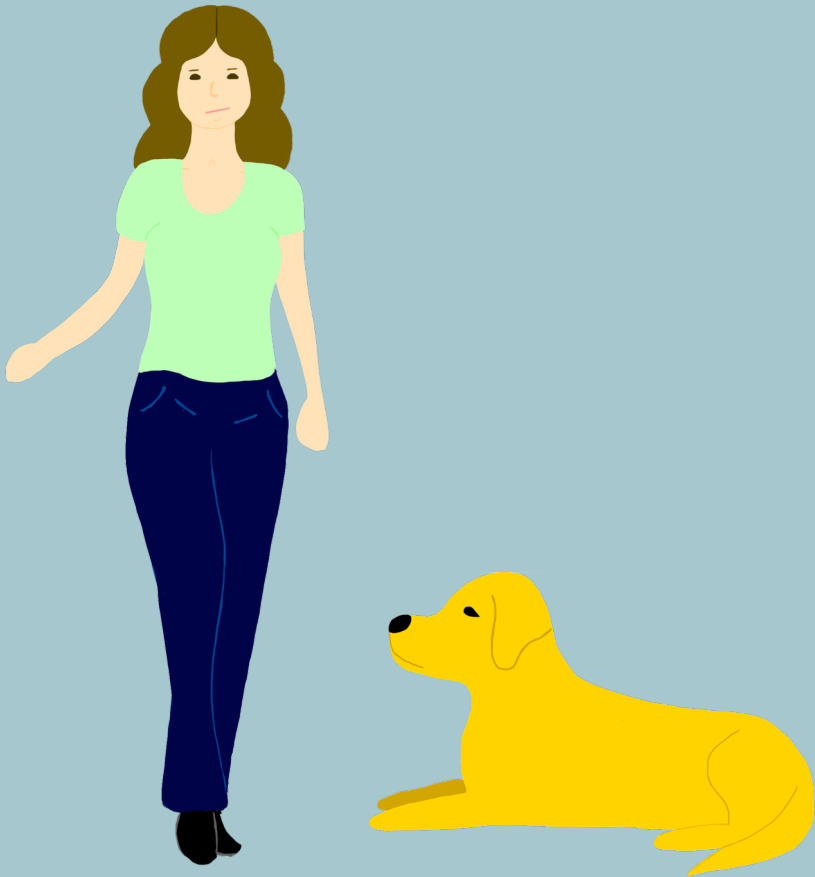


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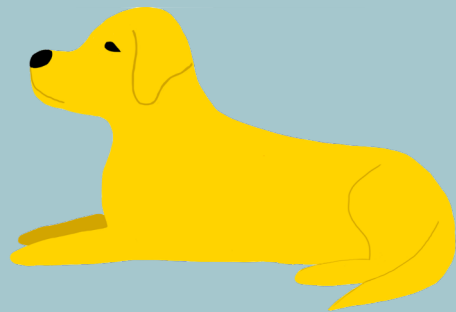


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Sam ends her day frustrated and upset. She's not sure how she's going to complete Ellie's treatment, but she's embarrassed to ask Dr. Martin for a different treatment.



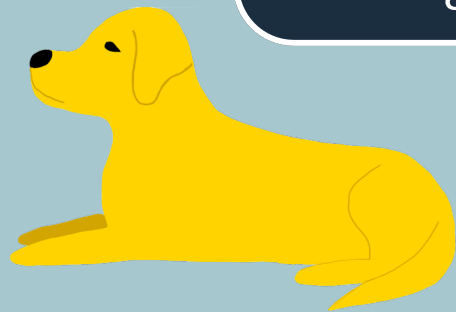
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To top it all off, Sam was so anxious while checking out that she can't remember when she scheduled Ellie's recheck appointment for.



Yikes...

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Sam and Ellie's needs were not well-accommodated at their appointment today.

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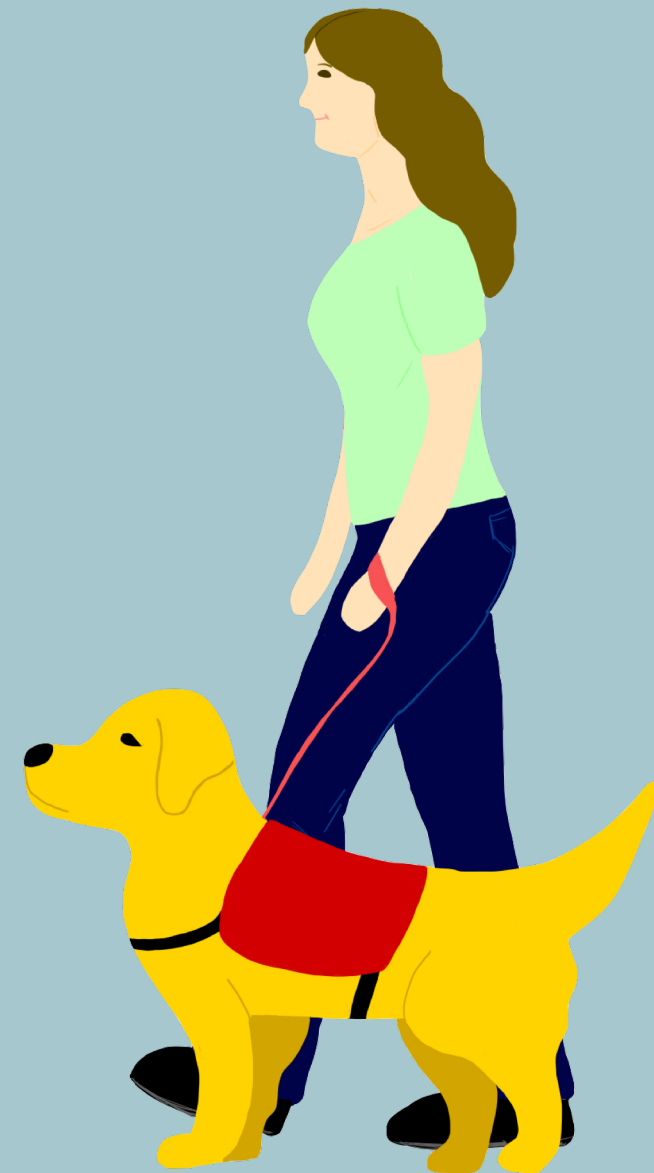
This could allow for more serious issues to develop that could threaten Ellie's ability to work and consequently, Sam's safety.

So...

HOW COULD THE
VETERINARY TEAM HAVE
BEEN MORE HELPFUL?

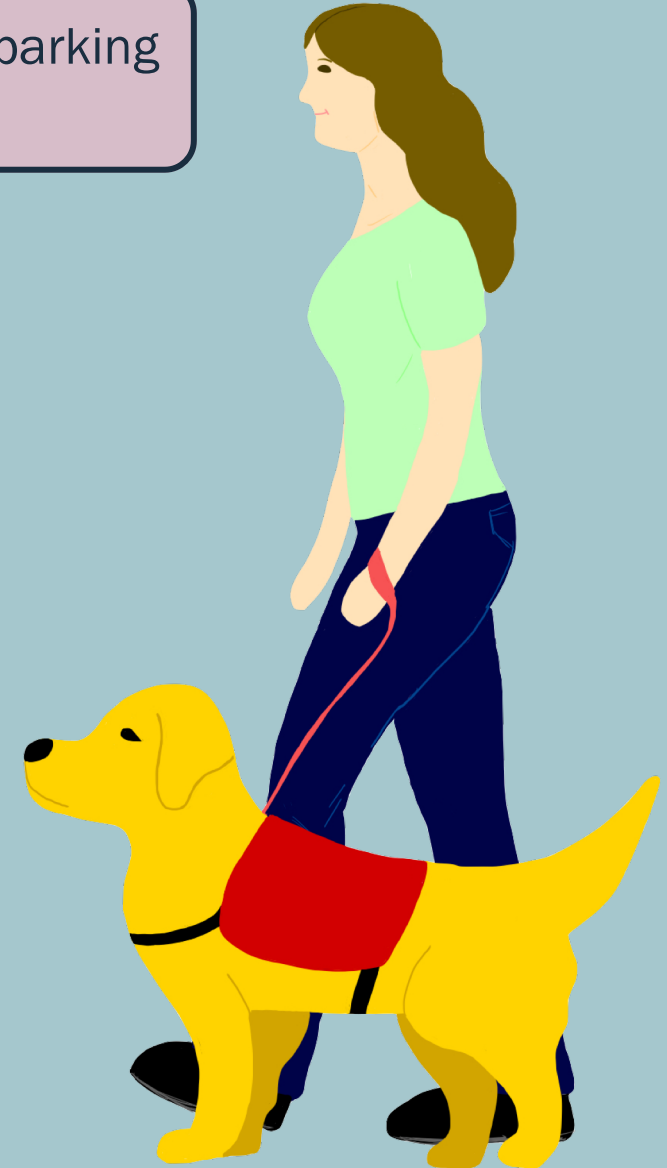
Let's try this again.

Sam and Ellie arrive at vet clinic for their appointment.



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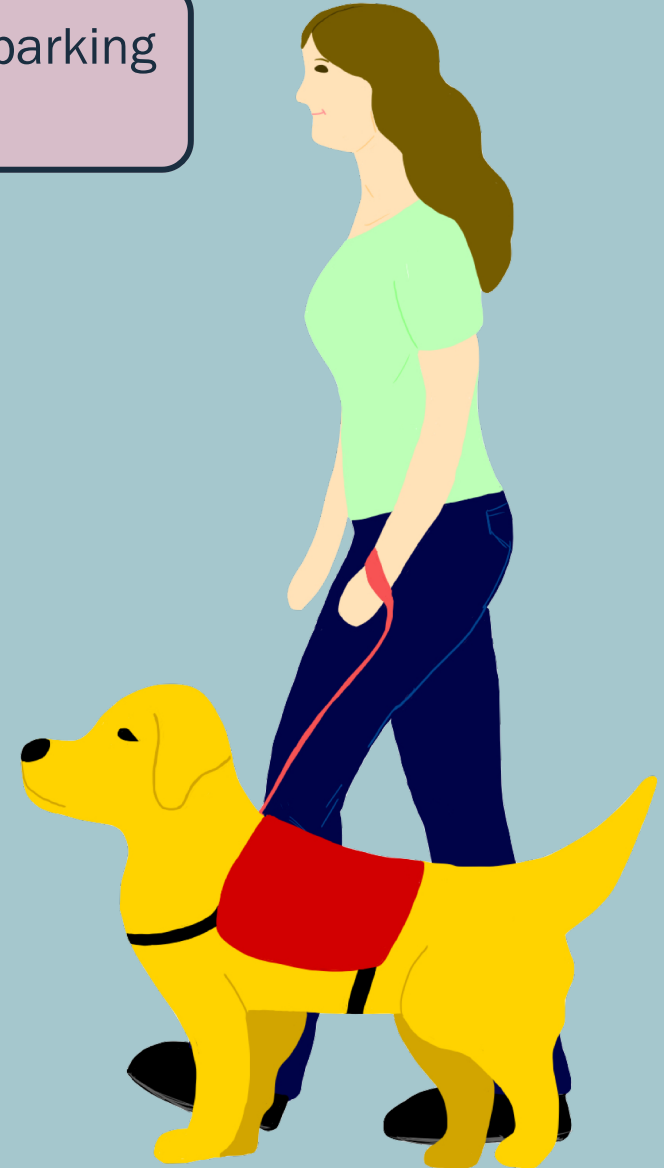
Their ride parks in the designated handicap parking spot right by the front door.



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Once parked, Sam calls the clinic to let the staff know that she and Ellie have arrived just as the receptionist had suggested when Sam made the appointment.

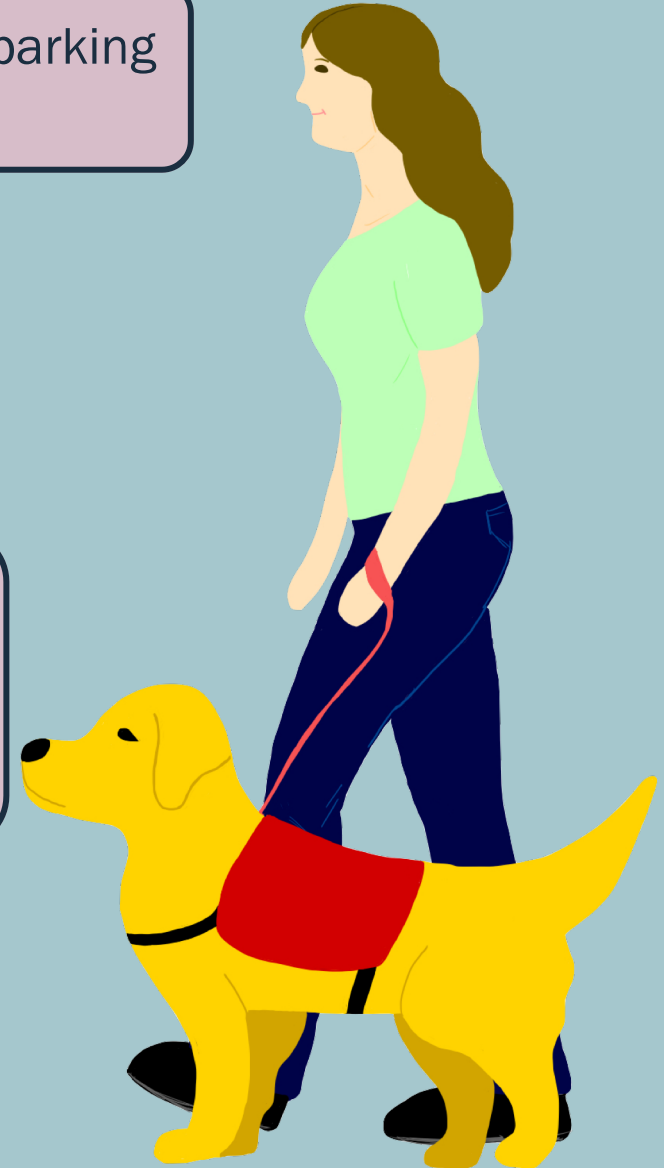


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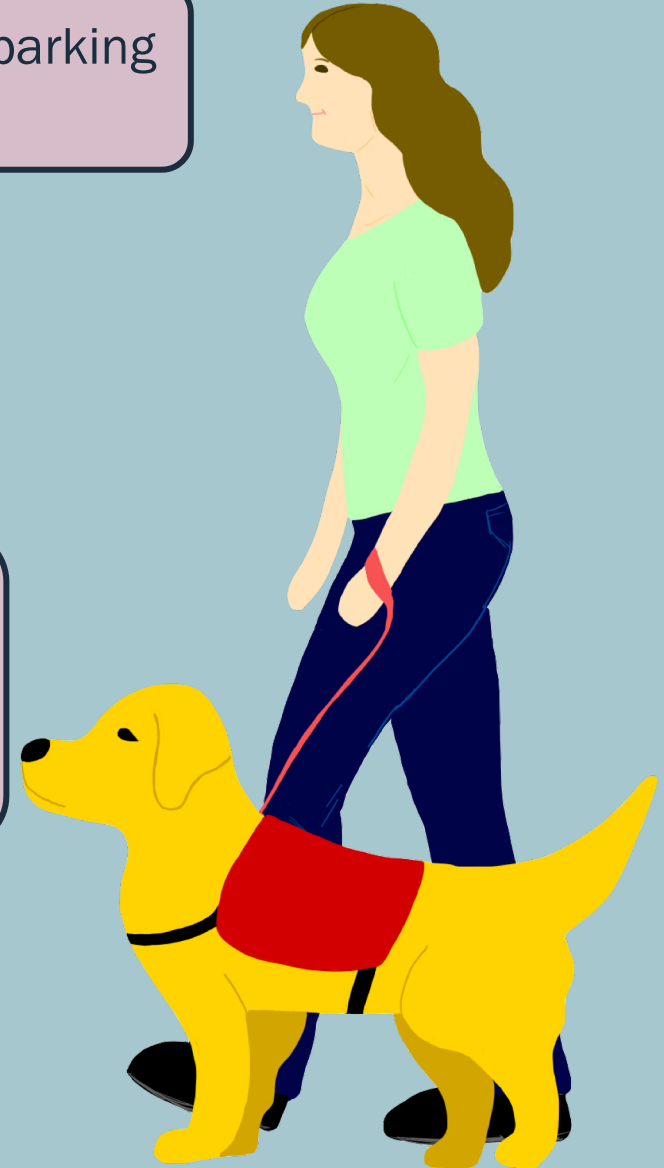
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The tech meets the pair at the entrance and holds the door for them. He then immediately walks them to the exam room.



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The tech meets the pair at the entrance and opens the door for them. He then immediately walks with them to the exam room.

The clinic should be physically accessible to all clients as mandated by the ADA. Some forms of accessibility are legally required (e.g. designated handicap parking and wheelchair ramps) while others are optional (e.g. handicap push buttons).

Take a walk from your clinic's parking lot to the front desk to the exam room. Is there a clear path the whole way through? Are there any curbs, cracks, or potholes that you have to navigate over/around? Is the path wide enough for a wheelchair? How easily can your front door be opened? Peek into your clinic's restrooms while you're at it. Will a wheelchair fit? Could a partner and their service dog reasonably fit in the stall together?

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The lobby can be full of distractions, and a distracted service dog can cost a partner their safety. When you schedule the appointment, talk to the partner about checking in over the phone when they arrive and waiting in their car until the exam room is ready. Other options include scheduling their appointment during a time when the clinic is less busy (e.g. first thing in the morning or during an afternoon break) or, if it's already open, having them wait in the exam room. Additionally, if your clinic has an alternative, more private entrance, consider having the pair enter that way to avoid high-traffic areas.

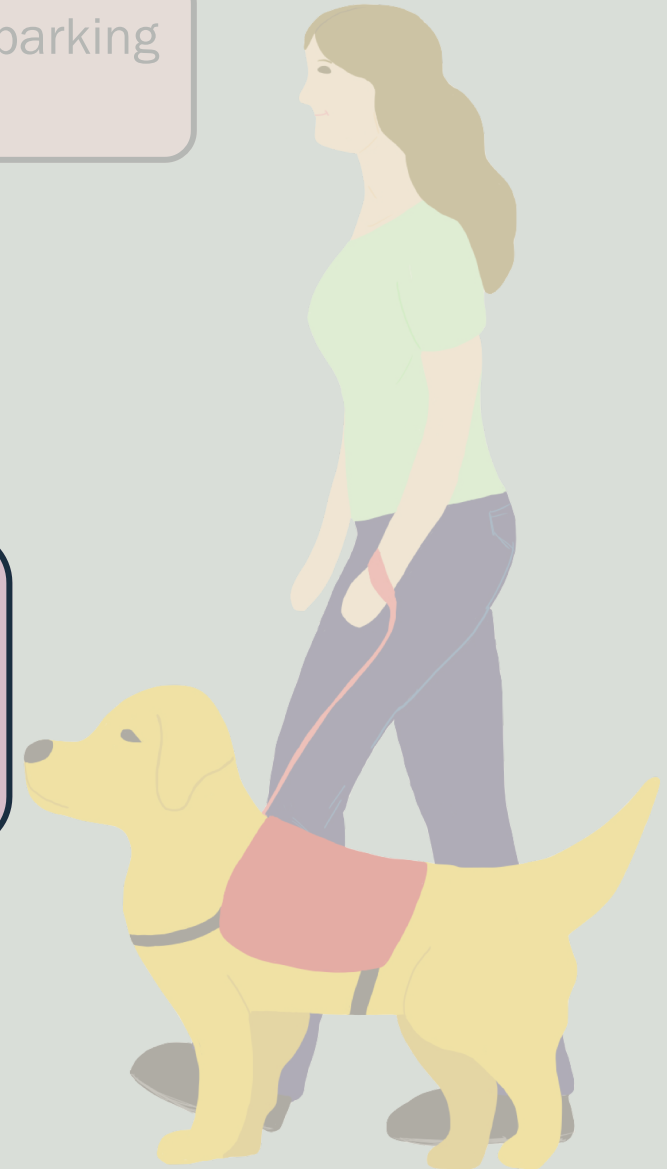


Never assume that a partner needs your help just because they have a disability. It is always better to ask instead of automatically stepping in. Stepping in unannounced could inadvertently interfere with their dog's tasks and disrupt the pair's flow.

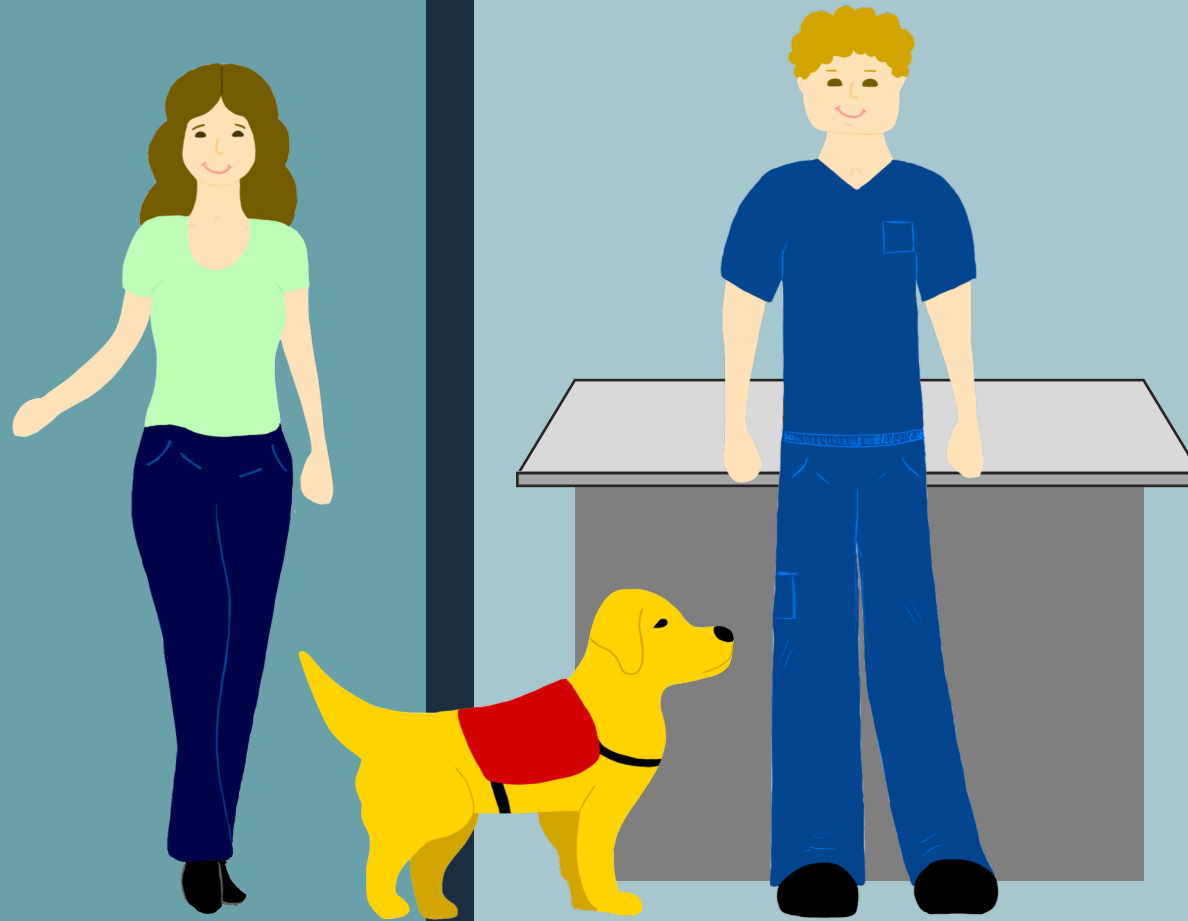
Helping is great, but don't overdo it to the point that the partner feels infantilized. Remember, the partner has learned to work with their disability with the help of their service dog, so despite what you think, they may not need your help.

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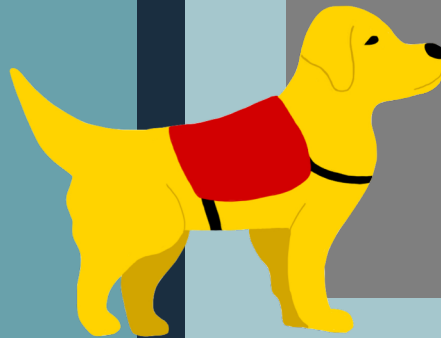
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Upon entering the exam room, the tech calmly asks Sam if he can say hi to Ellie.



Sam tells Ellie a command that gives her permission to approach the tech.

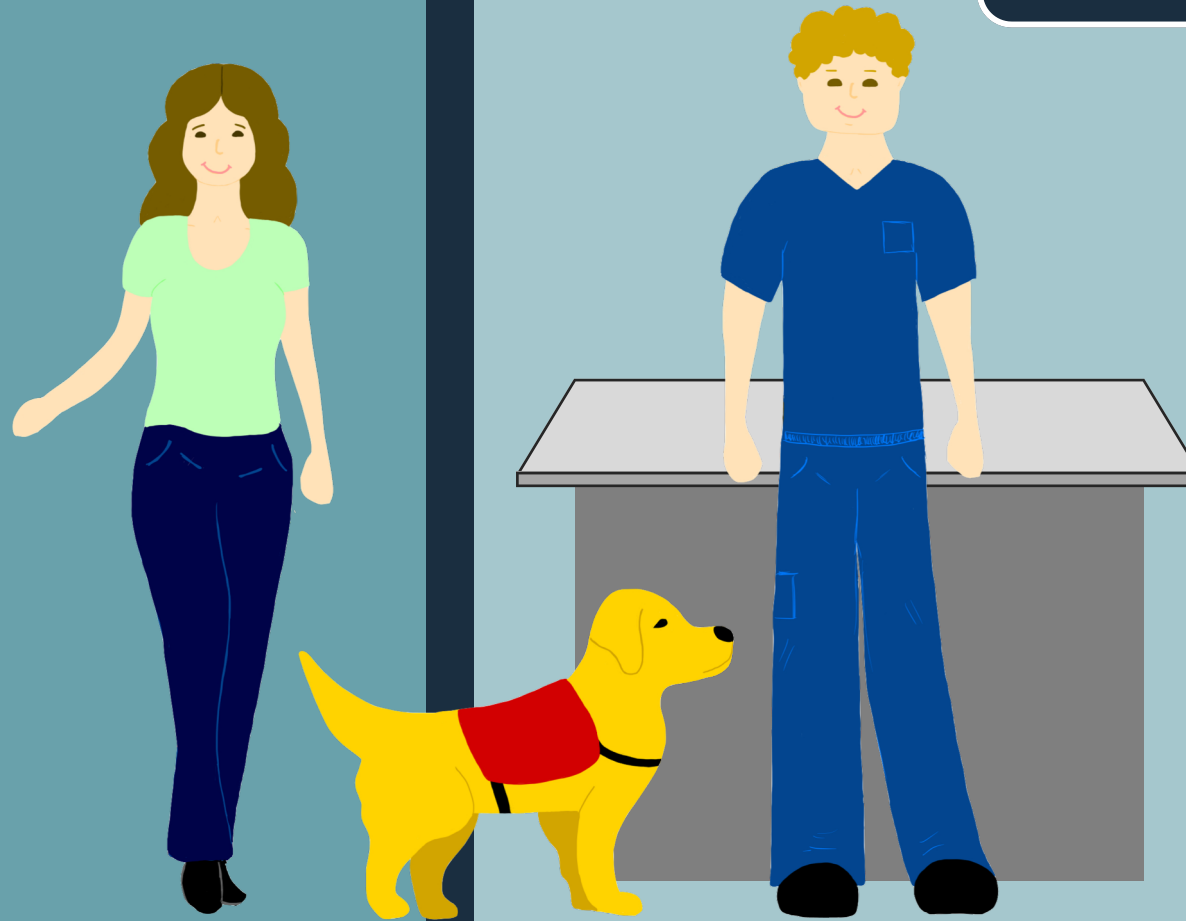


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Ellie excitedly trots over to the tech to accept his pets and praise.

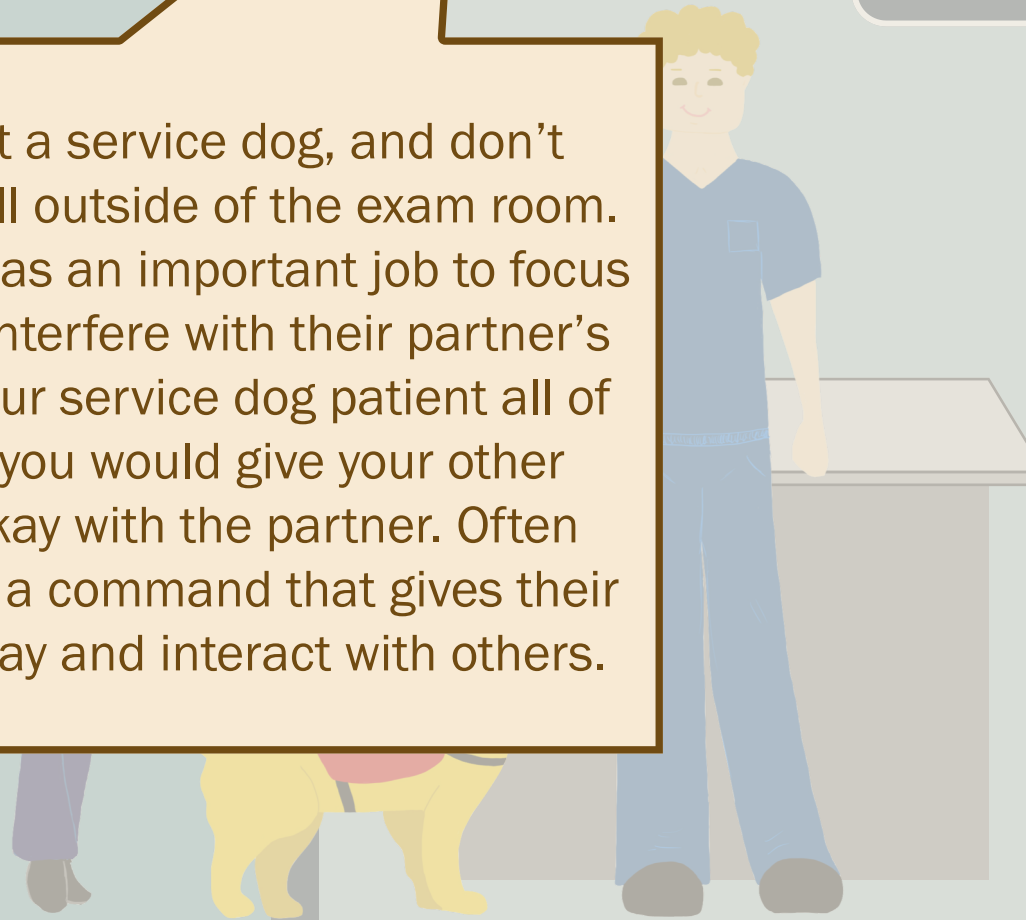


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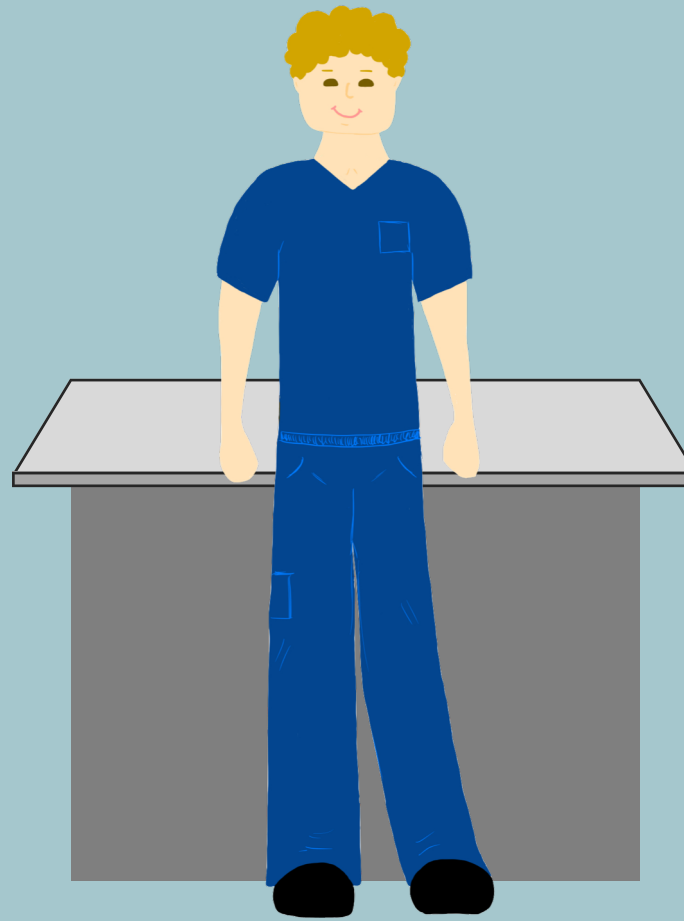
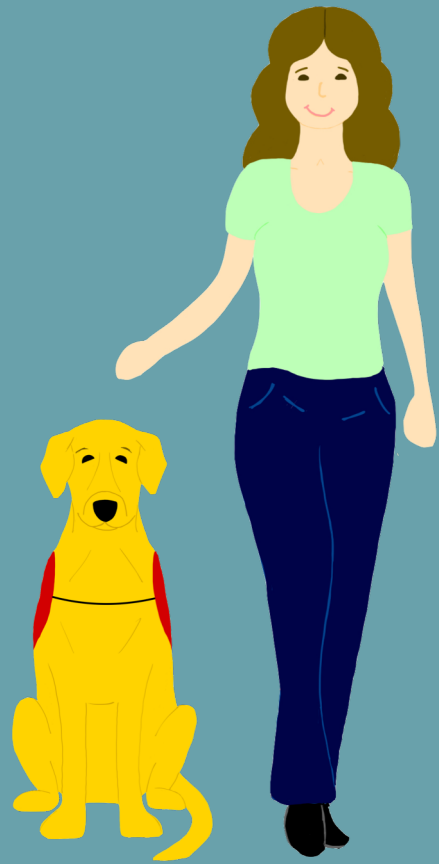
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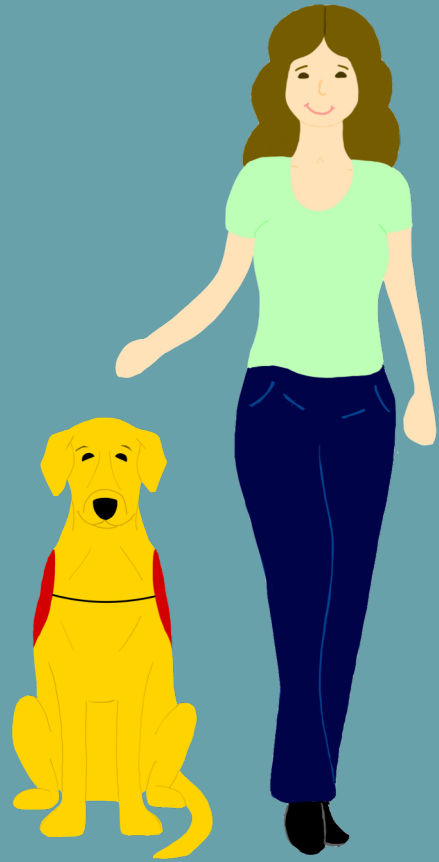
Always ask if you can pet a service dog, and don't request to pet the dog at all outside of the exam room. Remember, a service dog has an important job to focus on, and distracting it can interfere with their partner's safety. You can still give your service dog patient all of the love and praise that you would give your other patients as long as it's okay with the partner. Often times, the partner will give a command that gives their dog permission to step away and interact with others.



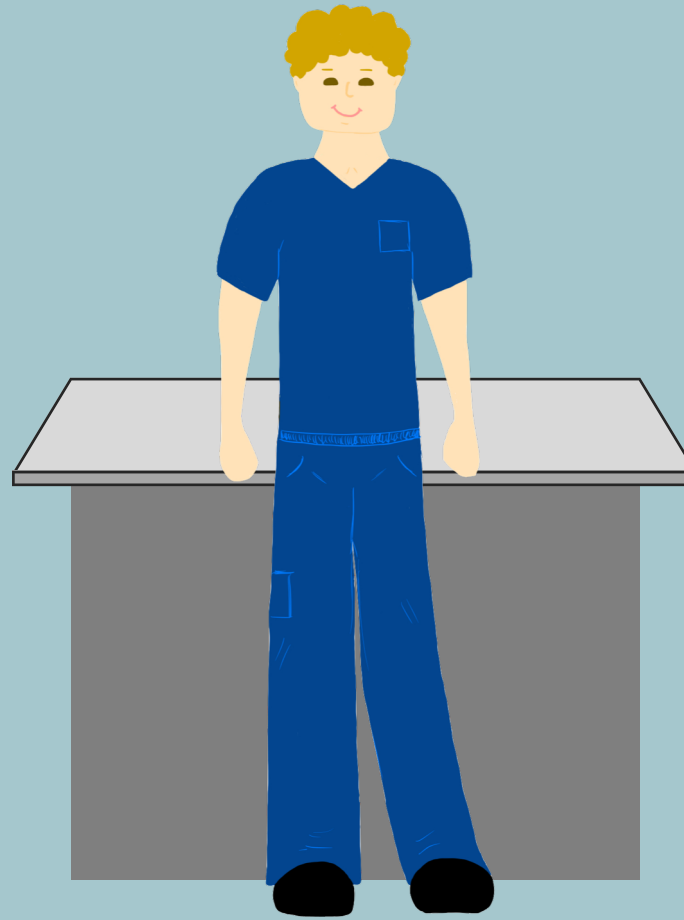
The tech begins asking questions about Ellie's history.
"What are Ellie's clinical signs...When did this start...Has this ever happened before?"



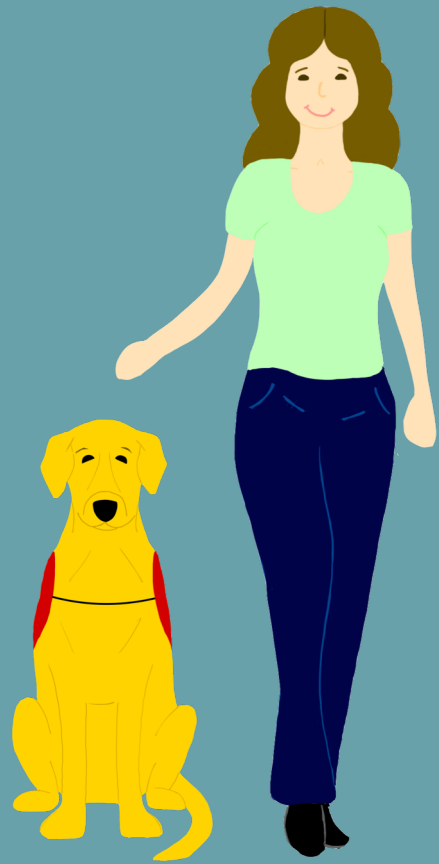
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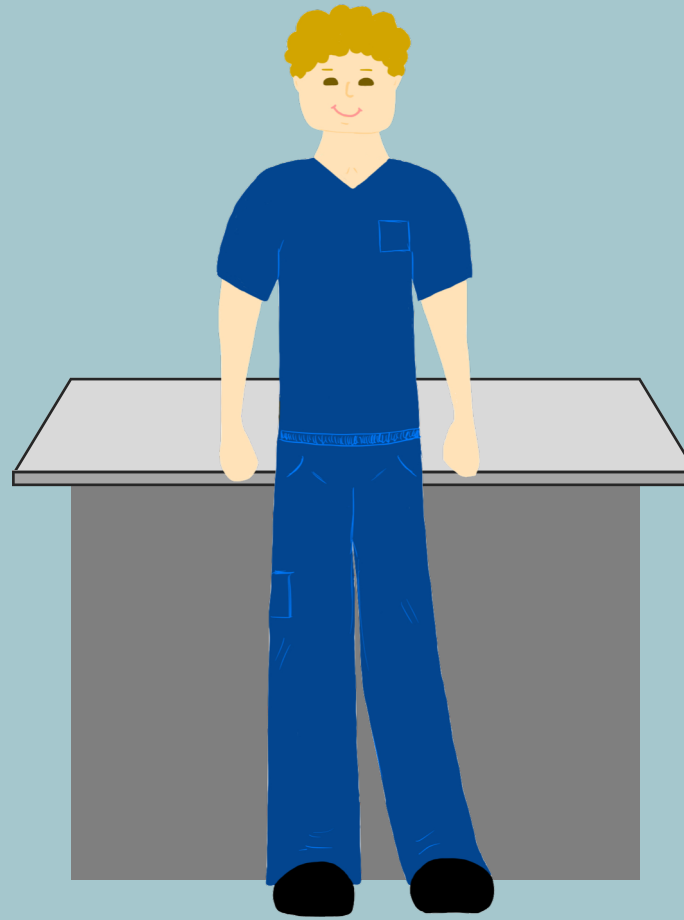


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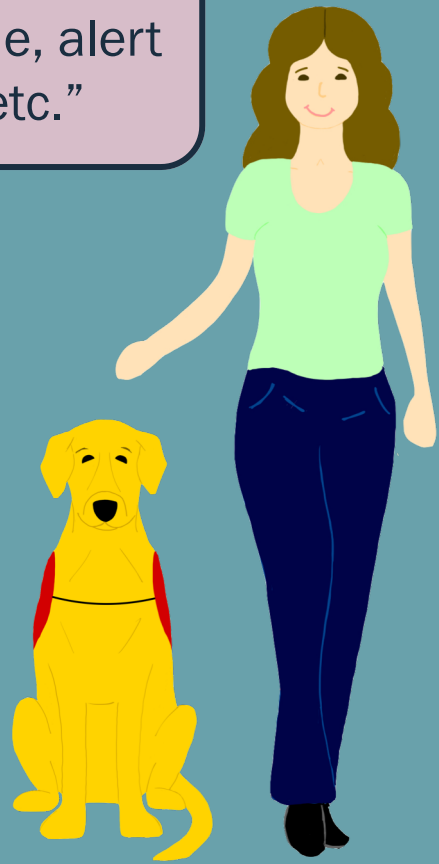
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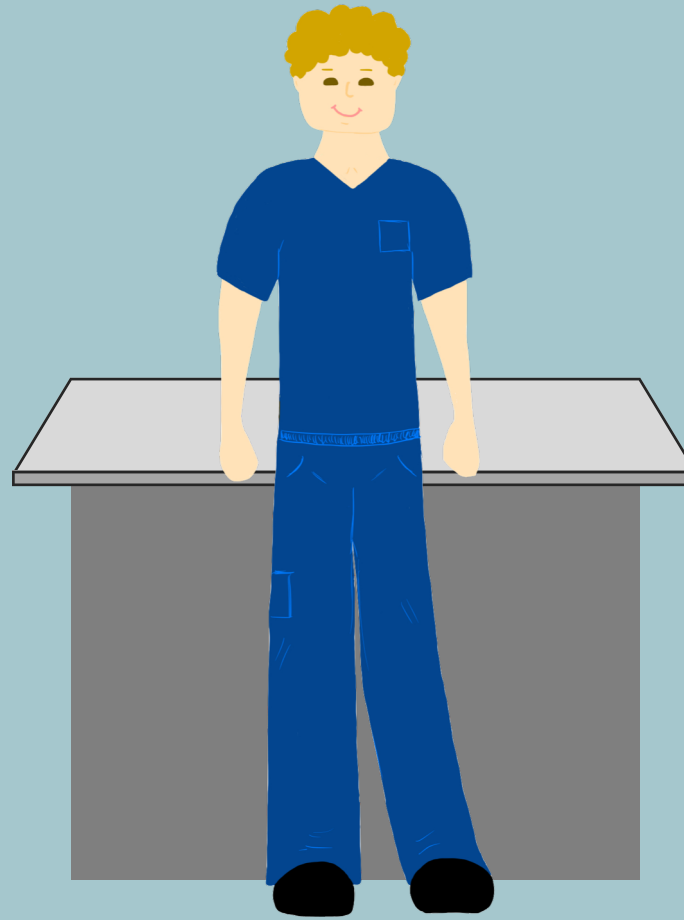
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"Ellie is trained to retrieve and carry things for me, alert others if needed, etc."



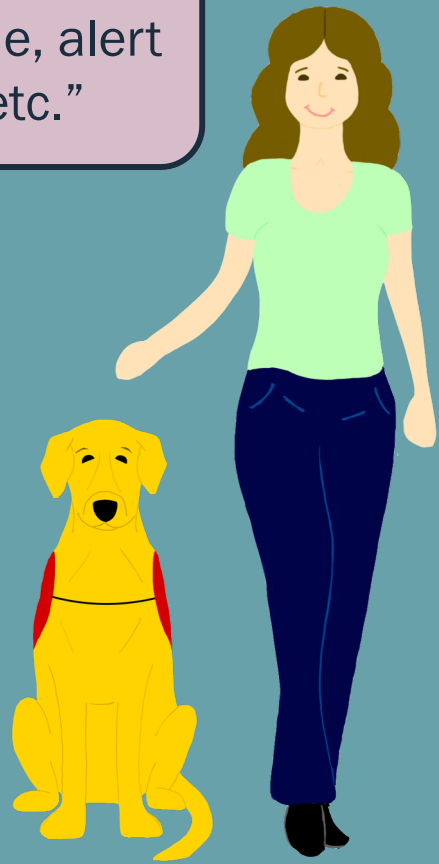
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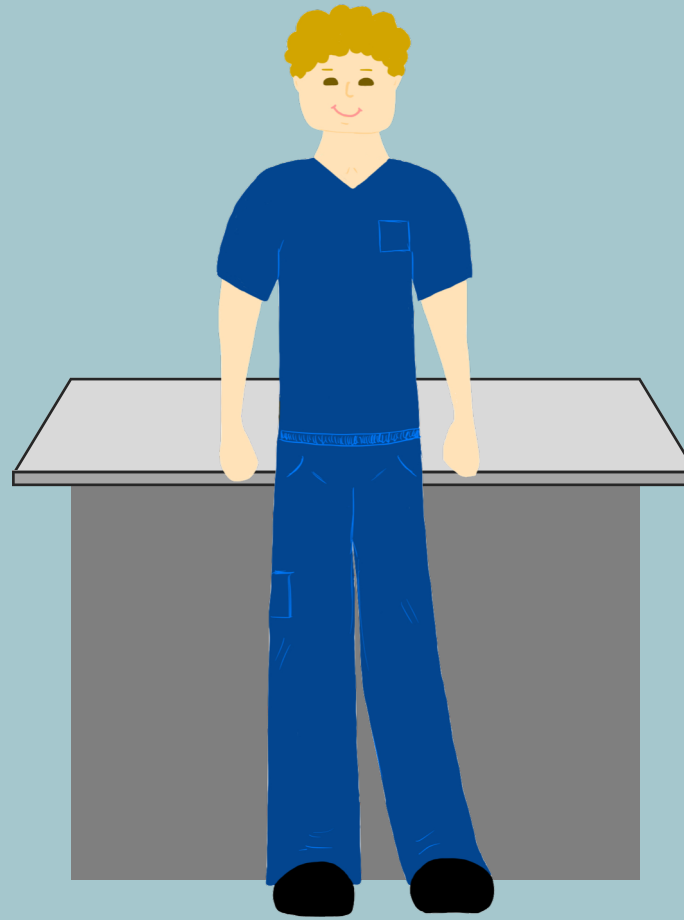
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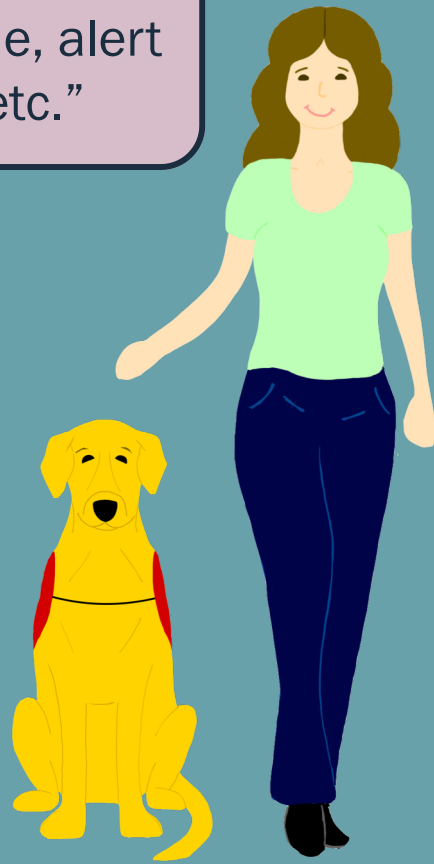


"Wow, that's impressive! Is there anything specific about Ellie's work that you would like to share as part of her history today?"

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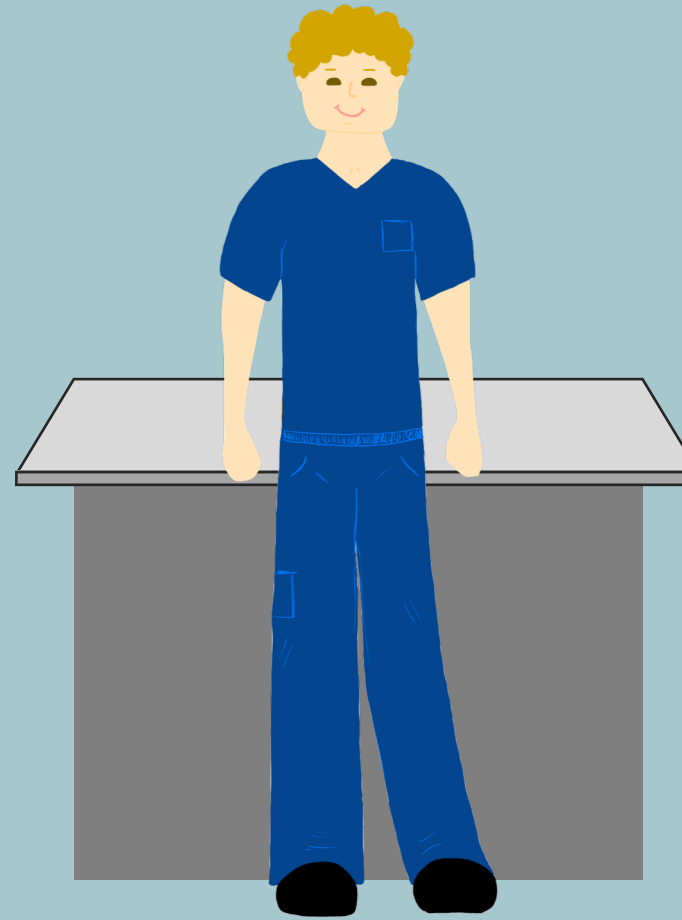
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"I don't think so."



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According to the ADA, there are only two questions that the public can ask about a service dog:

- 1) Is the dog a service animal that is required because of a disability?
- 2) What work or task has the dog been trained to perform?

When answering these questions, the partner does not have to reveal their disability, and they do not have to explain the specifics of the task that their dog performs.

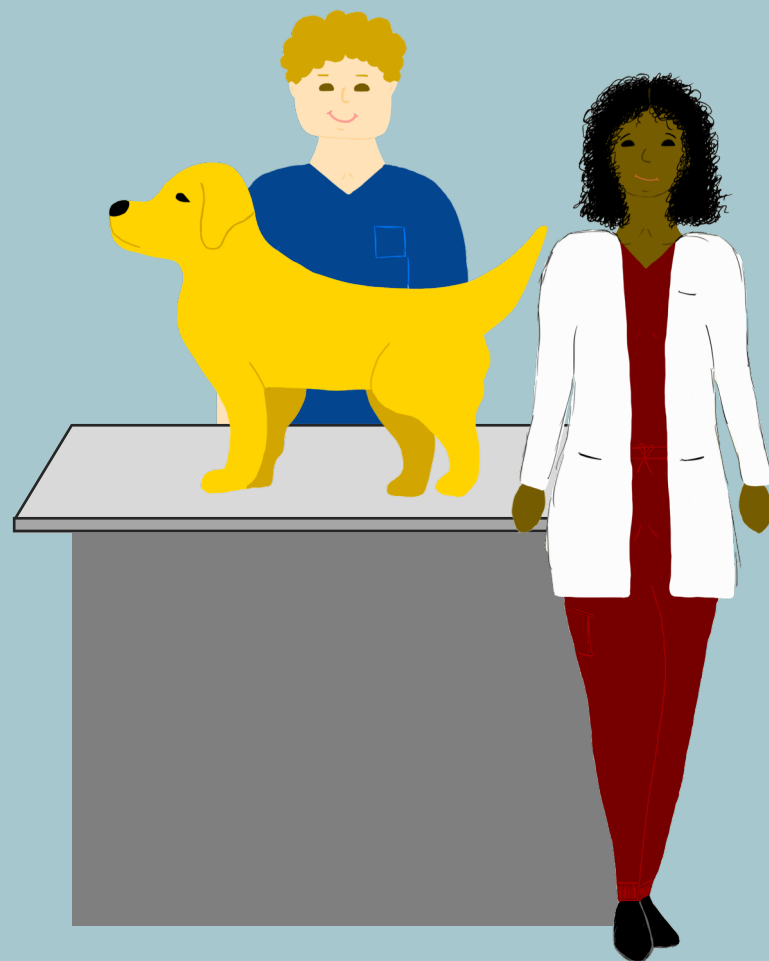
At times, knowing the nature of the partner's disability and what exactly the dog does on a daily basis may be beneficial when considering differential diagnoses and developing a treatment plan. However, you shouldn't outright ask about the dog's specific tasks. Instead, ask if there are any factors about the dog's work that may be relevant to the issue at hand. If you're respectful and considerate, the partner will more than likely be willing to share relevant information if it means their dog receives proper care.

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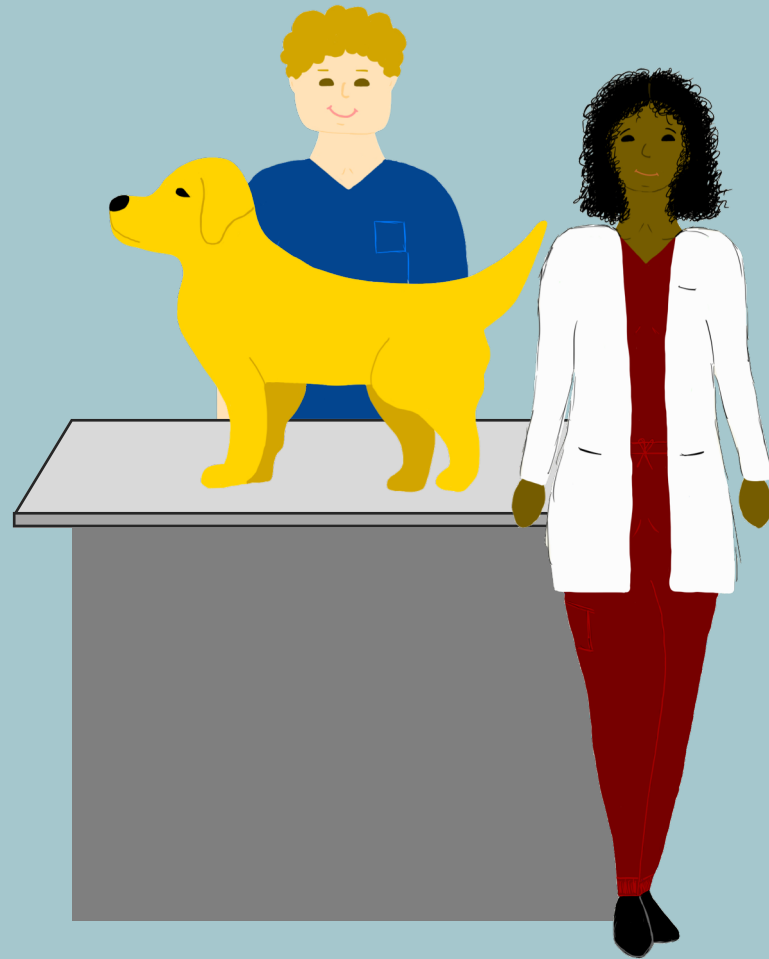
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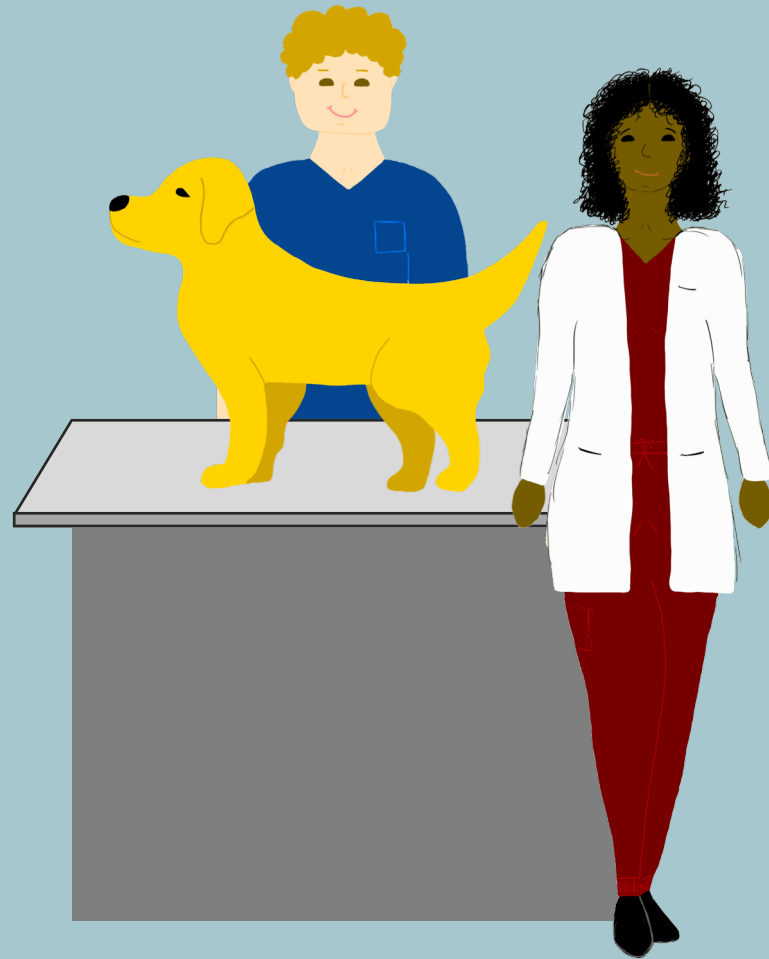


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Dr. Martin asks Sam if she would prefer Ellie's vest stays on during the appointment.



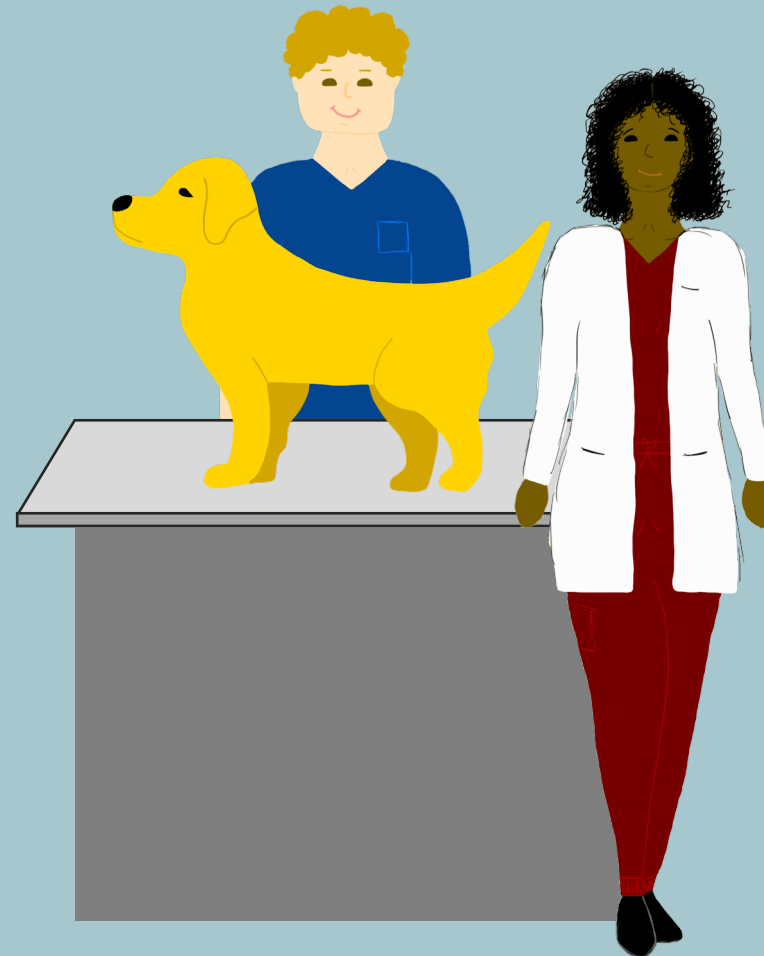
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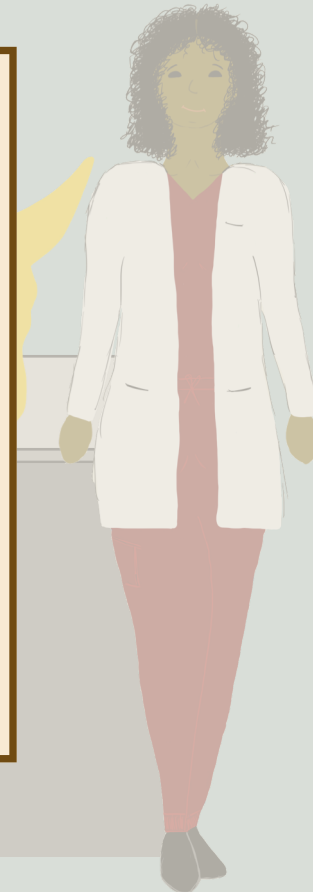
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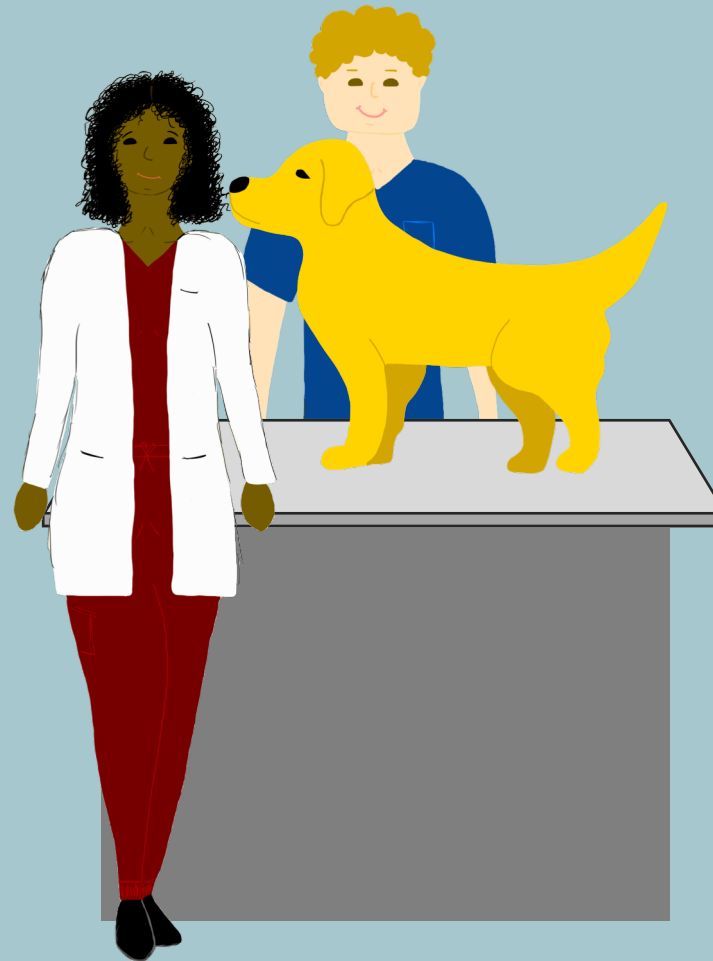
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Dr. Martin asks Sam if she would prefer Ellie's vest stays on during the appointment.

Before beginning your exam, be sure ask the partner for any relevant rules or commands for their dog. Some partner's have preferences when it comes to leaving their dog's vest on during the appointment, giving their dog treats as a distraction during the exam, and interacting with the dog in general. Plus, knowing the dog's relevant commands can make your exam go smoother.



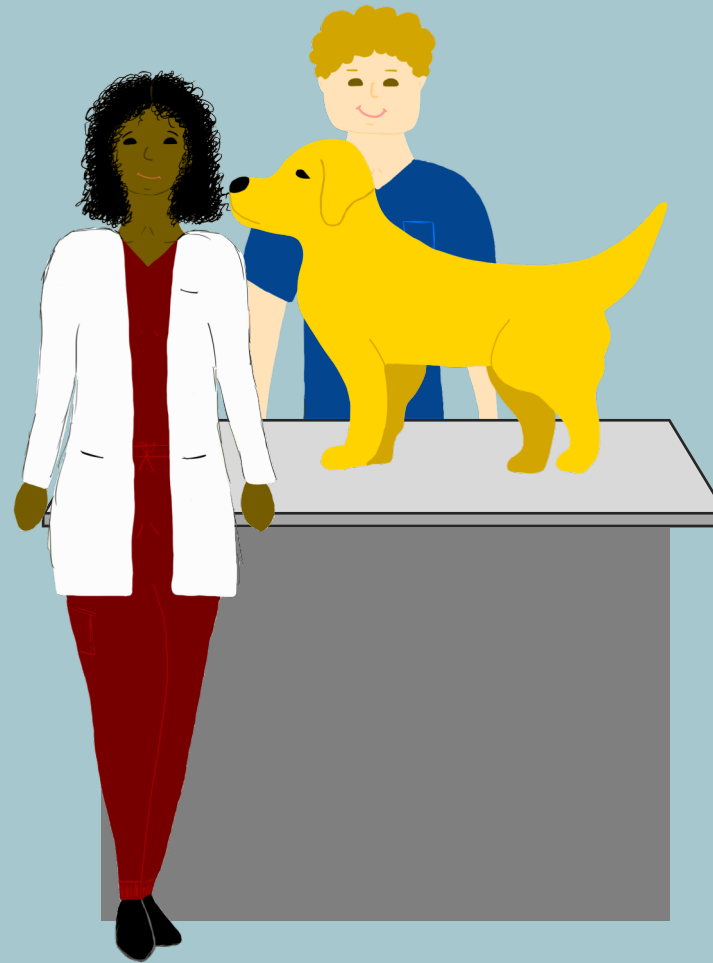
Upon completing her exam, Dr. Martin says, “Ellie looks great! I did noticed that she has gained a few pounds since her last visit. Has Ellie’s food intake or exercise changed at all since then?”



Sam admits that she's been giving Ellie table scraps more often recently and acknowledges that she needs to stop.



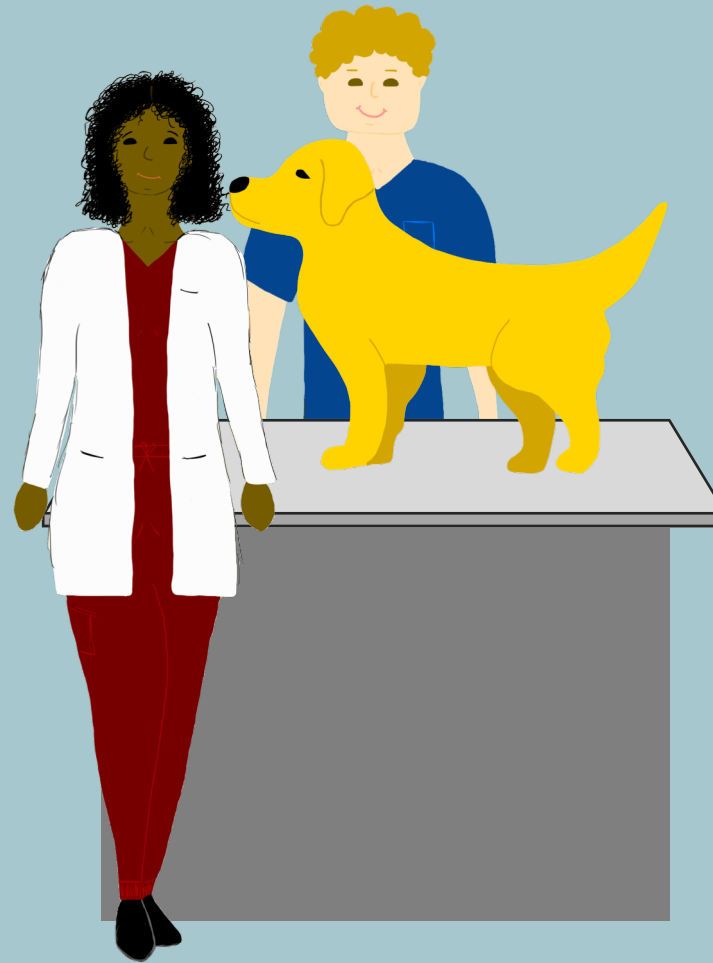
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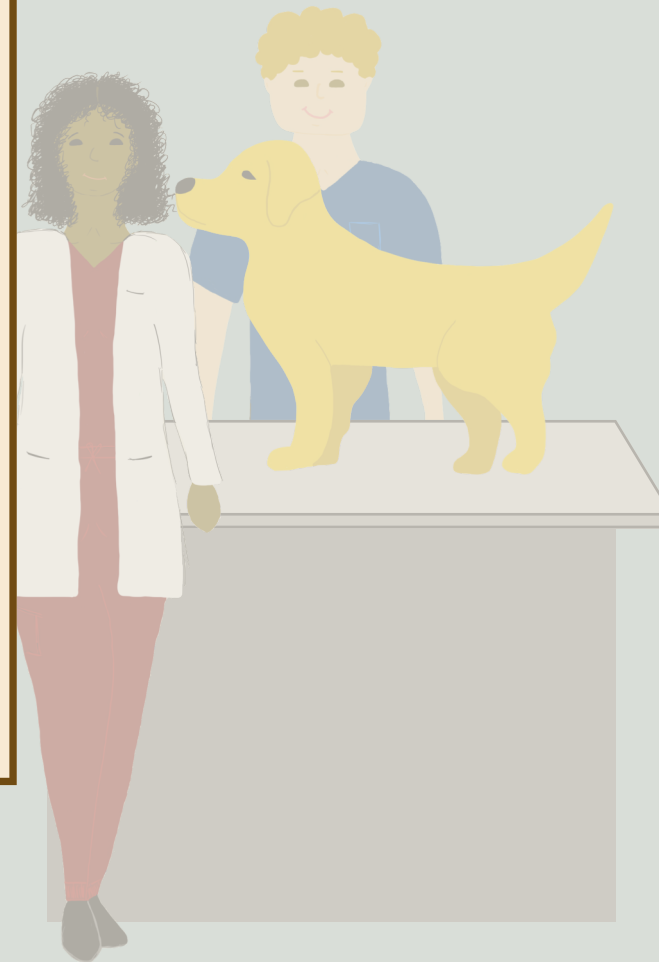
Dr. Martin briefly reminds Sam of the risks that come with an overweight pet and how these risks can affect Ellie's ability to work. She recommends cutting the table scraps from Ellie's diet and stopping by every couple of weeks for a weight check. If Ellie continues to gain weight, they can discuss a more focused solution.

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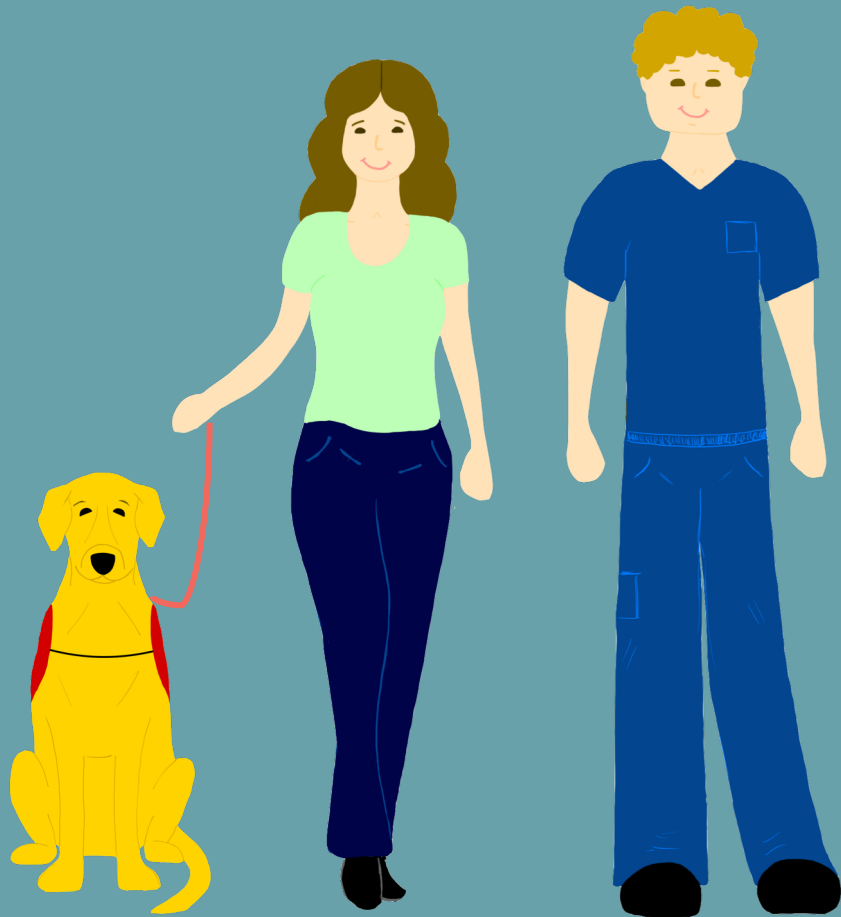
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Considering the time and dedication that it takes to train a service dog and the strength of the bond between the dog and their partner, service dogs need to be capable of working for a majority of their expected lifespan. This is why preventative care is crucial for service dogs, and you should use every opportunity you get to prevent issues that may decrease their longevity.

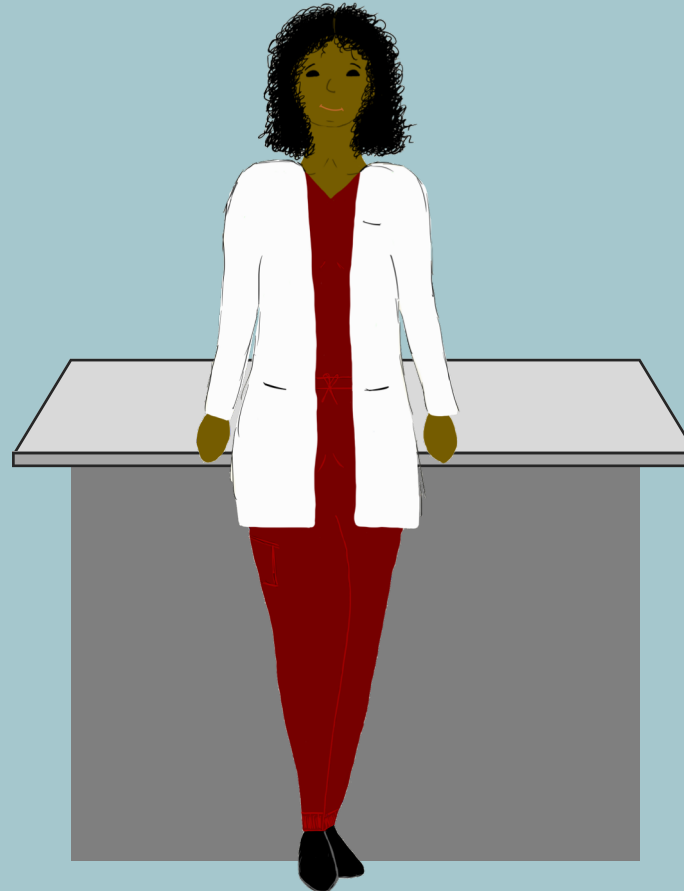
Although many partners are given care guidelines by their training organizations, compliance can wane over time, and the organizations may only periodically check in.



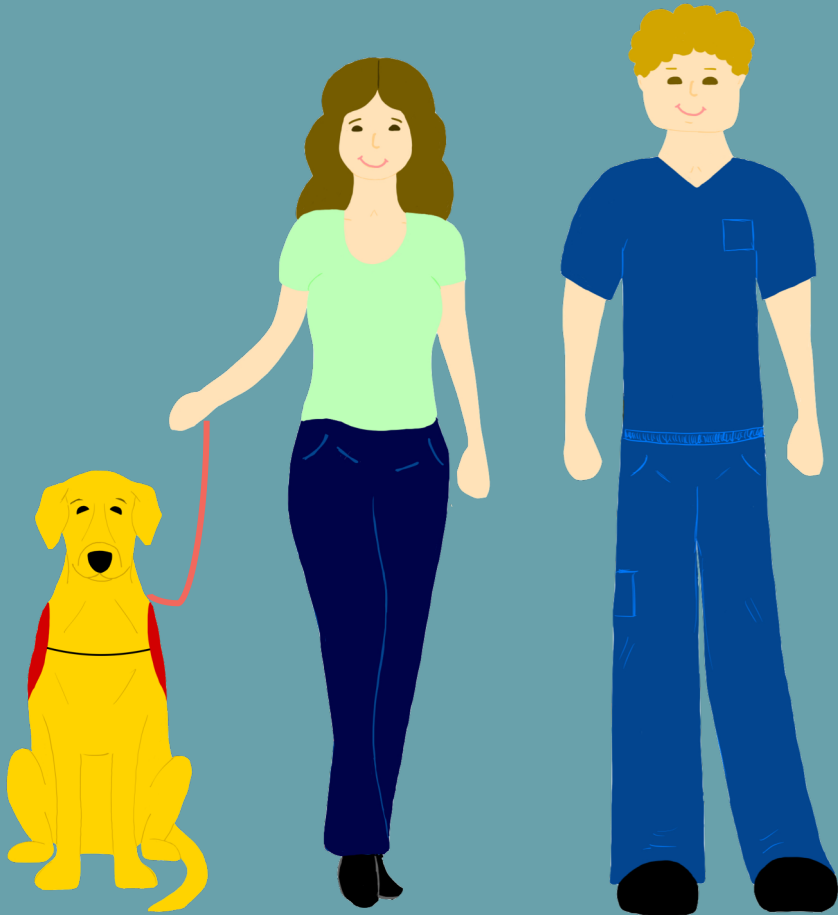
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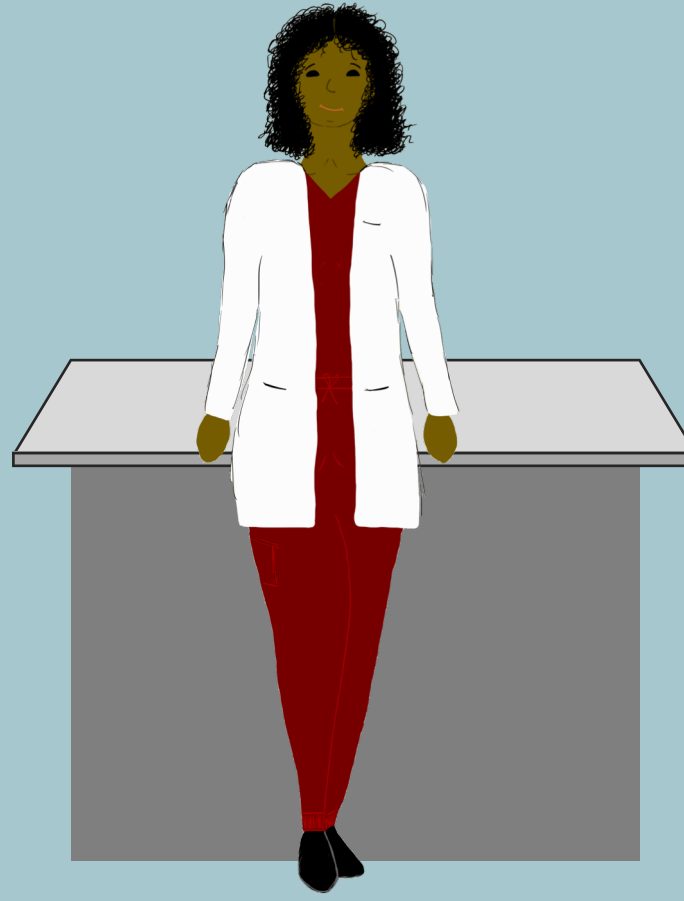
“Now as far as Ellie’s current problem, I highly suspect that she has a urinary tract infection. I would like to examine a urine sample to confirm this. The easiest way to do this is to have my tech take her outside to urinate. Would you like to accompany him?”



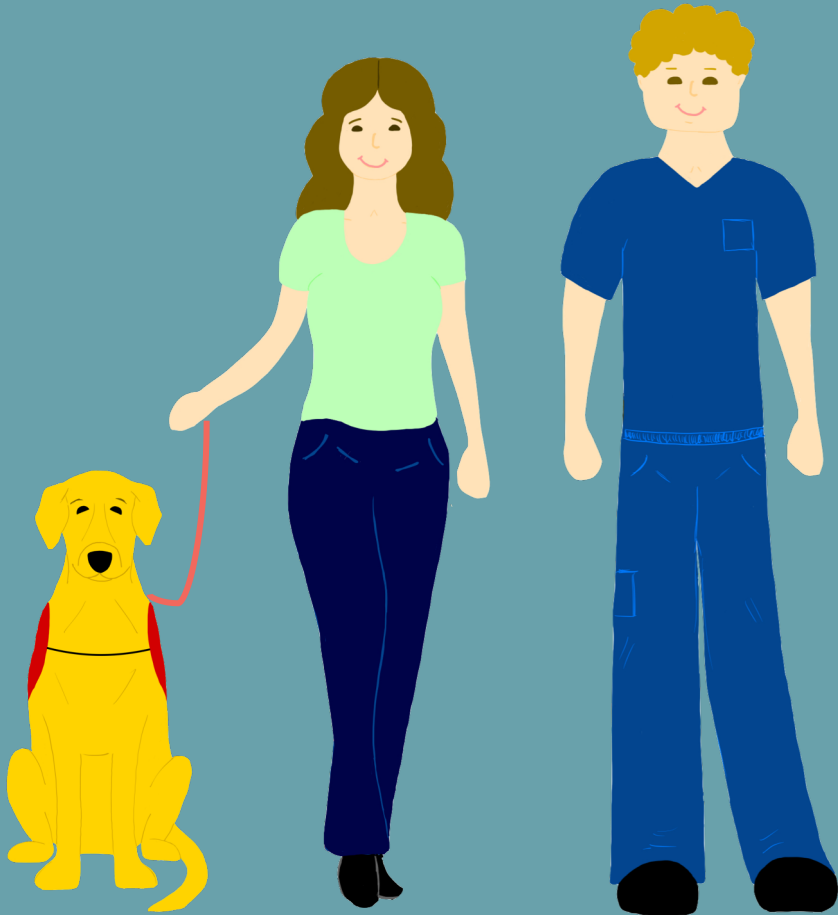
“Yes, please!”



“Now as far as Ellie’s current problem, I highly suspect that she has a urinary tract infection. I would like to examine a urine sample to confirm this. The easiest way to do this is to have my tech take her outside to urinate. Would you like to accompany him?”

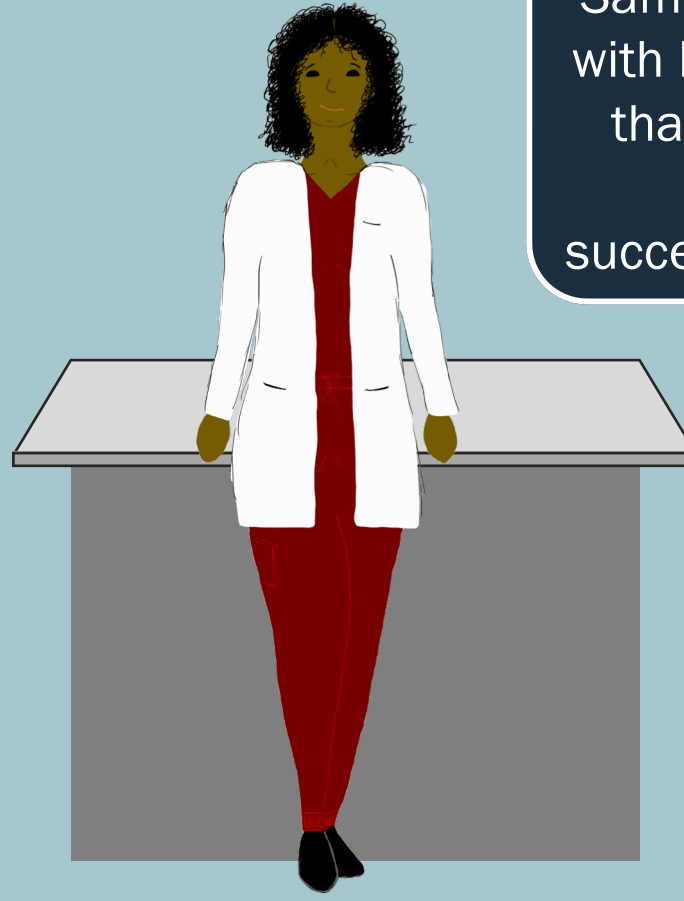


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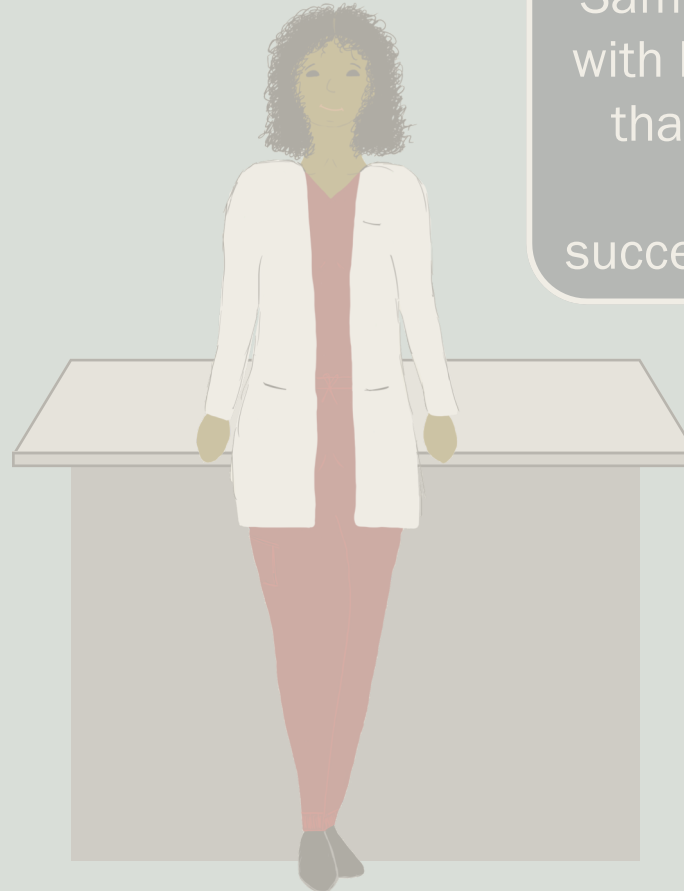
Sam and the tech head outside with Ellie. Sam says a command that gives Ellie permission to urinate and the tech successfully collects the sample.



The service dog should remain in the same room as their partner whenever possible. You may have to adapt your clinic's protocol to accommodate this need by allowing the partner to accompany their dog in the treatment area or by performing tasks in the exam room instead of in the treatment area. Don't sacrifice anyone's safety for the sake of keeping the pair together, but do try to accommodate the partner's presence. Separating the pair can cause significant stress for both individuals, which we want to avoid as much as possible. If you do need to separate the pair, try to limit the length of time that they are separated. Explain the situation to the partner and how long it will take and ask if you can do anything to help them while their dog is away (e.g. having someone stay in the room with them).

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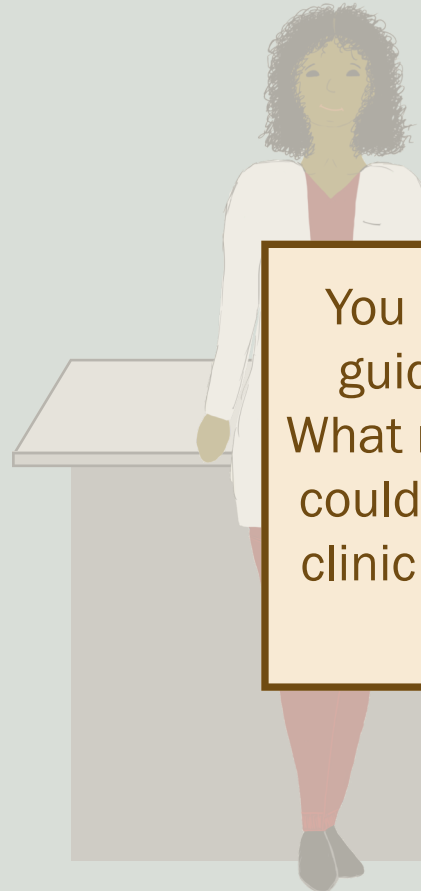


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Sam and the tech head outside with Ellie. Sam gives a command that gives permission to urinate. The tech

You may opt to perform an ultrasound-guided cystocentesis in this scenario. What reasonable accommodations, if any, could you make for Sam and Ellie at your clinic in order to collect the urine sample via this method?



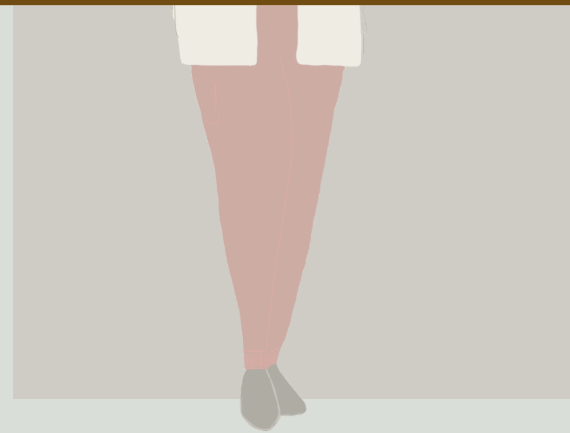
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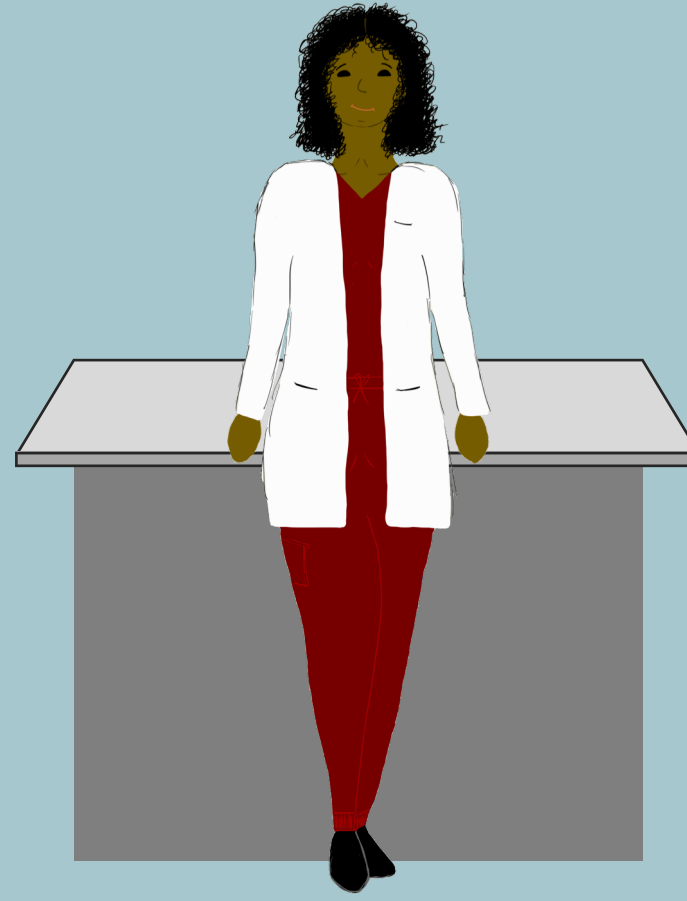
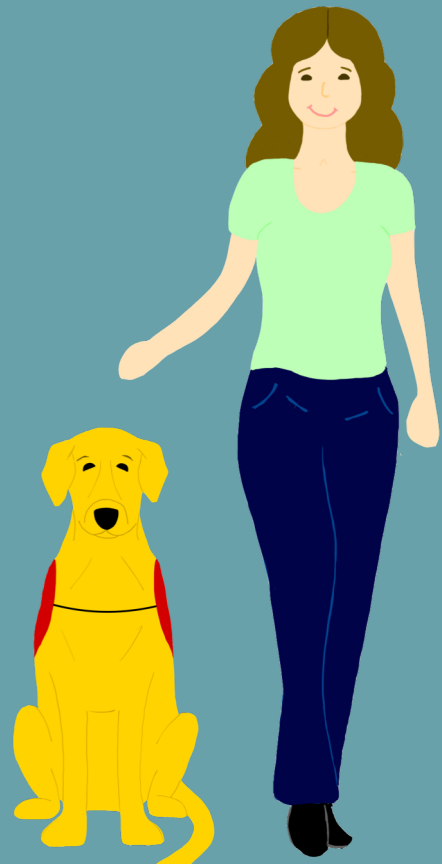
Sometimes separating the pair for an extended amount of time is unavoidable. In the event that the service dog needs to stay at the clinic, be sure to give the partner an opportunity to make necessary personal arrangements while their dog is away. Make sure to ask the partner for relevant commands and rules that the staff will need to know to properly care for the dog.

The partner will likely be anxious, so you may need to communicate with them frequently throughout the process to help relieve their anxiety. If the dog needs to stay for a few days, consider offering scheduled visitations.

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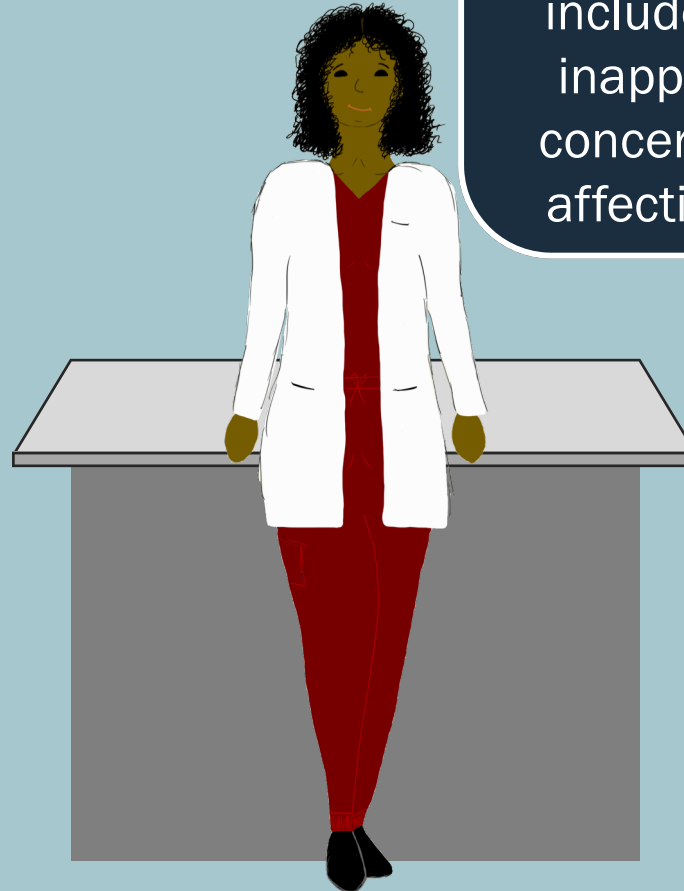
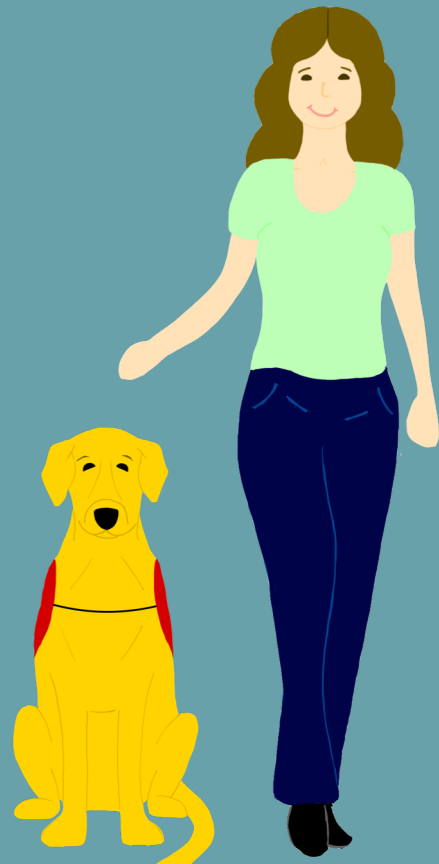


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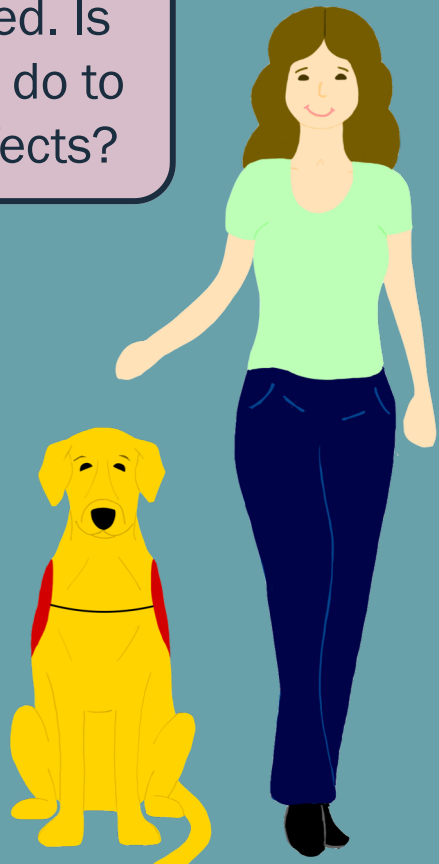


Dr. Martin enters the room again and explains that Ellie's urine showed clear evidence of a UTI.

“Luckily, the treatment is usually straightforward. I would like to send Ellie home with an antibiotic. Potential side effects to antibiotics include vomiting, diarrhea, and inappetence. Do you have any concerns about the side effects affecting Ellie's performance?”

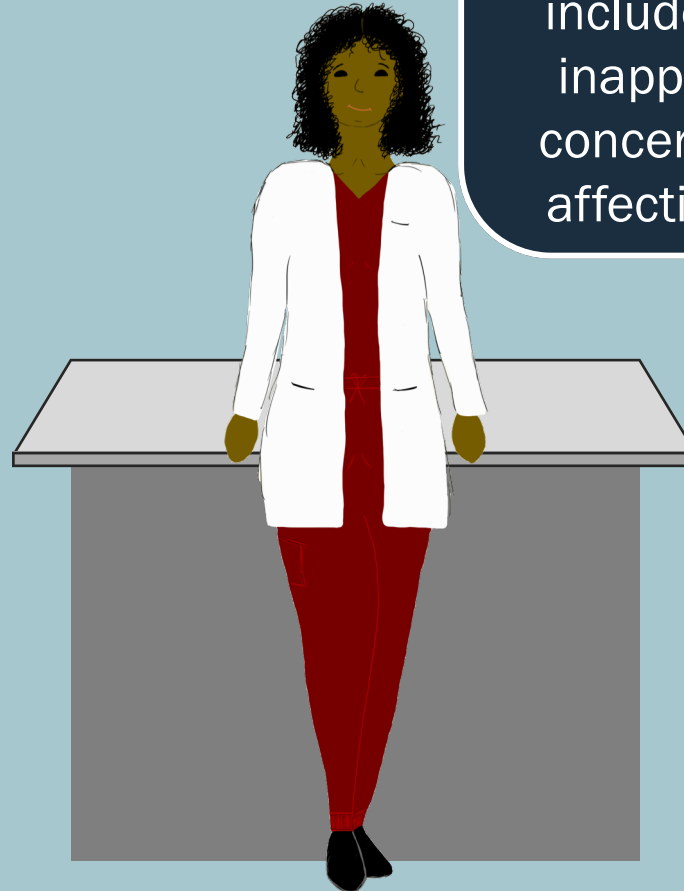


“Yes, I’m a little worried. Is there anything we can do to prevent these side effects?”

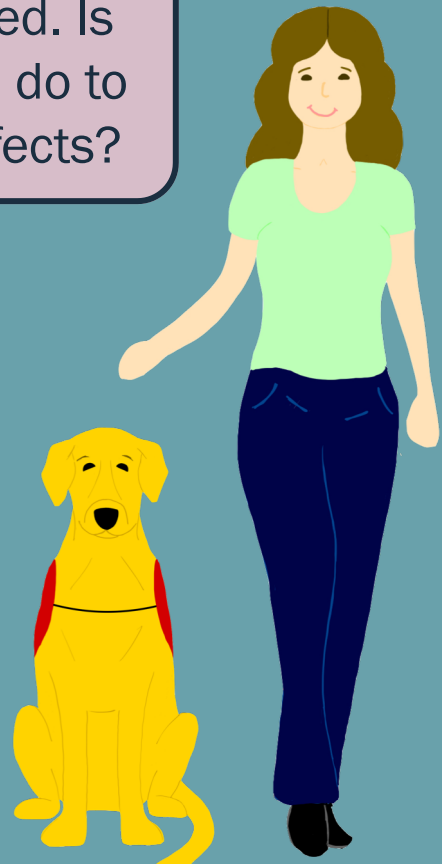


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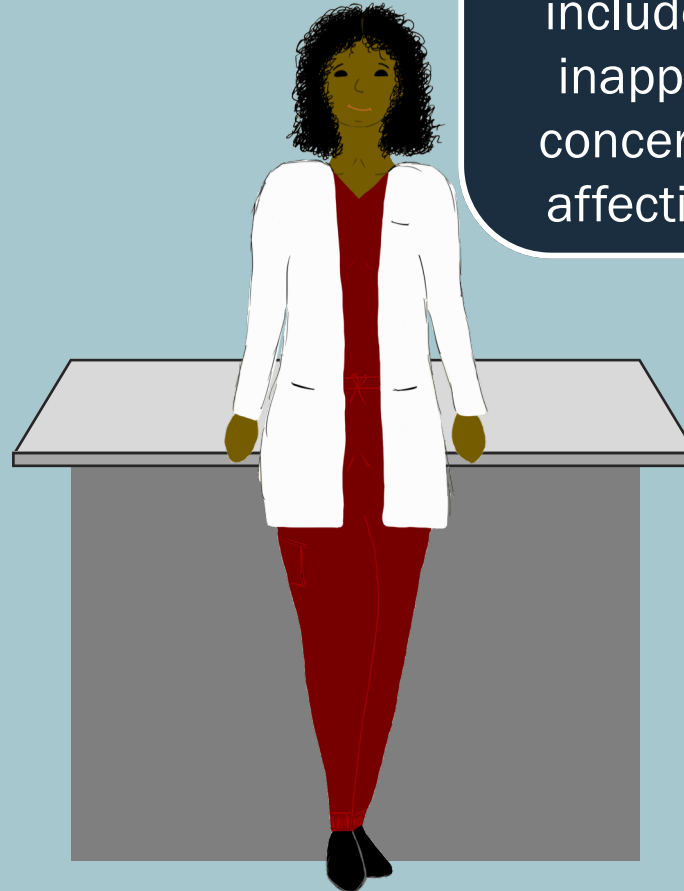


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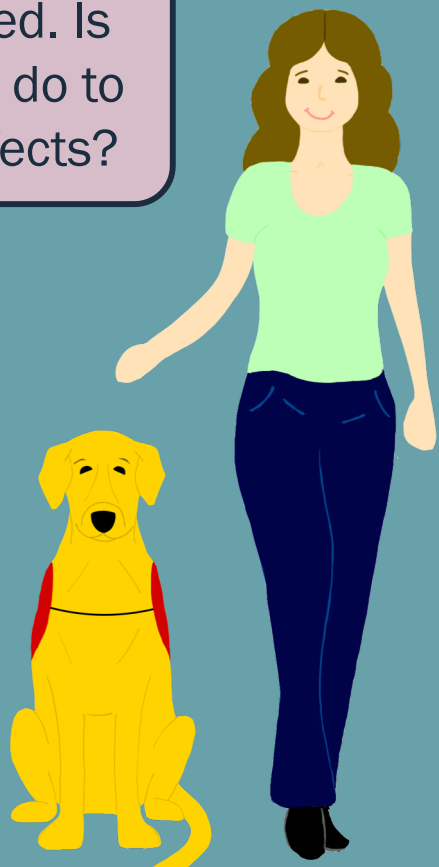
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“Giving her the medication with food can help prevent vomiting. In the event that she develops diarrhea, give me a call, and I can give you probiotic to sprinkle over her food.”

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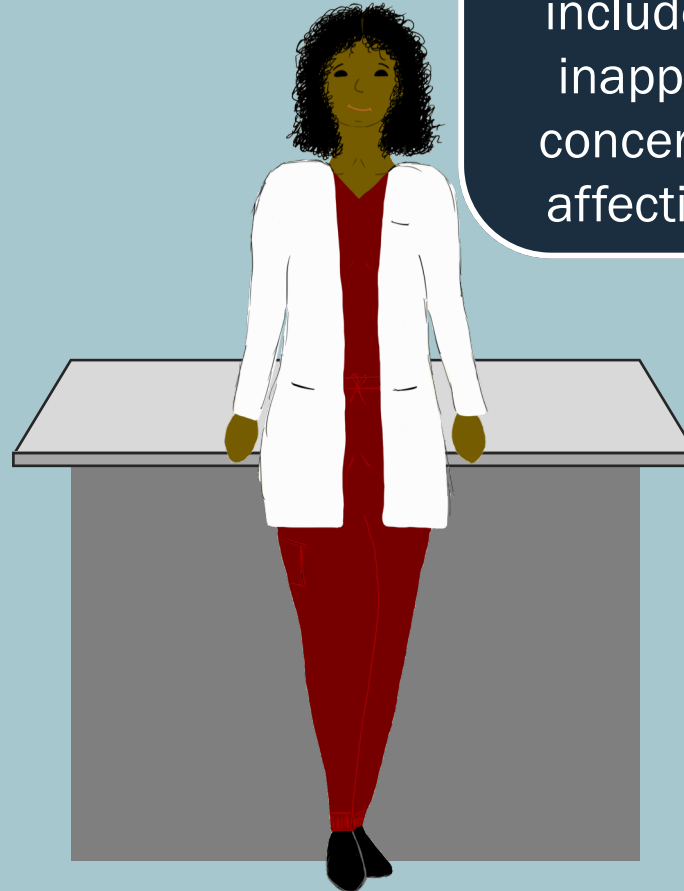
“Okay, I’m willing to try that.”



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Always discuss the potential side effects of a medication with the partner. Some side effects could affect the dog's ability to work either temporarily or permanently, so understand that the partner may decline a medication for this reason.

For example, gabapentin can cause sedation which can make the dog too sleepy to recognize important cues; prednisone can cause polyuria which can lead to the dog having accidents in public places; topical ear medications can cause hearing loss which could cost the dog its job.

When medically appropriate, also consider treatments that don't require drugs (e.g. laser therapy instead of pain meds) and discuss the pros and cons of these options with the partner.

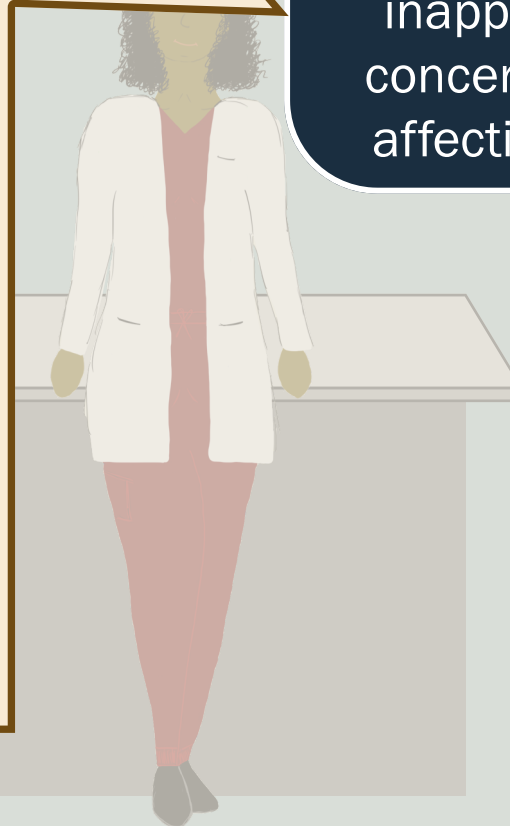
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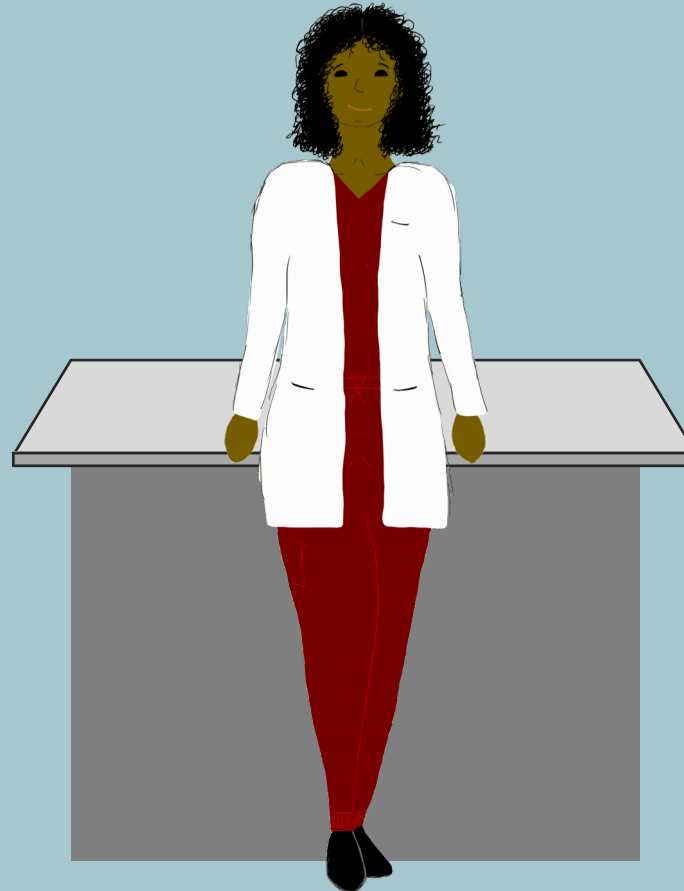
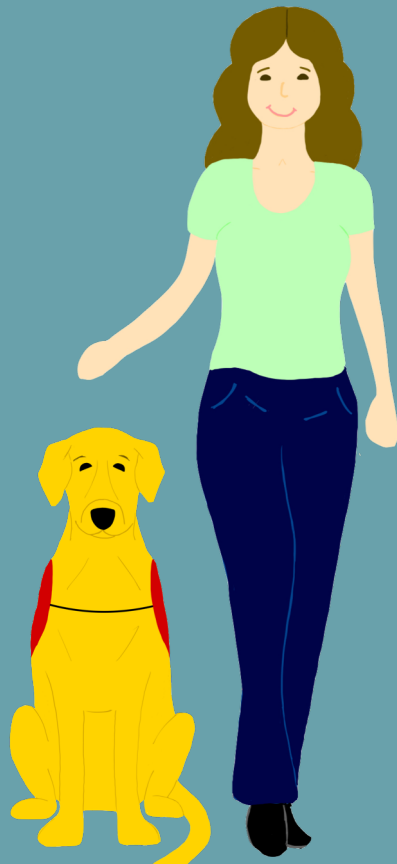
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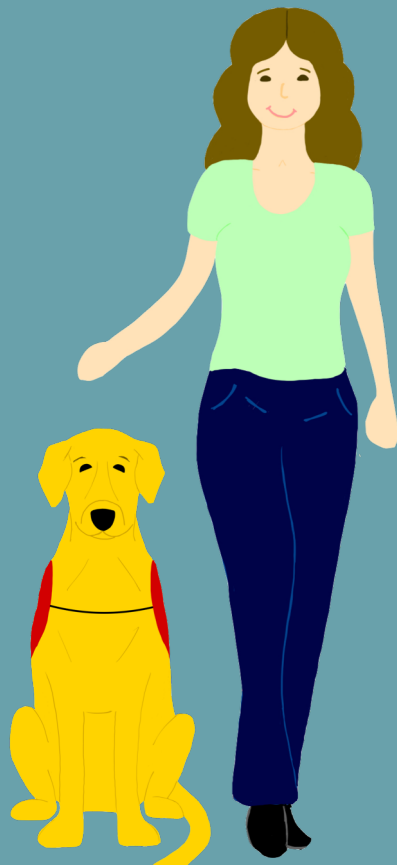
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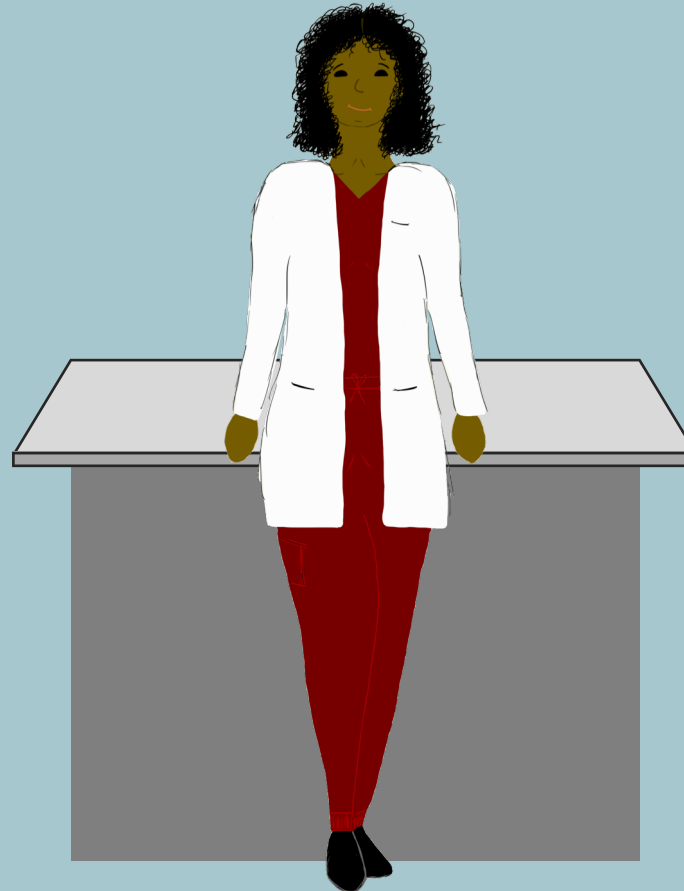
“I typically prescribe amoxicillin tablets to be given twice daily. How do you feel about this treatment?”



“Well...”

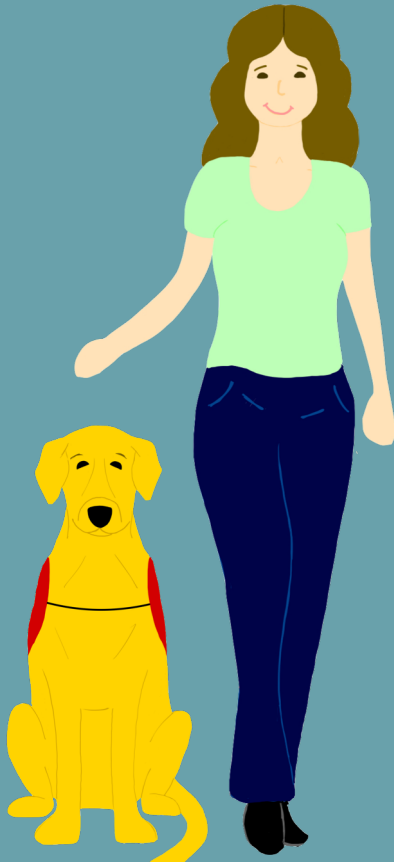


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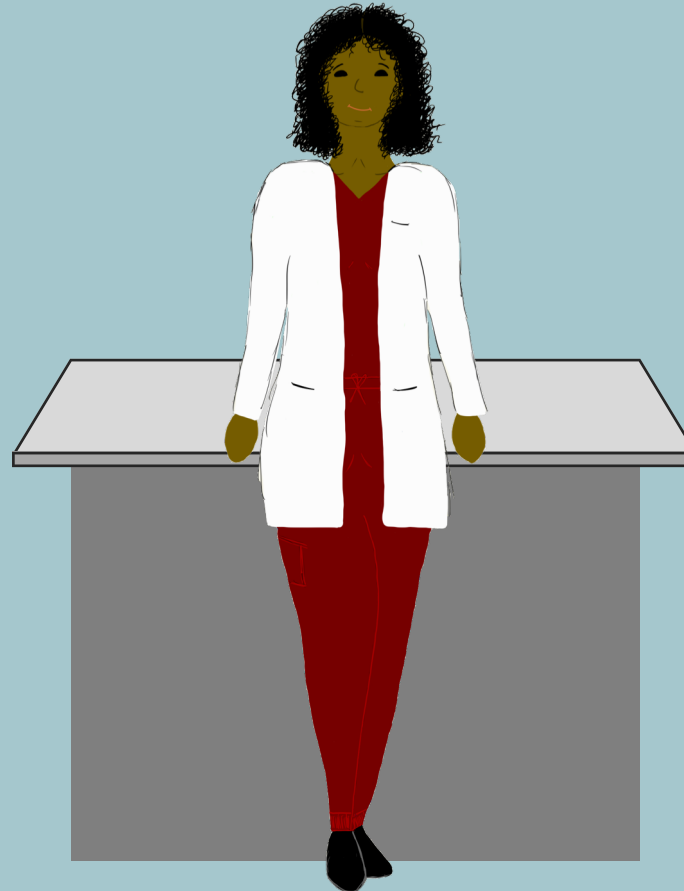


Sam explains that Ellie doesn't consistently take oral medications willingly, and she's unable to pill Ellie due to her disability. In fact, Sam's mother comes over every month to give Ellie her preventatives just in case Ellie refuses and has to be pilled. Unfortunately, Sam's mom is unable to come over on a daily basis to help.

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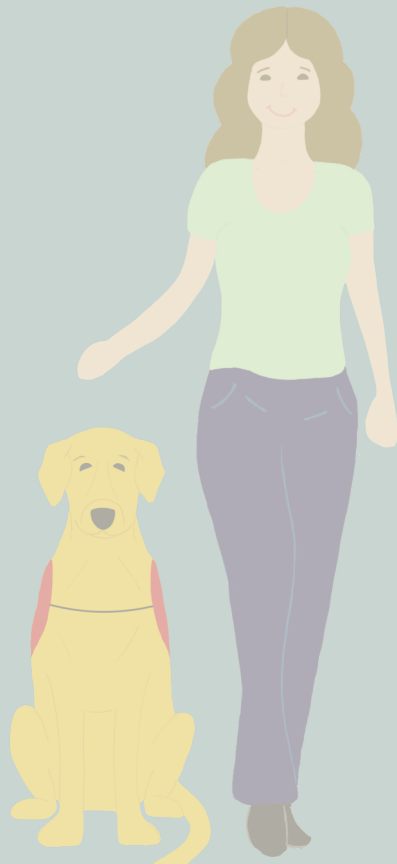


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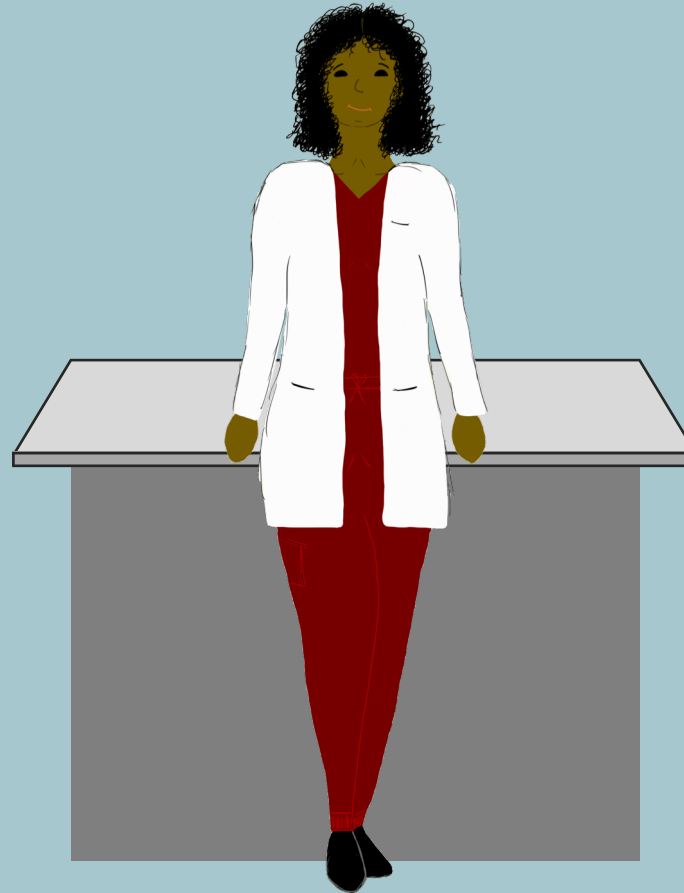
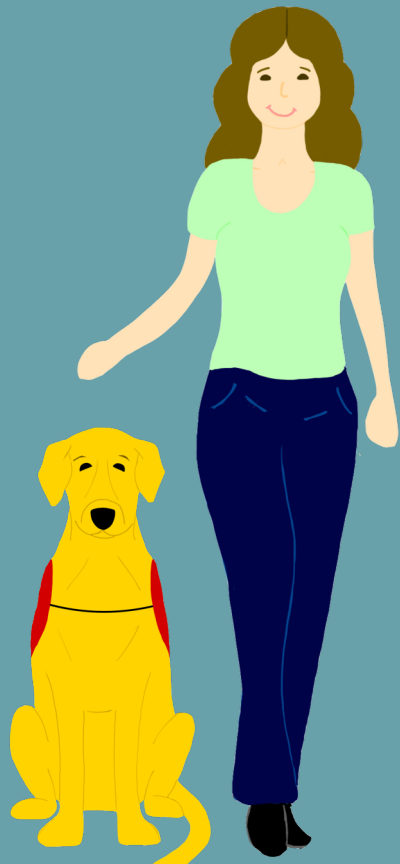
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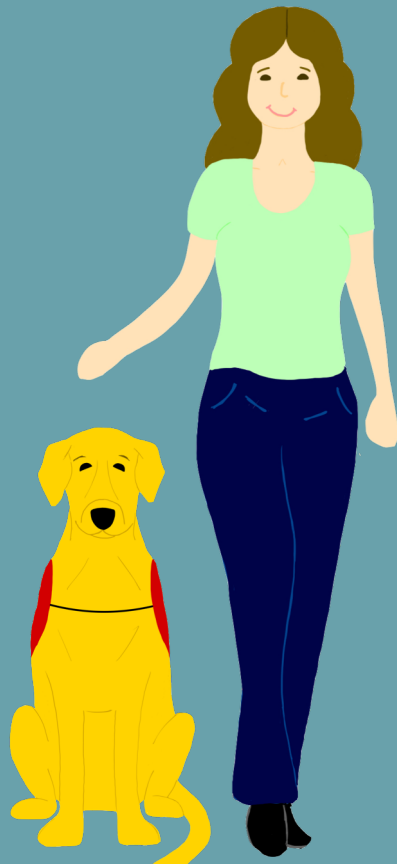
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It is imperative that you develop a treatment plan that the partner is actually capable of completing. The best way to do this is to simply ask (while remembering to refrain from asking about their disability itself). Never assume that an "easy" treatment plan is also easy for the partner. They may be too embarrassed to speak up, especially if they think it's their only option. A client's compliance to the treatment is crucial to a patient's recovery, so don't set them up for failure.

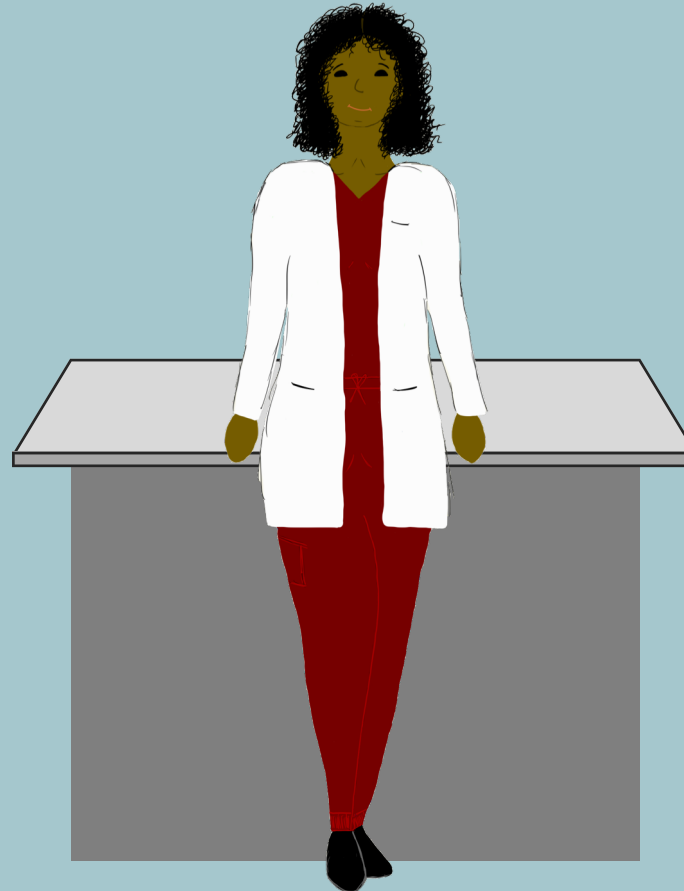
“I understand. Have you ever tried using a pill pocket?”



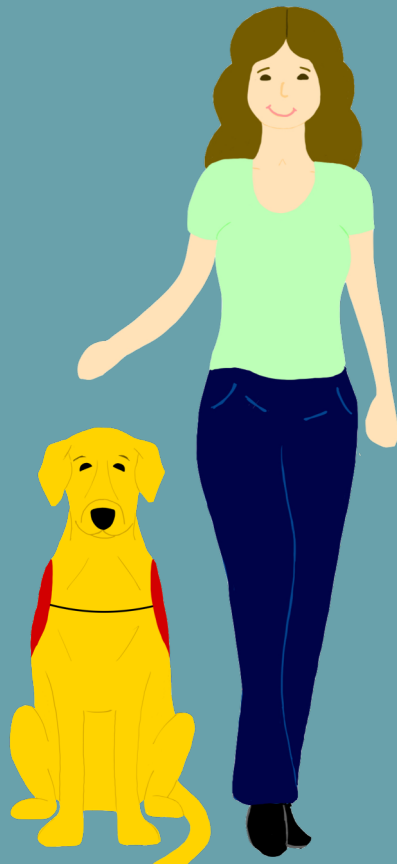
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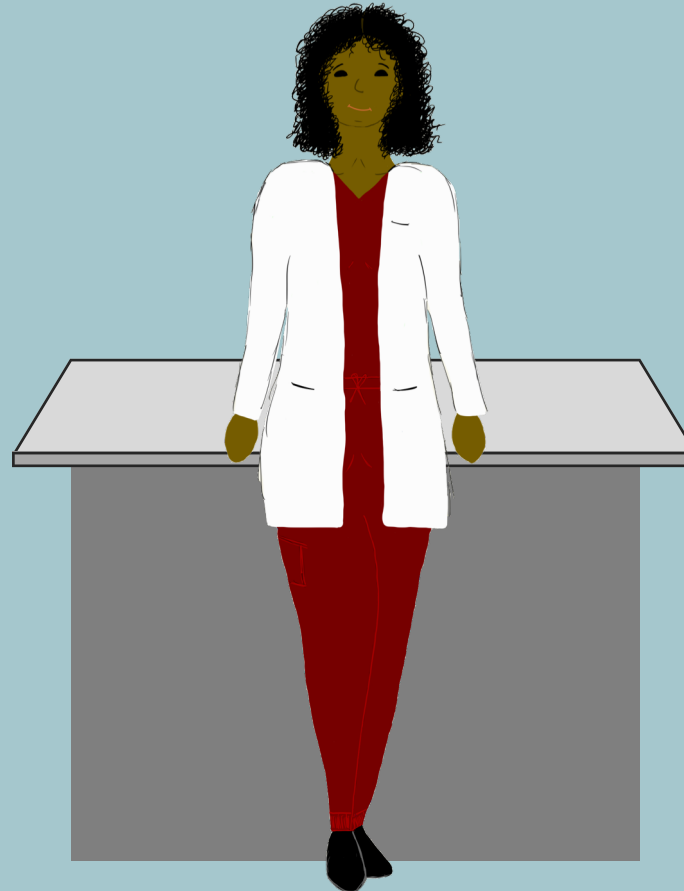


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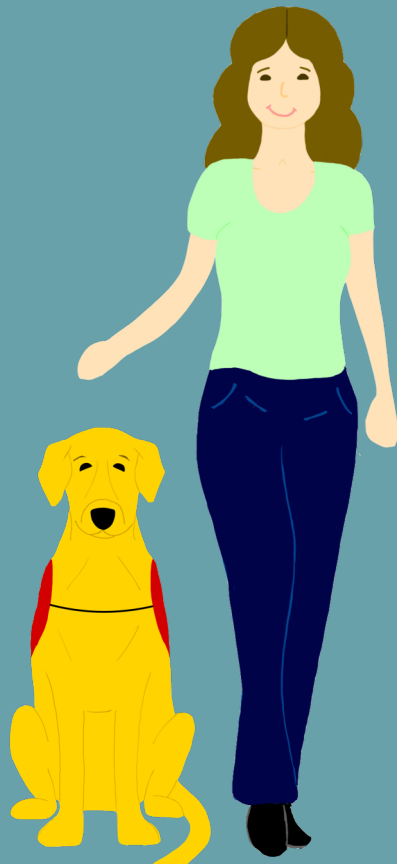
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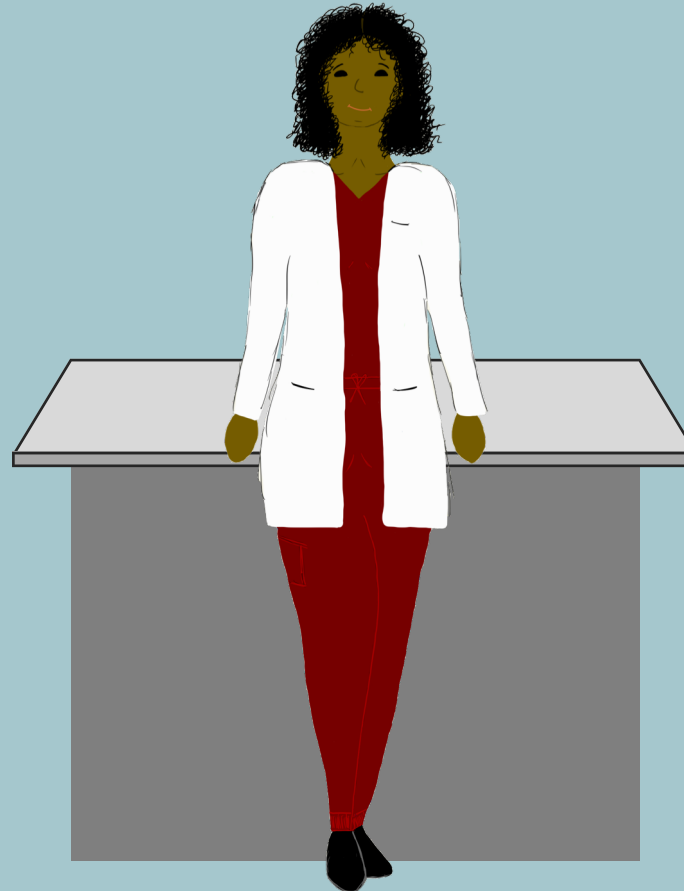
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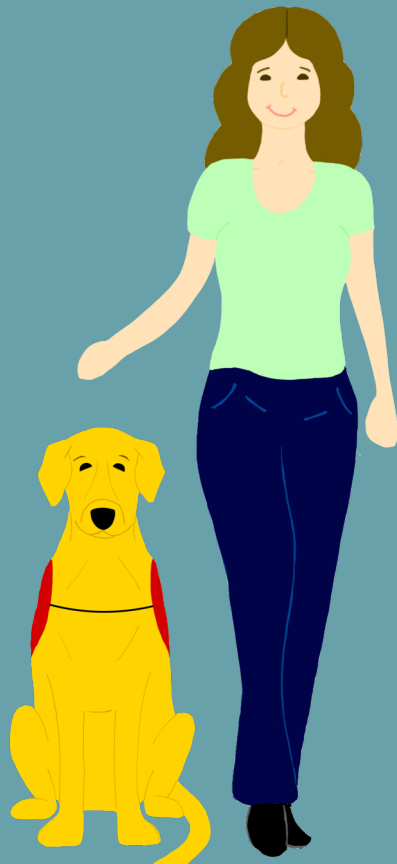
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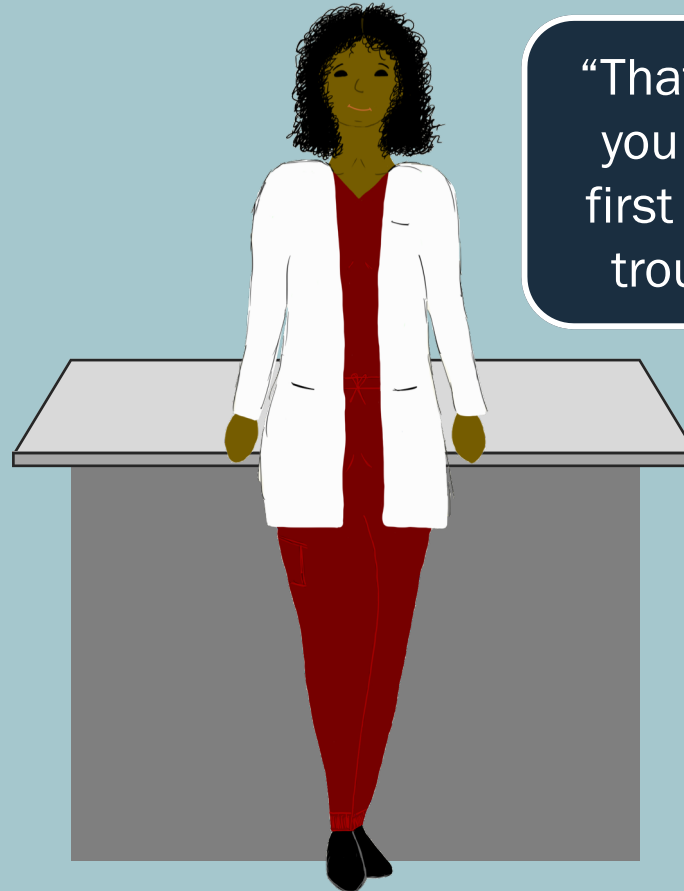
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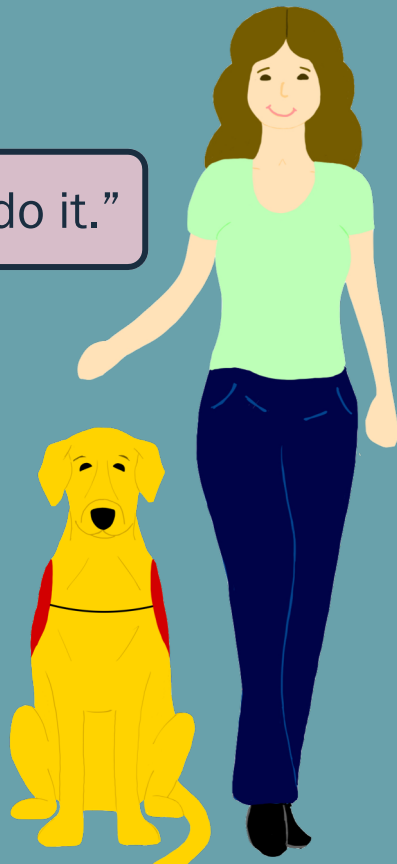
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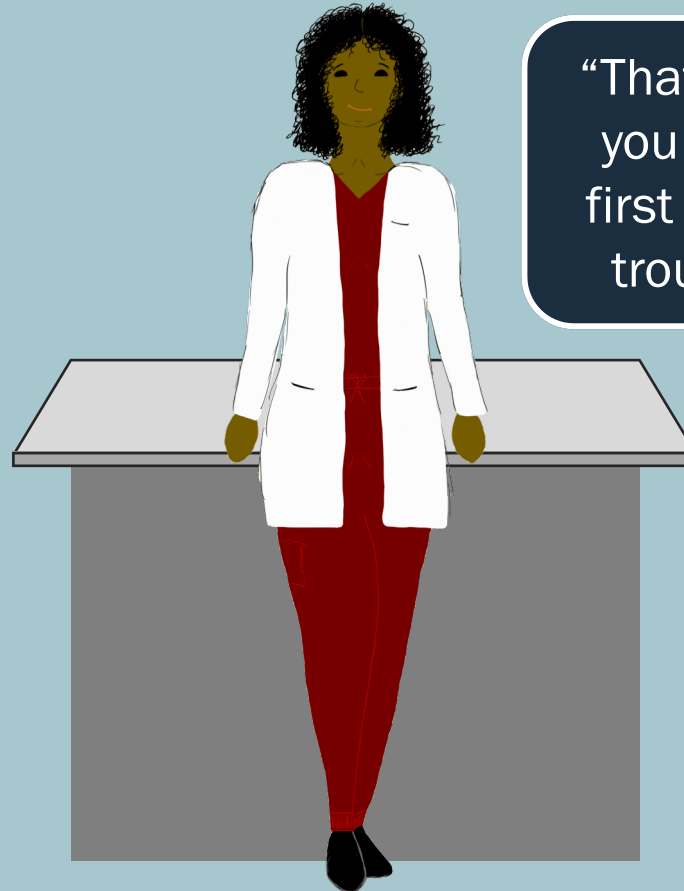
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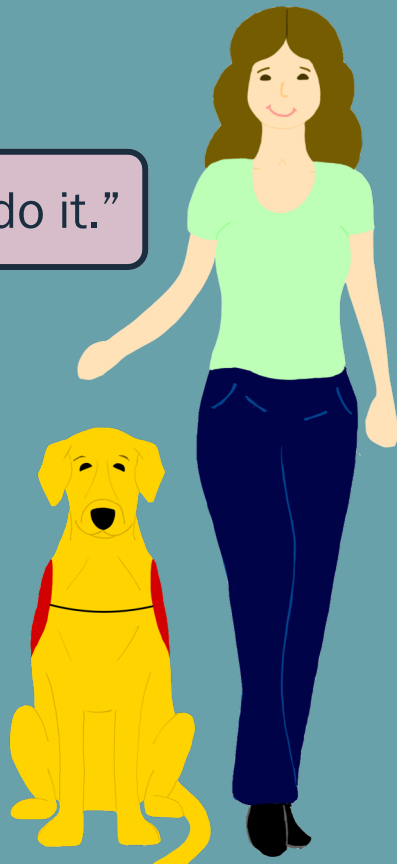
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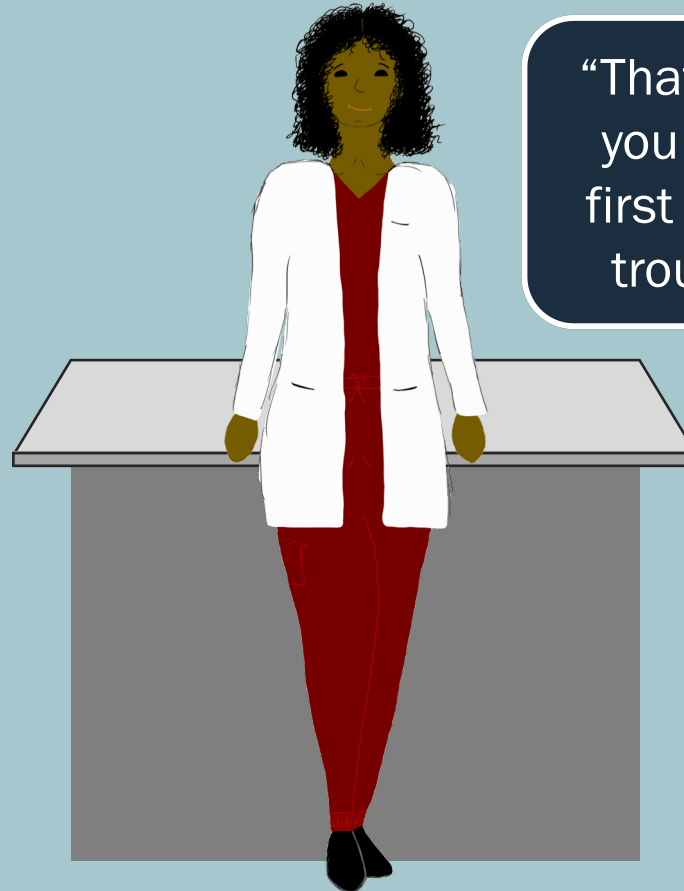


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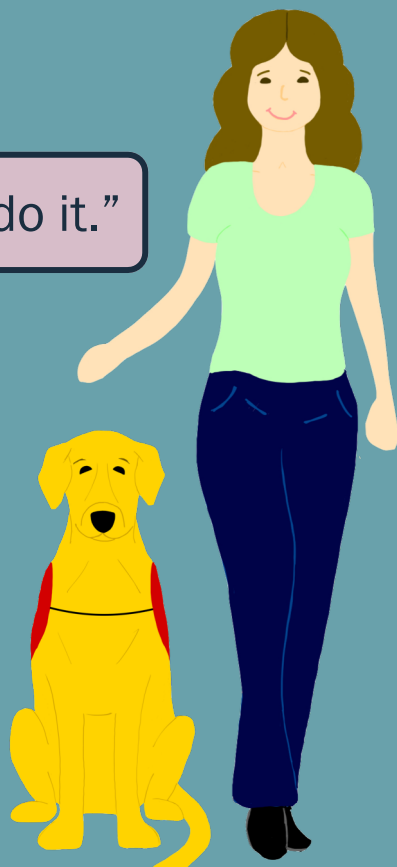


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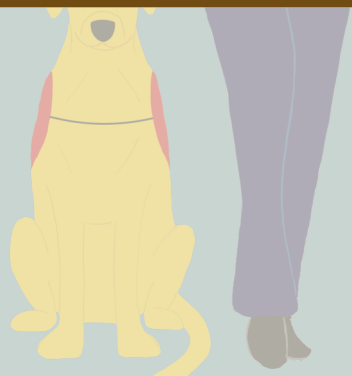
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Whenever possible, you and your staff can offer to assist the partner with their dog’s treatment. If the partner has never given their dog eye drops before, demonstrate an efficient method while they’re in the exam room. If the dog needs half a tablet, split the pills ahead of time instead of sending them home with a pill splitter. If the partner is unable to bathe their dog with medicated shampoo multiple times a week, offer to bathe the dog at the clinic for them.

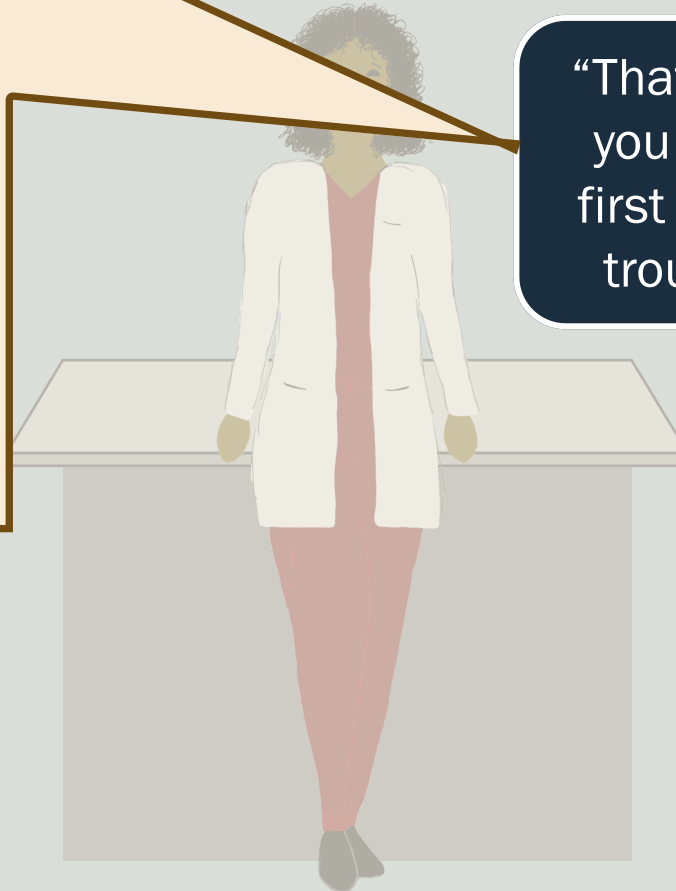
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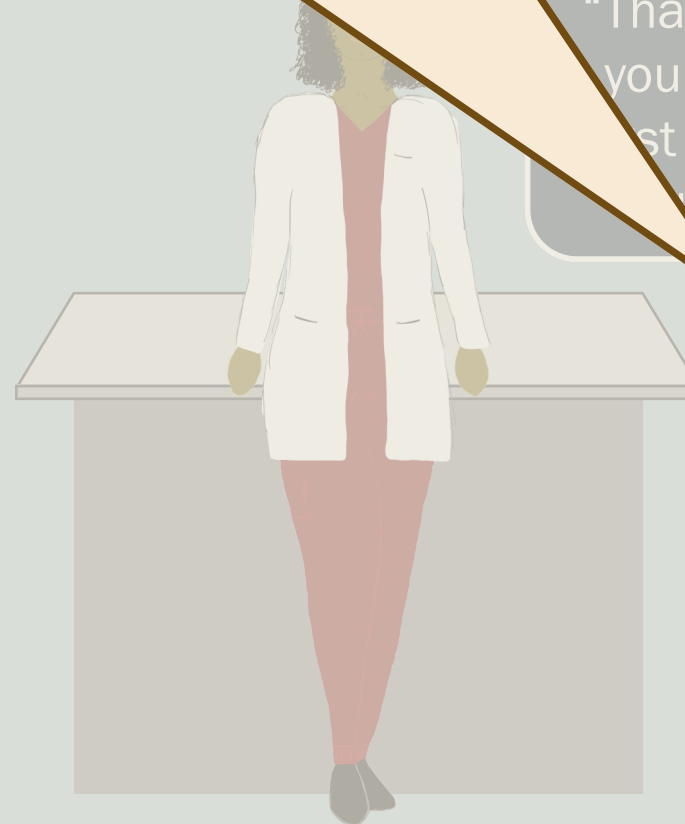
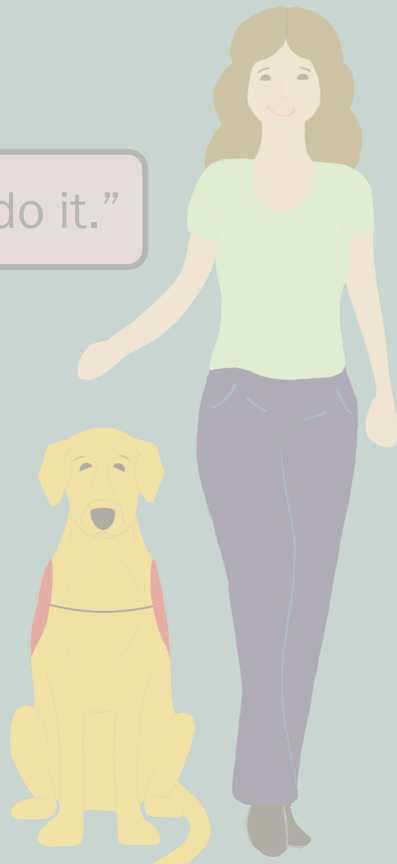
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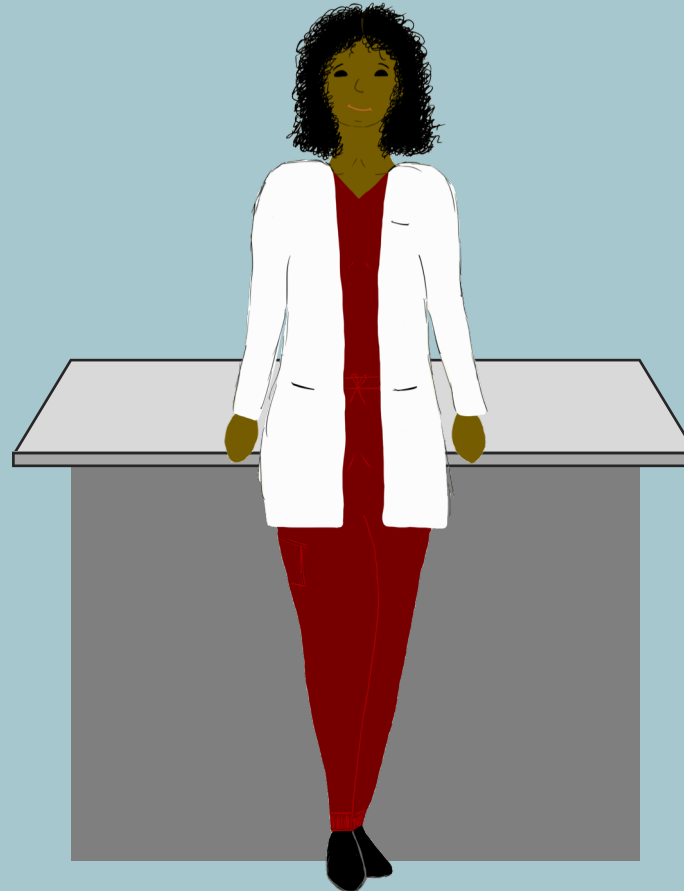
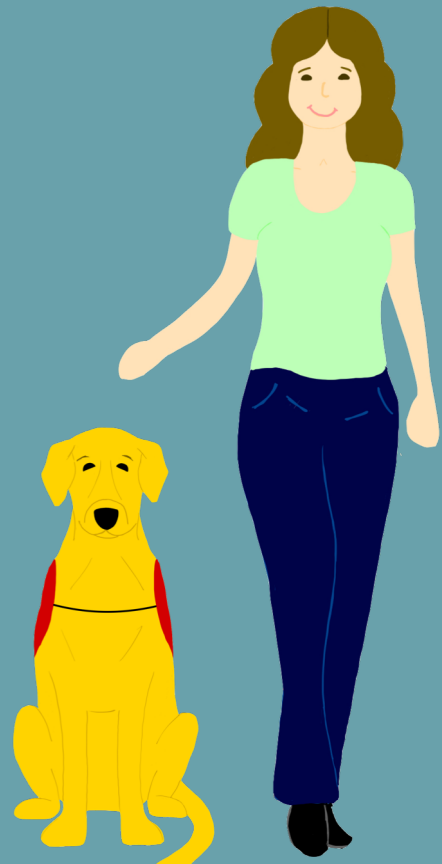
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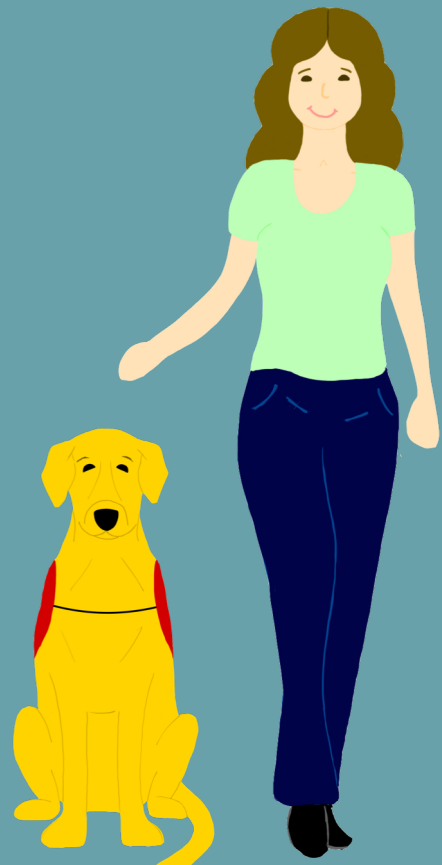
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Pretend that Ellie refused to take the pill pocket with the antibiotic inside. Would you now consider a cefovecin injection despite it not being a first-line drug for uncomplicated UTIs?

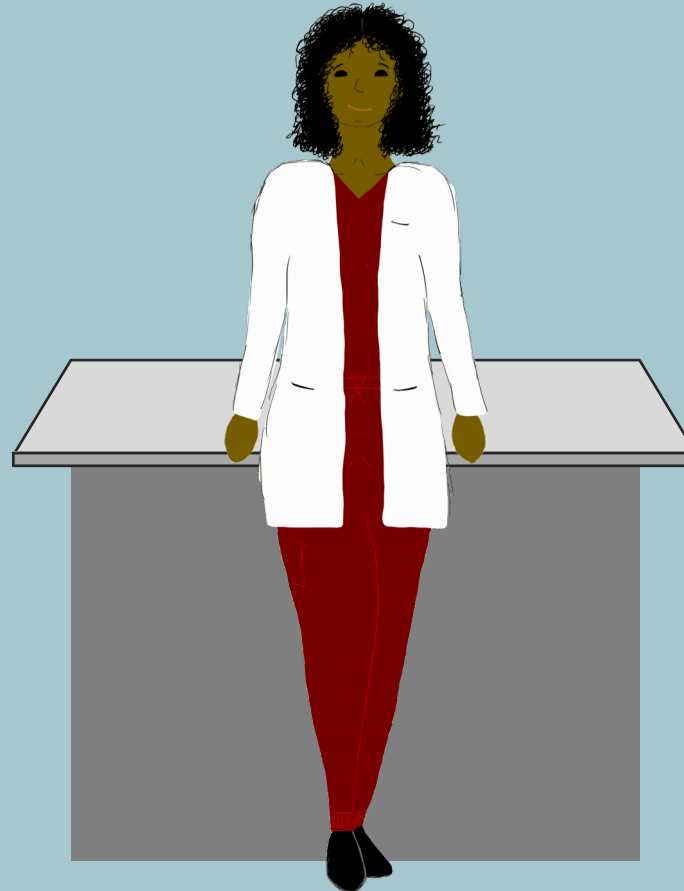
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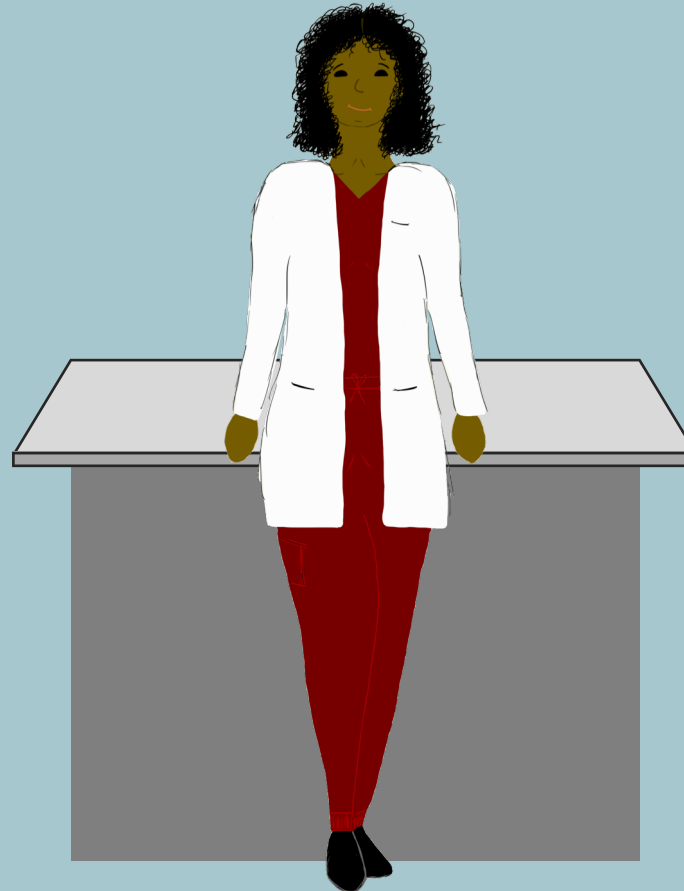


“I would like to see Ellie back in one week to recheck her urine. You can schedule that appointment with the receptionist. It’s pretty crowded in the lobby right now. I can send the receptionist in here to check you out if that’s better for you and Ellie.”

“I would like that. Thank you for all of your help!”



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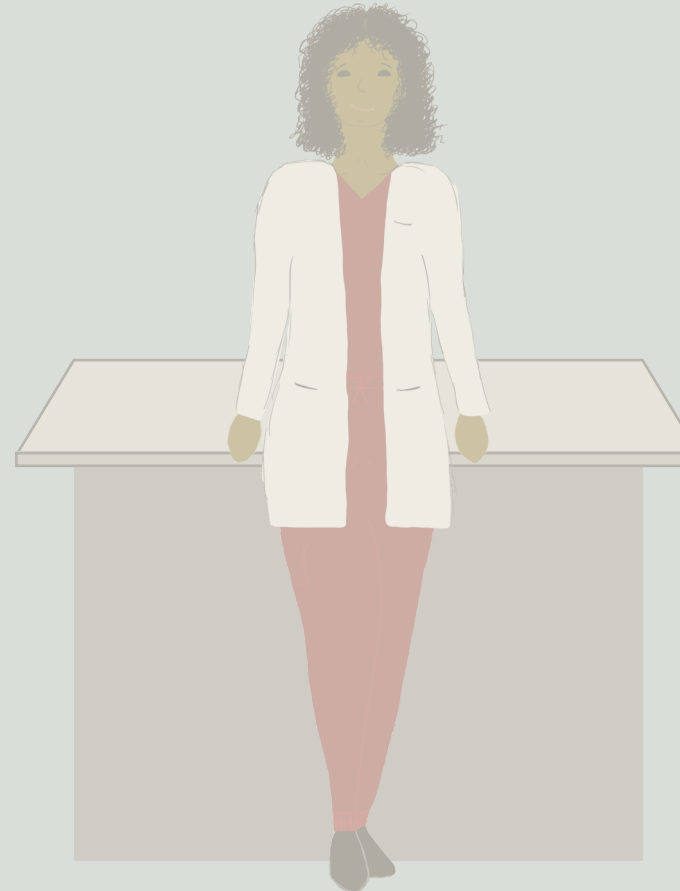
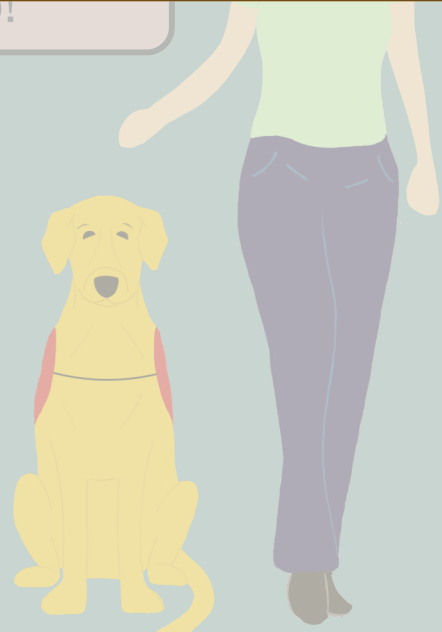


“I would like to see Ellie back in one week to recheck her urine. You can schedule that appointment with the receptionist. It’s pretty crowded in the lobby right now. I can send the receptionist in here to check you out if that’s better for you and Ellie.”

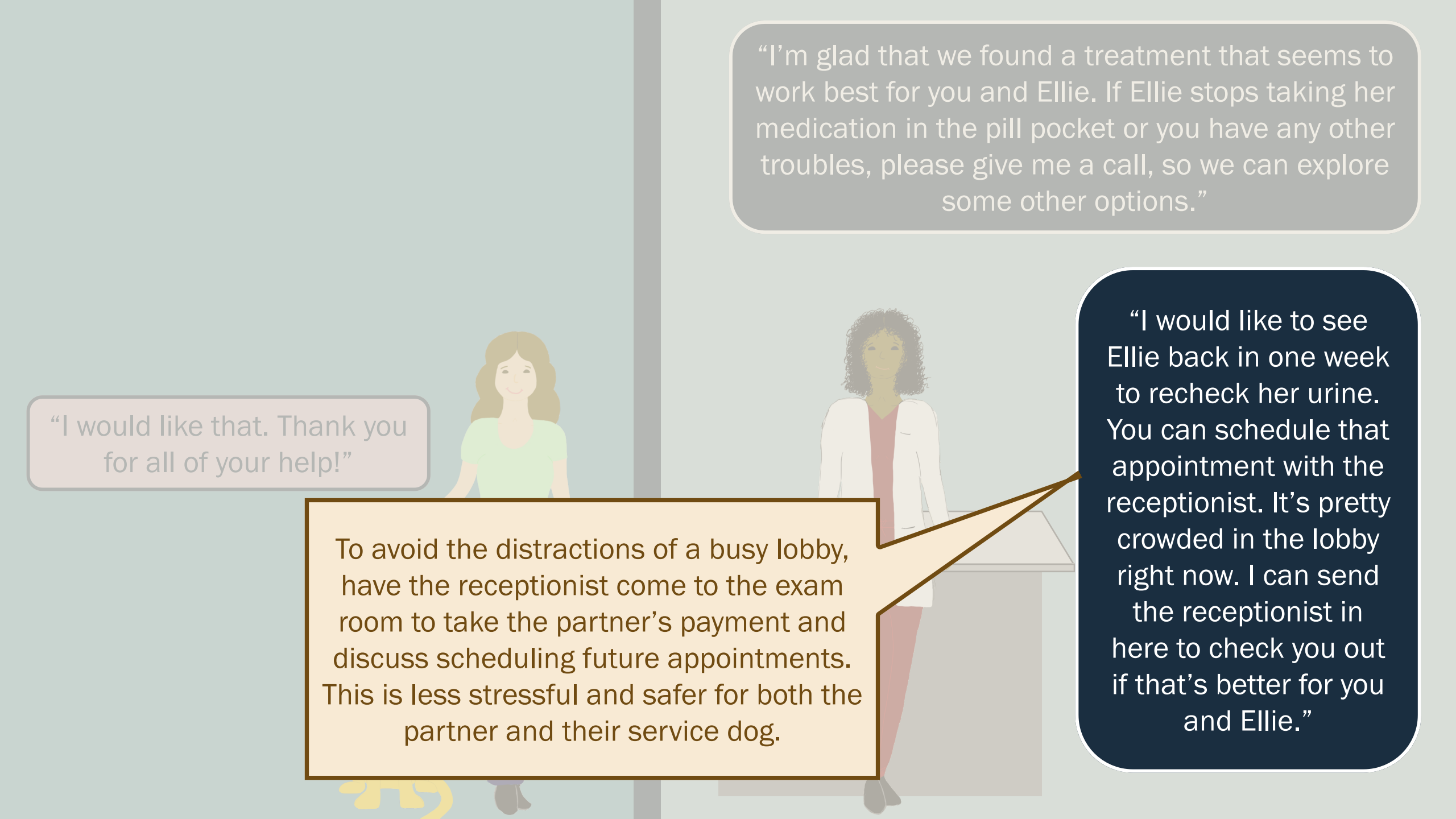
“I’m glad that we found a treatment that seems to work best for you and Ellie. If Ellie stops taking her medication in the pill pocket or you have any other troubles, please give me a call, so we can explore some other options.”

Your job doesn’t end when the patient goes home. Make sure the partner knows that you’re on their side and that their questions and concerns will be addressed if problems arise later on.

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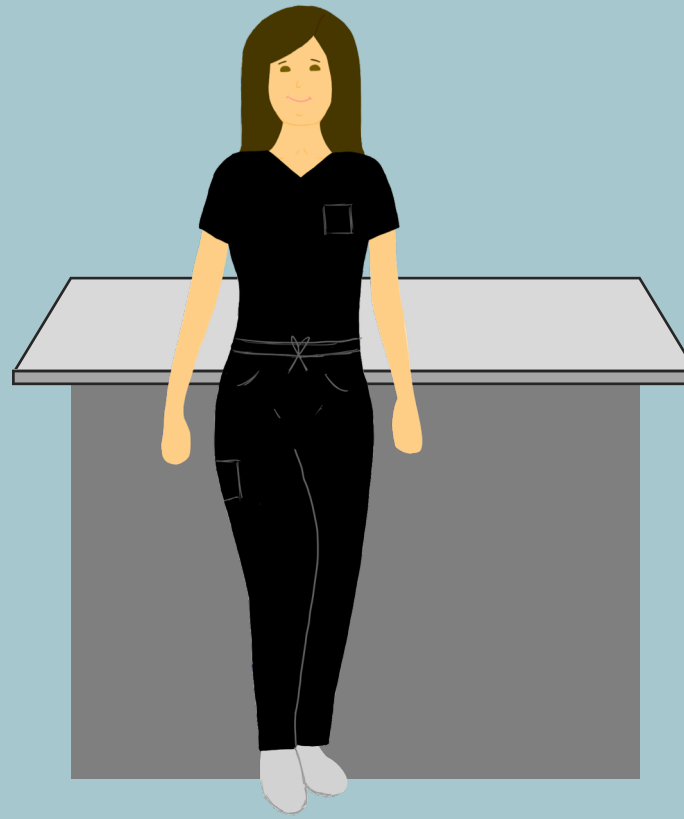
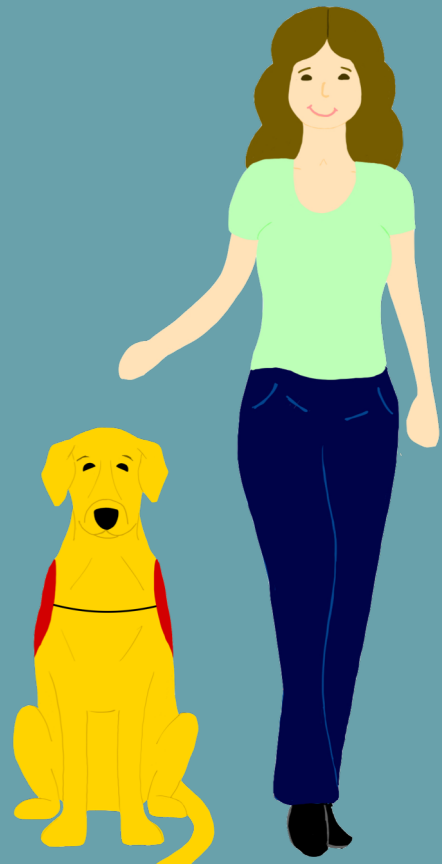
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“I would like that. Thank you for all of your help!”

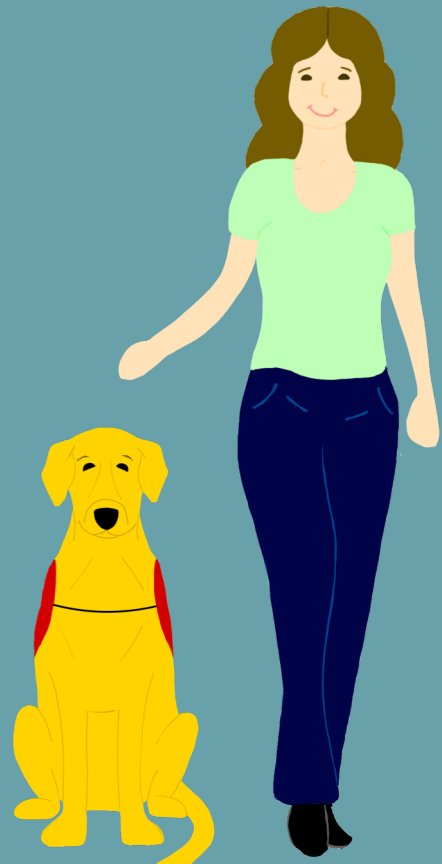
To avoid the distractions of a busy lobby, have the receptionist come to the exam room to take the partner’s payment and discuss scheduling future appointments. This is less stressful and safer for both the partner and their service dog.

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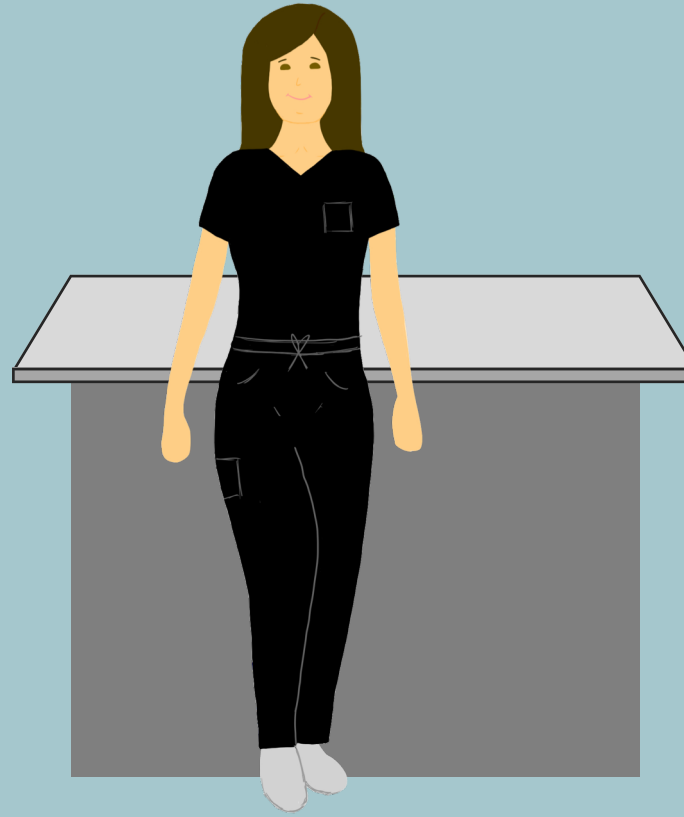
“Here are Ellie’s medication and some pill pockets. We also added a 25% discount to your bill, which we offer to all of our service dog patients.”



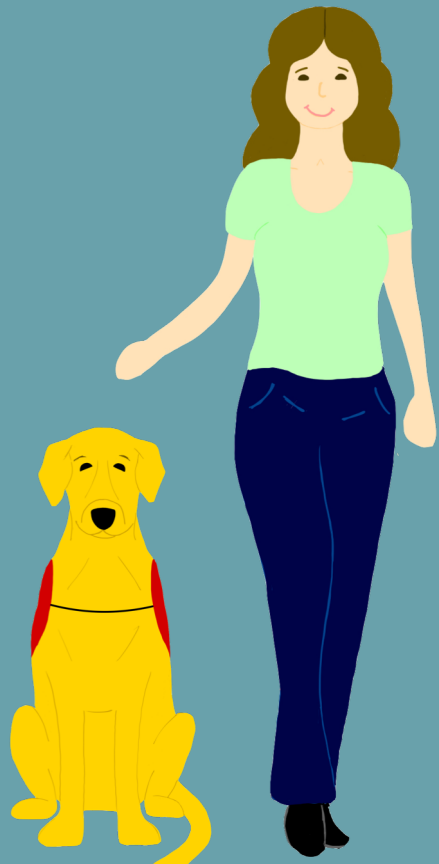
“We greatly appreciate that!”



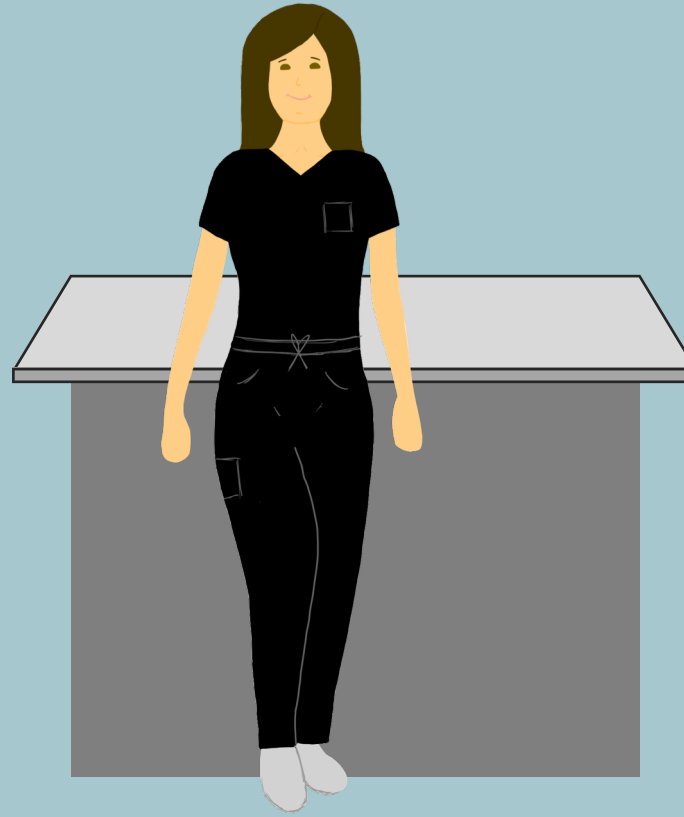
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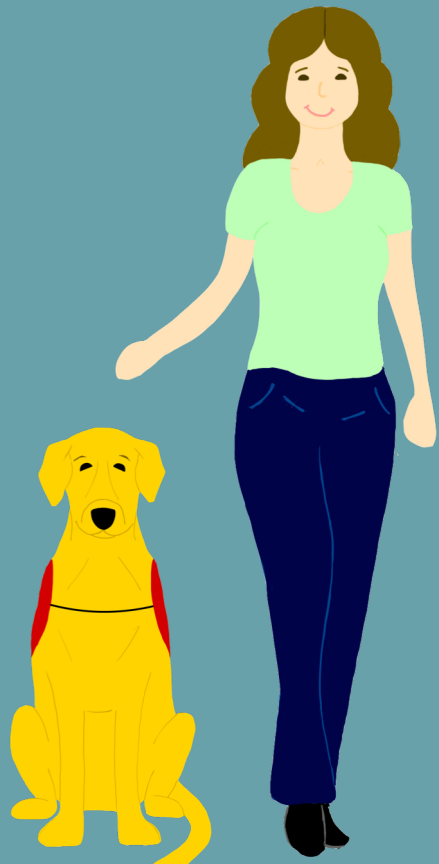
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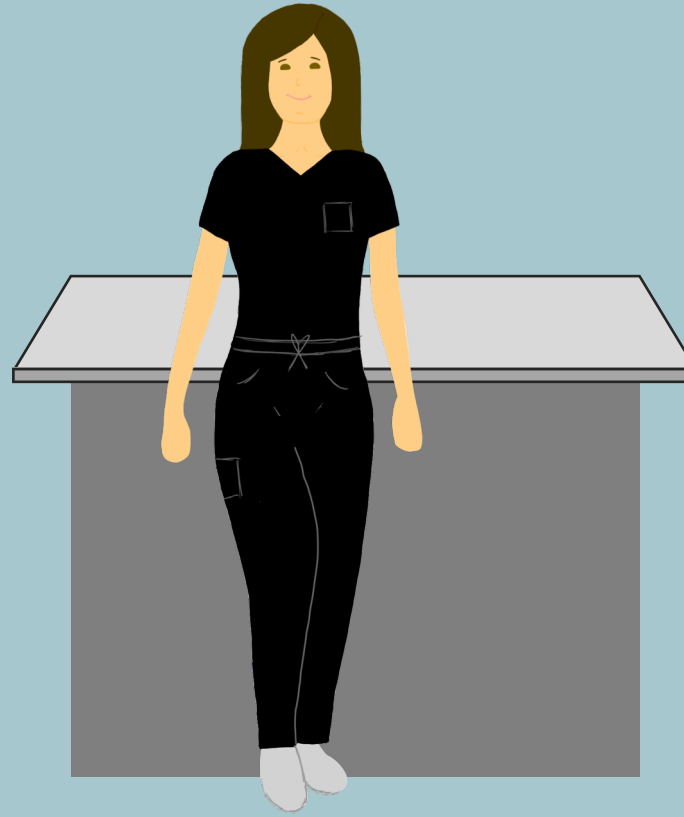
“We have Ellie scheduled for a recheck next Wednesday at 10 am. I wrote the appointment time on this card. Please don’t hesitate to call us if you have any questions or concerns before then.”

“We greatly appreciate that!”

Sam and Ellie head through the lobby and straight out the door without any incidence.



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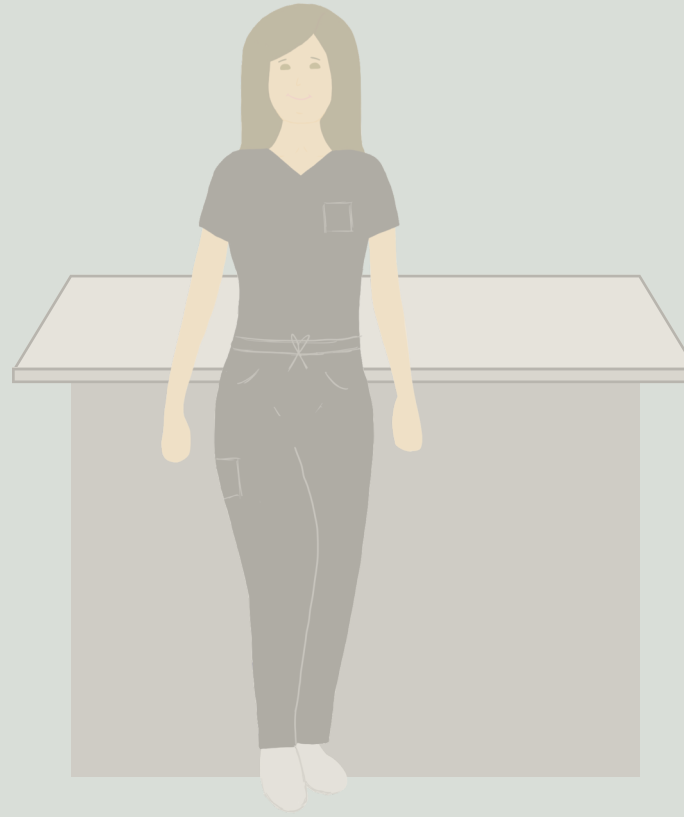
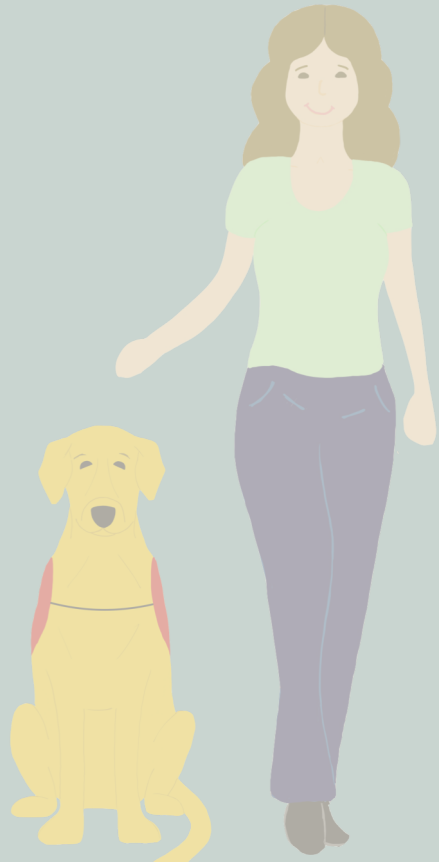


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Although it's not mandatory or expected, many clinics will offer a service dog discount ranging from 10-50%. People with disabilities often live off of a limited income, so these discounts are greatly appreciated."

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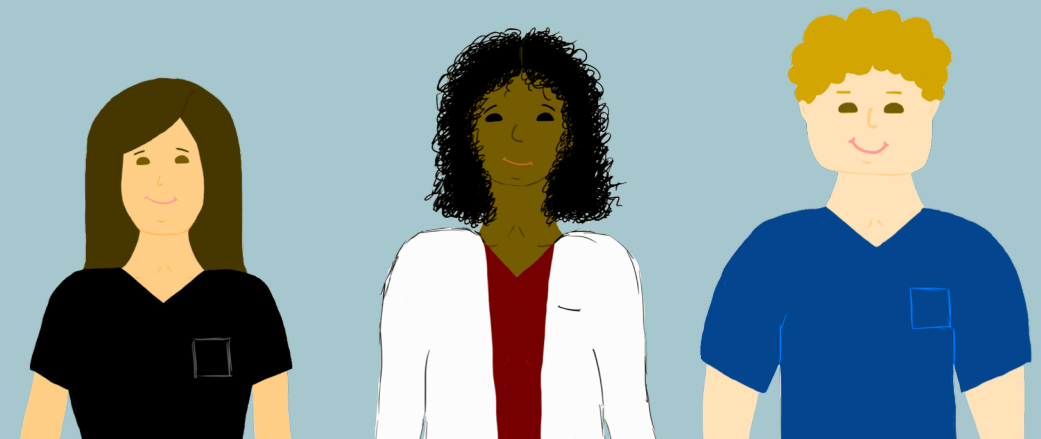
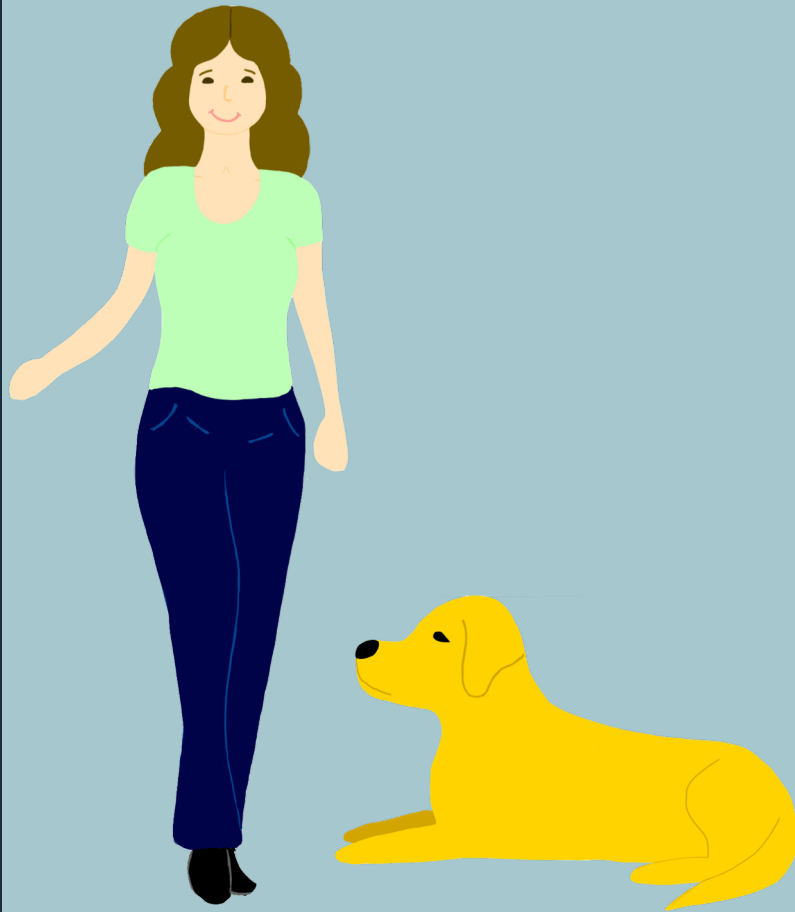
“We greatly appreciate that!”

The bond between a partner and their service dog is intense, so taking their sick dog to the vet can be an anxiety-inducing experience. This may cause the partner to forget important information like the date of their next appointment or the name of their dog’s diagnosis. Consider providing the partner with an appointment reminder card and a brief summary of what was discussed during their visit to avoid additional anxiety and misunderstandings down the road.

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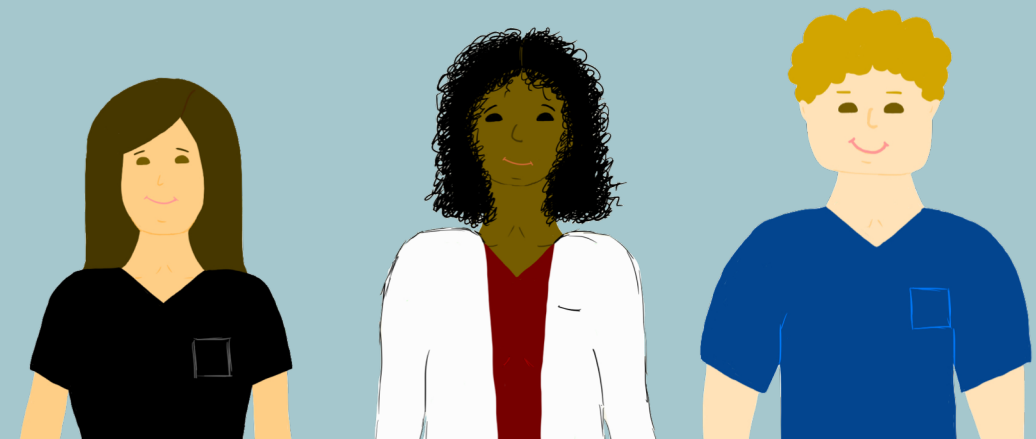
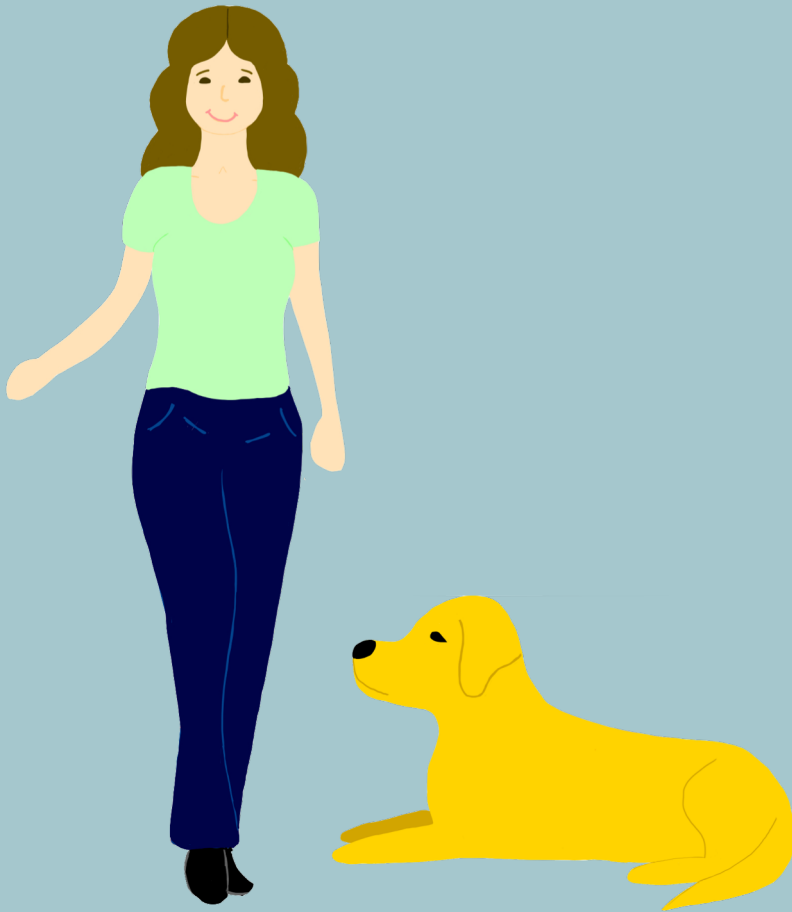
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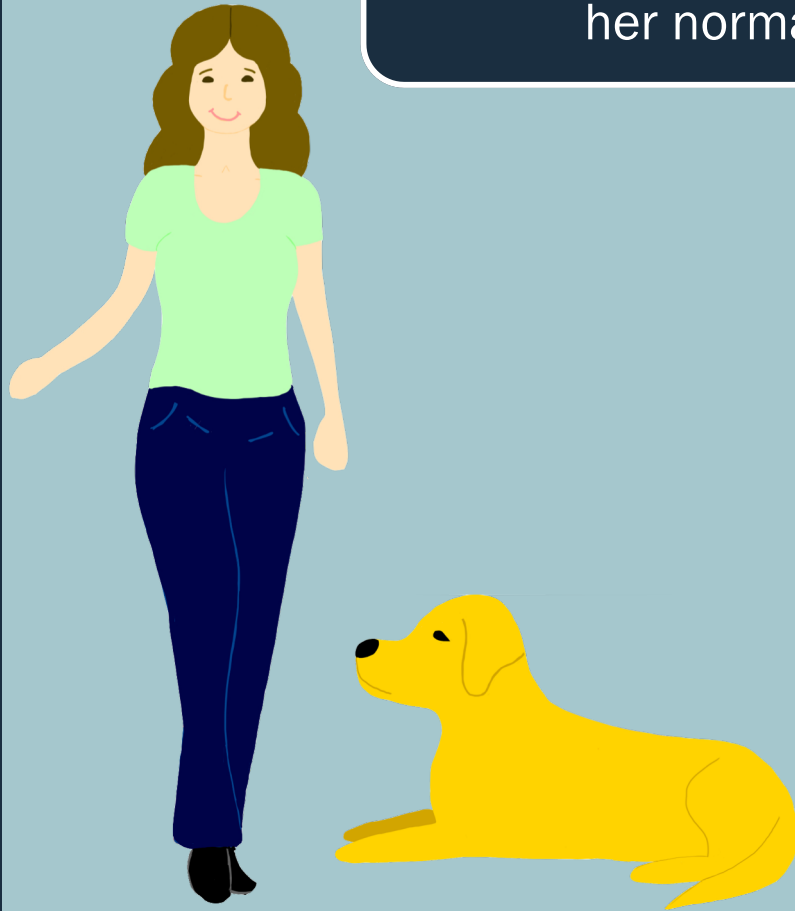
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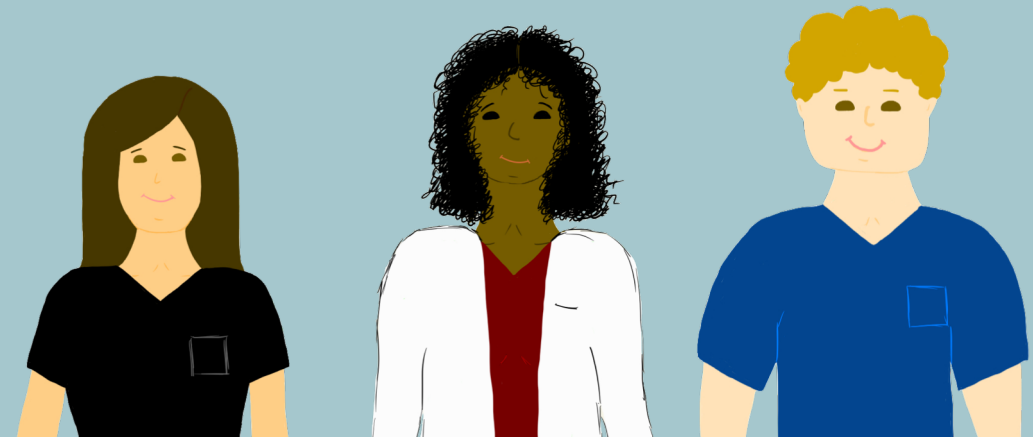
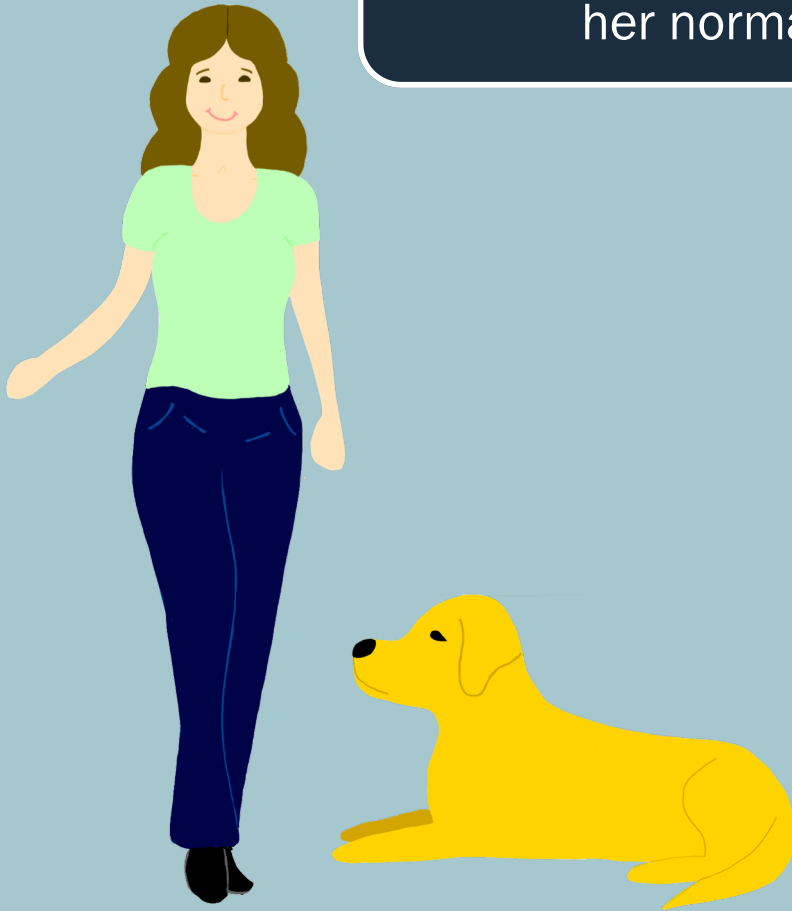


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The next day, the tech from Ellie's appointment calls to see how her treatment is working out. Sam happily reports that she hasn't had any problems.



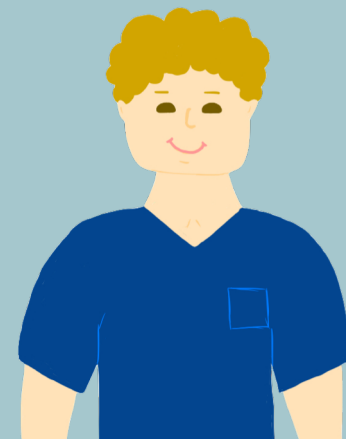
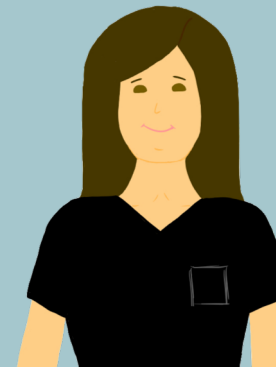
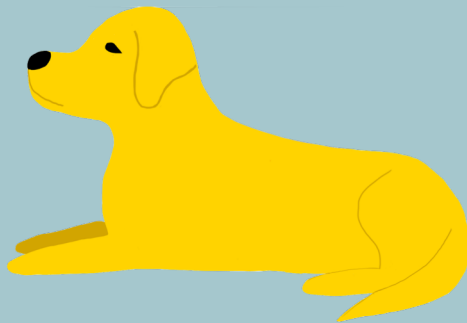
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Soon after, Ellie's clinical signs disappear, and she goes back to her normal self.

Sam is relieved that Ellie is feeling better and is appreciative of the support and understanding that she received from the veterinary staff.

Ellie makes it through the night without any adverse reactions to the medication.

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Meeting these needs ensures the pair's safety and increases the amount of time that they have together.

There are no specific requirements to follow in order to accommodate the pair's needs; just be reasonable and empathetic while also adhering to veterinary regulations and ethics.

Additional Resources

The following sources were referenced in order to put together the information found in this presentation and can provide additional helpful details that were not covered in this presentation:

The 2021 AAHA Working, Assistance, and Therapy Dog Guidelines

The ADA's Beginner-Level Guide to Service Dogs

Frequently Asked Questions about Service Dogs and the ADA

Assistance Dogs International

I would like to thank the Saint Francis Service Dogs staff, Dr. Mark Finkler of Roanoke Animal Hospital, and Dr. Virginia Buechner-Maxwell of the Virginia Tech Center for Animal Human Relationships for assisting me with my project by providing me with their time and knowledge of service dogs and veterinary medicine.