

Reducing Workplace Injuries in Veterinary Medicine

Lower Rates in Fear Free Certified Veterinary Practices

Independent Five-Year
Retrospective Analysis
Conducted by Certified
Safety Training
(2020-2024)

APRIL 2026



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Executive Summary

The Safer Practice: What Fear Free Certification Actually Changes

Five years of independent injury data from 82 U.S. veterinary practices, and what it means for your team, your costs, and your patients.

Veterinary medicine carries one of the highest occupational injury burdens in all of healthcare, more than four times the national average across all industries.¹ The question every practice owner and team leader should be asking isn't whether injuries happen. It's whether anything makes a meaningful difference.

This white paper presents the findings of an independent five-year retrospective analysis conducted by Certified Safety Training (CST), examining self-reported workplace injury data from 82 U.S. veterinary practices between 2020 and 2024, 53 Fear Free Certified Veterinary Practices (FFCVPs) and 29 non-certified practices. Data quality and findings were independently reviewed and reanalyzed by an independent data analytics firm.*

Why it Makes Sense

When animals are calm and cooperative, handling becomes safer for everyone. Fear Free methodology reduces fear in patients helping reduce the risk that drives the majority of veterinary workplace injuries. It addresses the underlying cause, not just the outcome.

The Business Case is Clear

These reductions translate directly into lower workers' compensation costs, fewer staffing disruptions, and less administrative burden. The veterinary profession files 3,200 claims annually at an average cost of \$2,700 each.² A 22% reduction isn't just a safety story. It's a compelling business case.

Across five years of independent data, Fear Free Certified Veterinary Practices reported lower injury rates in every category measured, every single year:

22% Fewer total workplace injuries per 10 employees per year

52% Fewer professional liability claims per practice

24% Fewer animal bites & scratches, the most costly injury type

12% Fewer needle stick & sharps injuries

**Based on self-reported data from 82 U.S. veterinary practices, 2020–2024. Independently reviewed and reanalyzed by Aggie-Tech Analytics. Findings are observational and do not establish causation.*

2) HUB International / AVMA PLIT workers' compensation claims data, 2015–2018. Average claim cost reflects veterinary-specific industry data; actual current costs may be higher.

Introduction & Background

Veterinary professionals face one of the highest occupational injury burdens in healthcare, with risk stemming from animal handling, fear- and stress-induced patient behavior, lifting requirements, and fast-paced clinical environments. Recent research underscores the scale of the problem: a 2024 international survey of veterinary workers reported non-fatal occupational injury rates of 13.8 per 100 full-time workers, nearly five times the national average across all industries.³

Animal-related injuries, particularly bites and scratches, remain a central safety concern. A 2024 longitudinal review of a U.S. veterinary medical center found that injury incidence has increased over the past decade, with bites, most often to the hands and fingers, representing the largest share of reported events. Bite injuries were also associated with higher average workers' compensation costs than other animal-related injuries, reinforcing their operational impact.⁴

These findings are consistent with earlier research. A 2020 cross-sectional study of more than 550 veterinarians found that over half reported an animal-related injury within a two-year period, with improper handling and restraint identified as primary contributors.⁵ Back injuries

and musculoskeletal strains were similarly prevalent, particularly among staff who routinely lift or carry patients.

Peer-reviewed research supports this connection. A 2025 study published in the Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association found that practice-wide certification in stress-reducing animal care was directly associated with lower rates of patient-inflicted injuries to veterinary staff.⁶

These findings highlight a growing need for evidence-based strategies that reduce patient fear and reactivity, improve handling efficiency, and strengthen staff safety culture.

To address this gap, Certified Safety Training (CST) conducted an independent retrospective analysis of five years of workplace injury data from U.S. veterinary practices (2020–2024), comparing outcomes between Fear Free Certified Veterinary Practices and non-certified practices of similar size and case volume. This white paper summarizes those findings and explores how patient-handling approaches, environmental conditions, and restraint philosophies may influence staff injury outcomes across all major incident categories.



“Practice-wide certification in stress-reducing animal care lowers the rate of patient-inflicted injuries to veterinary staff in small animal general practices.”

— Everett et al., Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association, 2025

Methods at a Glance

Key Injury Categories



Overall Workplace Safety (Combined Injury Categories)



Animal-Related Injuries (Bites and Scratches)



Needle Stick/Sharps Injuries



Musculoskeletal Injuries (Back and Lifting/Carrying)

Findings are observational and based on self-reported data. Participation was voluntary and practices were not randomly selected. Results should be interpreted as directional indicators rather than population- representative conclusions.

How Rates Were Calculated

Unit of measurement

All injury rates are expressed as injuries per 10 employees per year, enabling fair comparison across practices of different sizes.

Rate Calculation

Total reported injuries across all practices were divided by total employees in the dataset, weighting results by the full employee population, not a simple average of individual practice rates.

Data Quality

All submissions were reviewed by Aggie-Tech Analytics. Five responses per cohort were excluded for incomplete data, yielding a final verified sample of 82 practices.

Study Cohorts

53 Fear Free Certified Veterinary Practices

29 Non-Fear Free Certified Veterinary Practices

Methods

Study Design

Certified Safety Training (CST) conducted an independent retrospective analysis of self-reported workplace injury data from U.S. veterinary practices, examining five years of reported incidents (2020–2024) to evaluate differences in injury patterns between Fear Free Certified Veterinary Practices and non-certified practices of similar size and case volume.

CST is a leading provider of OSHA compliance and workplace safety programs for the veterinary industry. With more than 30 years of experience

and a team of Certified Safety Professionals, CST develops training, compliance tools, and safety assessments purpose-built for veterinary practices across the U.S. and internationally.

Survey design, data collection, and aggregation were performed by CST. To encourage broader participation, Fear Free, LLC assisted with survey distribution to veterinary professionals in its network, including both certified and non-certified practices.

Data Collection

CST collected injury data using a standardized survey tool and incident-reporting form consistent with its workplace safety training protocols. Participating practices provided:

- Annual counts of total workplace injuries by category (bites and scratches, needle stick and sharps injuries, back injuries, lifting and carrying injuries, and other musculoskeletal injuries)
- Number of full-time or full-time equivalent (FTE) staff per year
- Qualitative information regarding handling protocols or safety concerns

CST verified submissions for internal consistency and followed up with practices for clarification when required.

Independent Analysis

Survey submissions were reviewed by an independent consulting firm, Aggie-Tech Analytics, to ensure data quality and consistency prior to analysis. Following independent quality review, five responses from each practice category were excluded due to incomplete or inconsistent data, resulting in a final verified sample of 82 total cohorts.

Analytical Approach

Results are reported on both an annual basis and as a five-year average, expressed as *injuries per 10 employees per year*. To calculate each annual rate, total reported injury occurrences across all participating practices were divided by the total number of employees in the dataset, weighting the result by the full employee population rather than averaging yearly rates across practices.



About Certified Safety Training (CST)

Certified Safety Training (CST) is a leading provider of OSHA compliance and workplace safety programs for the veterinary industry. Backed by more than 30 years of experience and a team of Certified Safety Professionals, CST develops industry-specific training, customized safety manuals, safety data sheet libraries, and compliance tools purpose-built for veterinary practices, from general practice and emergency/specialty hospitals to mobile, equine, and boarding facilities.

CST serves veterinary professionals across the U.S., Canada, the U.K., Australia, and New Zealand, and partners with reputable veterinary organizations to support safer workplaces across the profession. It was this deep, practice-level expertise that positioned CST to conduct the independent retrospective analysis summarized in this report.



CST+ Safety Score

The CST Safety Score is a numeric, composite measure derived from clinic responses to the CST safety survey. It reflects the current level of safety preparedness and protocol adoption at each participating clinic, including factors such as training practice, compliance behaviors, and safety processes.

Higher scores indicate a greater degree of alignment with recommended safety standards and practices. In the dataset analyzed, Safety Scores ranged from a low of 23 to a maximum of 54, representing a broad spectrum of safety maturity across participating practices.

Lower scores reflect more limited adoption of formalized safety practices, while higher scores indicate more comprehensive and consistent implementation of safety-related policies and training.

It is important to note that the Safety Score represents a point-in-time assessment (collected in Q2-Q3 2025) and does not measure historical safety performance across the full 2020-2024 analysis period.

As such, comparisons involving Safety Score should be interpreted as associations between current safety preparedness and historical injury outcomes, rather than a direct measure of past conditions.



Results and Key Findings

Overall Workplace Safety (Combined Injury Categories)

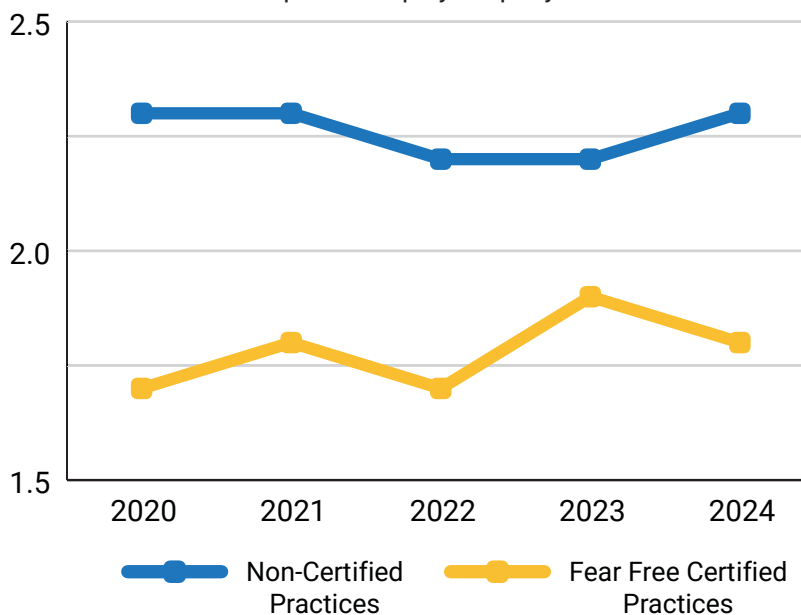
Veterinary teams face a range of daily risks, from bites and scratches to needle sticks and physical strains, that can lead to pain, time off, and higher costs for practices.

To capture the full picture, CST combined these major categories into a single metric: animal bites/scratches, needle stick/sharps injuries, and musculoskeletal injuries (including back strains and slips/trips/falls).

Rates were normalized per 10 employees per year for fair comparisons across clinic sizes. Data showed Fear Free Certified Veterinary Practices had consistently lower overall injury rates over the five-year period.

22%
**Fewer Workplace
Injuries in Fear Free
Certified Veterinary
Practices**

Total Combined Incident Rates in Fear Free Certified vs. Non-Certified Veterinary Practices (2020–2024)
per 10 employees per year



Total Combined Incident Rates			
Year	Fear Free Certified Practice	Non-Certified Practices	Reduction in Fear Free Practices
Injuries Per 10 employees per year			
2020	1.7	2.3	27%
2021	1.8	2.3	24%
2022	1.7	2.2	24%
2023	1.9	2.2	15%
2024	1.8	2.3	21%
5 Yr Avg	1.8	2.3	22%

Fear Free Certified Veterinary Practices had 1.8 total incidents per 10 employees per year, compared to 2.3 in non-certified practices, a 22% lower overall rate. This overall advantage was consistent across every year in the study period, with Fear Free Certified Veterinary Practices showing lower combined injury rates in each of the five years analyzed.

In practical terms, Fear Free Certified Veterinary Practices demonstrate a safer overall work environment, with a meaningful reduction in common occupational injuries. This supports a healthier, more sustainable workplace for veterinary teams.

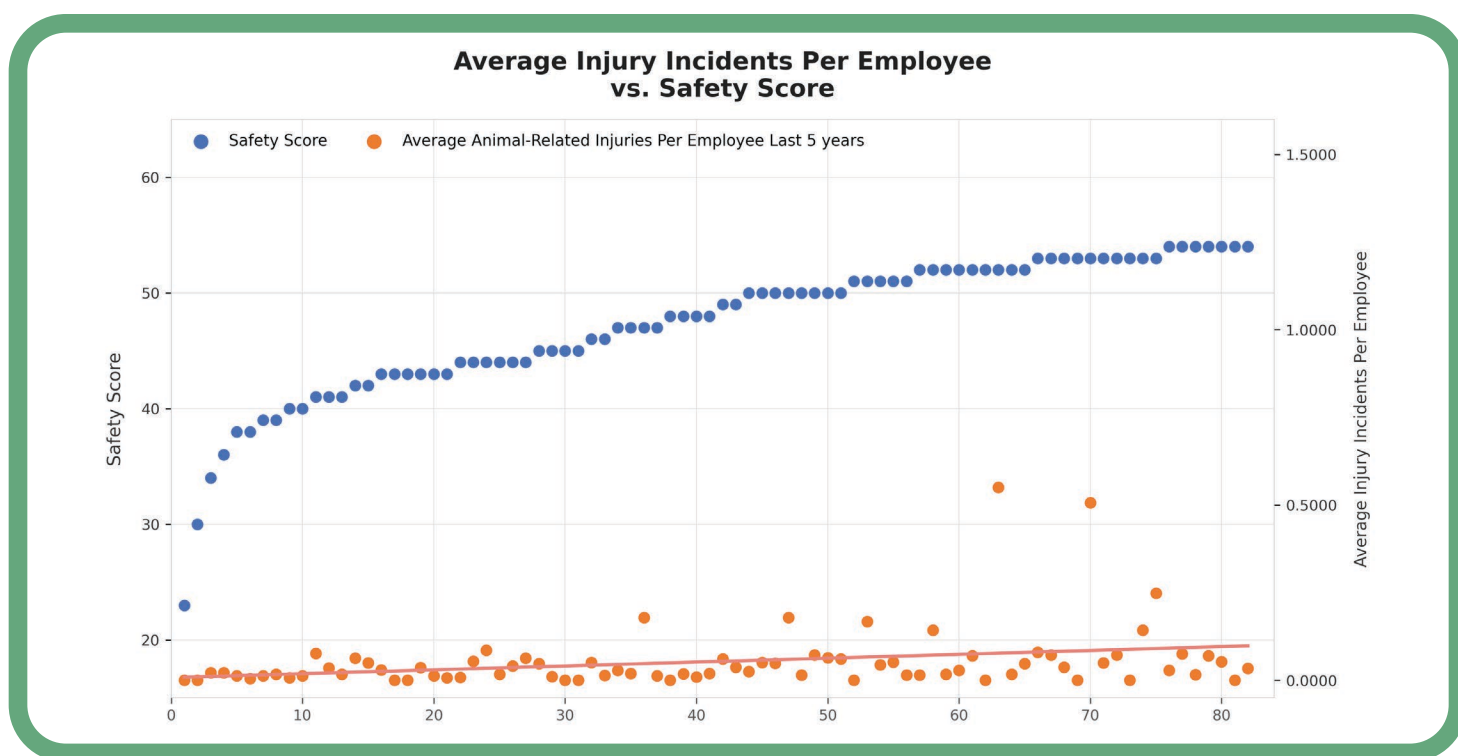


Results and Key Findings

Overall Workplace Safety (Combined Injury Categories)



See page 4 for full CST Safety Score definition.



Analysis of the dataset indicates a positive relationship between Safety Score and reported incident rates per employee. While this may appear counterintuitive at first glance, it is consistent with established safety management principles. Organizations with higher Safety Scores typically demonstrate more mature safety programs, including structured reporting systems, increased employee engagement, and stronger accountability mechanisms. As a result, these organizations often capture a higher volume of incidents, including minor injuries and near misses, that may otherwise go unreported in lower-performing environments. Conversely, facilities with lower Safety Scores frequently report fewer incidents, which may reflect underreporting rather than a true absence of workplace risk. Higher Safety Scores are indicative of improved transparency and a more proactive safety culture, rather than increased exposure to risk.



Results and Key Findings

Veterinary Professional Liability Claims

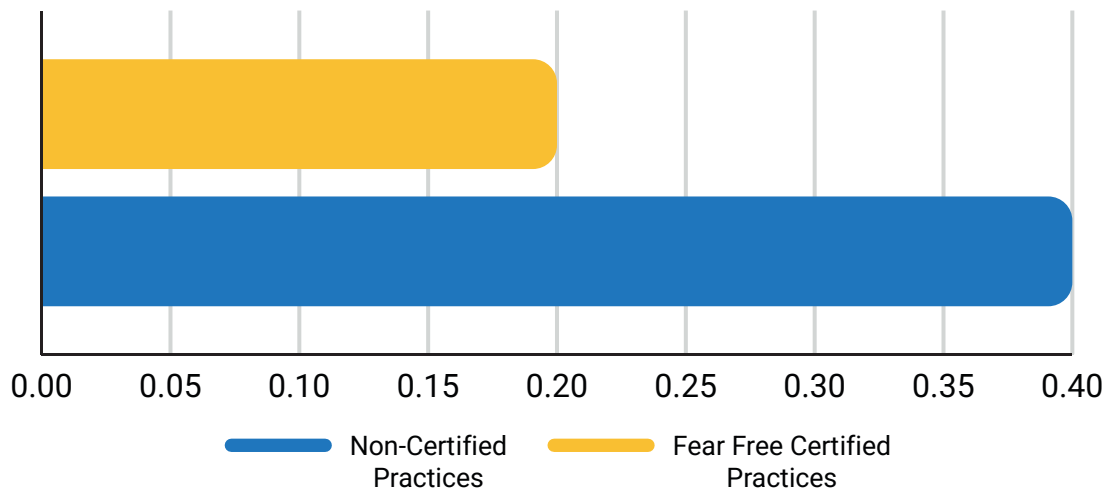
Fear Free Certified Veterinary Practices averaged 0.2 professional liability claims per 10 employees over the three-year reporting window captured in the survey, compared to 0.4 among non-certified practices, a 52% lower rate.* While claims are influenced by many factors, the calmer, more cooperative patient interactions fostered by Fear Free techniques may contribute to smoother procedures, better client communication, and fewer perceived issues.

In practical terms, fewer claims can mean reduced insurance premiums, less administrative burden, and greater focus on delivering high-quality care rather than managing disputes.

**Fear Free Certified
Veterinary
Practices Had a
52%
Lower Rate**

Professional Liability Claims Over the Past Three Years: Over 2X Lower in Fear Free Certified Veterinary Practices

Average claims per clinic



Participating Practices Shared Qualitative Insights

- Fear Free Certified Veterinary Practices often noted better team communication on handling and less need for forceful restraint.
- Non-certified practices more frequently linked injuries to animal fear, resistance, or escape attempts.

These anecdotal observations align with the quantitative data, suggesting low-stress techniques reduce injury risk.

*Data reflect self-reported responses from participating practices and represent associations, not causal relationships. Professional liability claim data reflect a three-year reporting window; other injury metrics in this paper reflect the 2020–2024 period.



Results and Key Findings

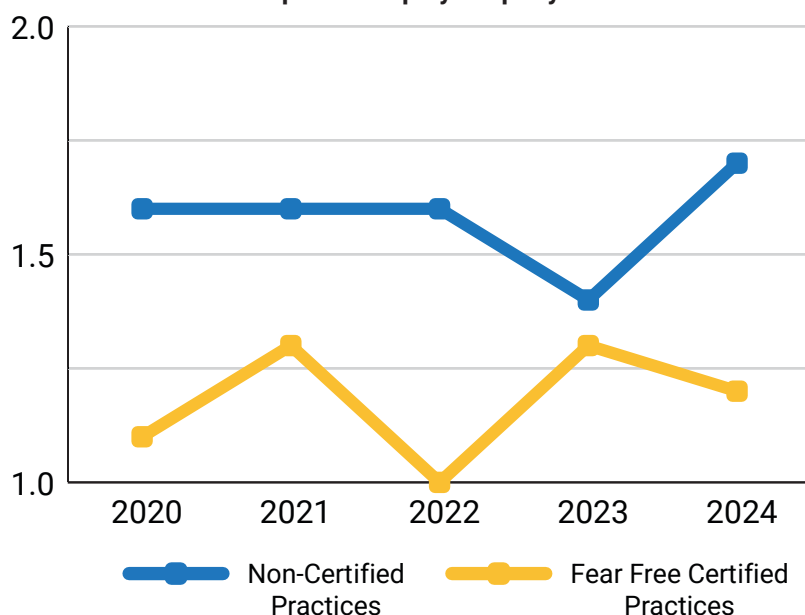
Animal-Related Injuries (Bites and Scratches)

Animal bites and scratches are a frequent occupational hazard in veterinary practice, often leading to medical treatment, lost work time, and workers' compensation claims. Most occur when stressed or frightened patients react defensively.

CST analyzed real-world data to assess if low-stress handling reduces these injuries. Rates were normalized per per 10 employees per year to enable fair comparisons across practices of different sizes.

**Fear Free Certified
Veterinary
Practices Had a
24%
Lower Rate**

**Animal Bite and Scratch Rates in Fear Free Certified
vs. Non-Certified Veterinary Practices (2020–2024)**
per 10 employees per year



Animal Bite & Scratch Rates

Year	Fear Free Certified Practice	Non-Certified Practices	Reduction in Fear Free Practices
Injuries Per 10 employees per year			
2020	1.1	1.6	30%
2021	1.3	1.6	18%
2022	1.0	1.6	34%
2023	1.3	1.4	7%
2024	1.2	1.7	24%
5 Yr Avg	1.2	1.6	24%

Fear Free Certified Veterinary Practices had 1.2 bites/scratches per 10 employees per year, compared to 1.6 in non-certified practices, a 24% lower rate. When examining raw incident counts without size adjustment, *Fear Free Certified Veterinary Practices already showed fewer injuries overall*. Normalizing for staffing levels revealed the full extent of the per-employee benefit. The consistency of this pattern across all five years of data, with Fear Free Certified

Veterinary Practices showing lower rates in every year analyzed, suggests the difference is meaningful and consistent across years.

In practical terms, veterinary teams in Fear Free Certified Veterinary Practices experience fewer bite and scratch injuries. This can mean fewer medical visits, reduced downtime, lower treatment costs, and a safer, more positive work environment.



Results and Key Findings

Needle Stick / Sharps Injuries

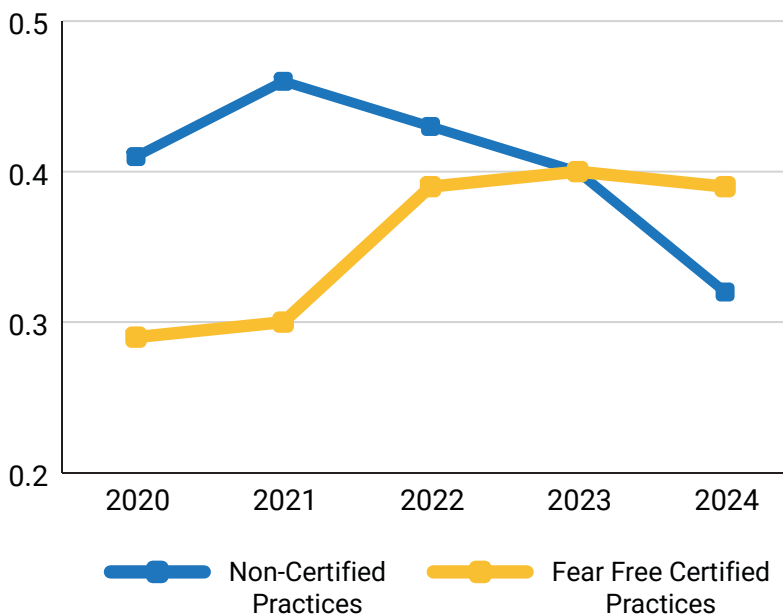
Needle stick and sharps injuries are a serious occupational hazard in veterinary practice. They occur most often during injections, venipuncture, and suturing, particularly when a patient moves unexpectedly. Beyond the immediate physical injury, these incidents carry the risk of zoonotic disease exposure and require medical follow-up, adding to staff stress and clinic costs.

CST analyzed five years of needle stick and sharps injury data, normalized per 10 employees per year to allow fair comparison across practices of different sizes. Across the five-year study period, Fear Free Certified Veterinary Practices averaged a lower sharps injury rate per 10 employees.

**Fear Free Certified
Veterinary
Practices Had a
12%
Lower Rate**

Needle Stick & Sharps Injury Rates in Fear Free Certified vs. Non-Certified Veterinary Practices (2020–2024)

per 10 employees per year



Needle Stick & Sharps Injury Rates			
Year	Fear Free Certified Practice	Non-Certified Practices	Reduction in Fear Free Practices
Injuries Per 10 employees per year			
2020	0.29	0.41	29%
2021	0.30	0.46	35%
2022	0.39	0.43	10%
2023	0.40	0.40	--
2024	0.39	0.32	--
5 Yr Avg	0.26	0.29	12%

Fear Free Certified Veterinary Practices had 0.26 needle stick/sharps injuries per 10 employees per year, compared to 0.29 in non-certified practices, a 12% lower rate. When examining raw incident counts without size adjustment, *Fear Free Certified Veterinary Practices still showed consistently fewer incidents*. Normalizing for staffing levels revealed the full extent of the per-employee benefit. This pattern held across

four of the five years analyzed, though differences narrowed in later years.

In practical terms, veterinary teams in Fear Free Certified Veterinary Practices experience fewer needle stick injuries. This can translate to reduced medical follow-up, lower prophylaxis costs, decreased risk of exposure, and greater peace of mind during daily procedures.



Results and Key Findings

Musculoskeletal Injuries (Back and Lifting/Carrying)

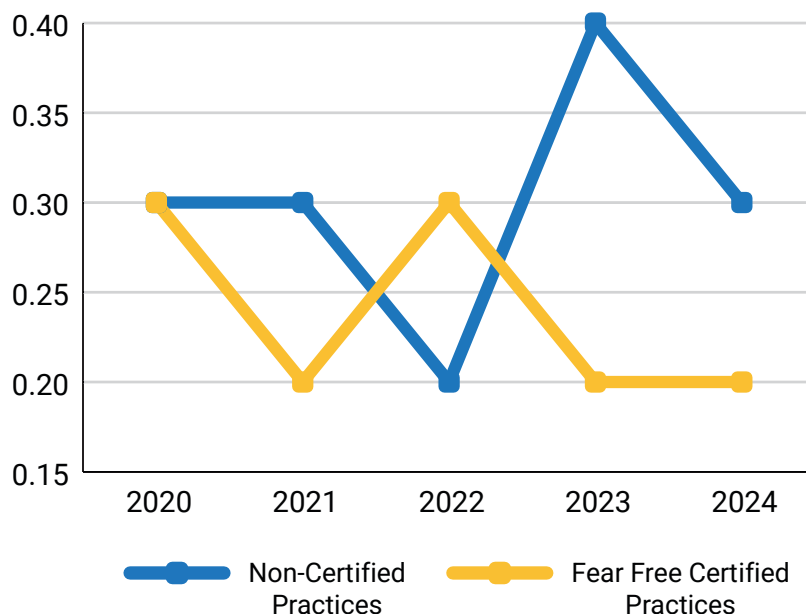
Veterinary work is physically demanding, with back injuries common from lifting or restraining heavy or resistant patients, and slips, trips, or falls often occurring in fast-paced, wet environments, leading to painful strains, sprains, chronic pain, and time away from work.

CST combined these into a single musculoskeletal injury metric, normalized per 10 employees per year for fair comparisons across clinic sizes. Data showed consistently lower rates in Fear Free Certified Veterinary Practices over the five-year period.

**Fear Free Certified
Veterinary
Practices Had a
4%
Lower Rate**

Musculoskeletal Injury Rates in Fear Free Certified vs. Non-Certified Veterinary Practices (2020–2024)

per 10 employees per year



Musculoskeletal Injury Rates

Year	Fear Free Certified Practice	Non-Certified Practices	Reduction in Fear Free Practices
Injuries Per 10 employees per year			
2020	0.3	0.3	3%
2021	0.2	0.3	31%
2022	0.3	0.2	--
2023	0.2	0.4	53%
2024	0.2	0.3	44%
5 Yr Avg	0.17	0.18	4%

Fear Free Certified Veterinary Practices had 0.17 musculoskeletal injuries per 10 employees per year, compared to 0.18 in non-certified practices, a 4% lower rate. When examining raw incident counts without size adjustment, *Fear Free Certified Veterinary Practices already showed slightly fewer injuries overall*. Normalizing for staffing levels revealed the full extent of the per-employee benefit.

In practical terms, veterinary teams in Fear Free Certified Veterinary Practices may experience fewer musculoskeletal injuries. Even modest reductions can mean less pain and downtime for staff, along with a safer, more supportive working environment.



Five-Year Summary

Injury Rates Per Employee (2020–2024)

Over the five-year study period, Fear Free Certified Veterinary Practices showed lower injury rates than non-certified practices across every category measured: animal-related injuries, needle stick and sharps injuries, and musculoskeletal injuries. This pattern was consistent in every year from 2020 through 2024.

The largest advantage was in animal-related injuries (24% fewer bites and scratches per employee), the most frequent and highest-cost category in veterinary practice. Needle stick and musculoskeletal rates were also lower. Taken together, these reductions point to a workplace where the full range of daily hazards is meaningfully reduced, not a single-category effect, but a pattern consistent enough across categories and years to suggest it's the handling protocols and team training driving the difference.

**Lower Rates In
Every Injury
Category,
Every Year**

Five-Year Summary: Injury Rates Per Employee (2020–2024)

Injury Category	Fear Free Certified	Non-Certified	Reduction
Injuries Per 10 employees per year			
Animal Bites & Scratches	1.2	1.6	24% Lower
Needle Sticks & Sharps	0.26	0.29	12% Lower
Musculoskeletal	0.17	0.18	4% Lower
Total Combined Incidents	1.8	2.3	22% Lower

Rates calculated by pooling total reported injuries across all participating clinics and dividing by total employees, then averaged across 2020-2024. Analyses are observational and based on self-reported data. Results represent associations, not causal relationships.

Discussion

Interpretation of Key Findings

Across all major injury categories, Fear Free Certified Veterinary Practices (FFCVPs) showed *substantially lower employee injury rates* than non-Fear Free practices, with reductions ranging from 24% (bites/scratches) to 12% (needle sticks/sharps) and 4% for musculoskeletal injuries.

The most *striking differences* appeared in risks directly tied to patient handling: animal-related trauma, physical strains, and procedural accidents. While this retrospective analysis cannot prove causation, the *consistency and magnitude* of these findings over five years *strongly suggest* that Fear Free protocols contribute to safer workplaces for veterinary teams.

Mechanisms That May Explain Reduced Injury Rates

Fear Free Certified Veterinary Practice standards incorporate several elements known to reduce occupational risks in veterinary settings:

- *Gentle, fear-reducing handling and cooperative care* minimize fear-based reactions, leading to *fewer bites and scratches* from patients.
- *Reduced need for forceful restraint* decreases physical strain, lowering *back injuries* and musculoskeletal trauma during lifting or containment.
- *Emphasis on preparation, communication, and environmental modifications* creates calmer procedures, reducing sudden movements that cause *needle sticks* and sharps injuries.

These findings align with and extend the conclusions of Everett et al. (2025), whose peer-reviewed analysis found that practice-wide stress-reducing certification significantly lowers patient-inflicted injuries to veterinary staff, consistent with the patterns observed across all five years of this dataset, and across every injury category measured.⁶

Implications for Veterinary Practice

The observed reductions in animal-related injuries, musculoskeletal strains, and needle sticks carry important *operational and financial benefits* for practices. Fewer injuries mean *less lost productivity, reduced workers' compensation costs*, lower temporary staffing needs, and decreased emotional toll on teams.

These improvements can support *better staff retention, stronger morale*, and a *safer overall culture*. Adopting Fear Free methodologies may be a valuable component of a comprehensive occupational health strategy, particularly for practices aiming to lower turnover, cut expenses, or meet OSHA and insurance safety expectations.

Discussion

OSHA Framing

Notably, many of the injury types examined in this analysis, including sharps injuries, musculoskeletal strain, and slips, trips, and falls, are directly addressed through OSHA-required or OSHA-expected training, reinforcing the practical and regulatory relevance of proactive safety preparedness. Animal bite prevention, while not explicitly required under current OSHA standards, represents an additional voluntary risk-reduction opportunity, one where the data suggests Fear Free methodologies may provide a meaningful advantage.

Practices that leverage Certified Safety Training for their foundational compliance needs are positioned to more effectively layer these additional safety protocols. By doing so, organizations benefit from a dual-pronged approach:

- **Regulatory Assurance:** Maintaining strict adherence to OSHA standards through expert-led compliance partnerships.
- **Injury Reduction:** Minimizing patient-related risks through a combination of mandated safety training and refined handling techniques. Ultimately, synthesizing standardized OSHA compliance and advanced handling methodologies creates a more robust safety culture than either approach could provide in isolation.

Economic Implications and Cost of Care Pressures

The financial stakes are significant. According to AVMA PLIT data, veterinary practices file approximately 3,200 workers' compensation claims annually, at an average cost of \$2,700 per claim, totaling \$8.8 million industry-wide among reporting practices alone.¹ Animal-related injuries account for roughly 70% of those claims, making bite and scratch prevention the single highest-leverage opportunity for cost reduction. For a practice with 10 employees, even a modest reduction in annual claims can meaningfully lower premium costs, reduce lost productivity, and decrease the administrative burden of claim management.

As the veterinary industry faces *rising operational costs* and growing scrutiny over pricing, reducing preventable injuries offers a powerful way to enhance *financial stability*. Practices with fewer injuries typically experience *lower workers' compensation claims*, reduced staffing disruptions, and more predictable labor expenses—benefits that are especially valuable when balancing profitability with affordable care for pet owners.

Practices that maintain *stable teams* and provide *low-stress patient experiences* may also enjoy *stronger client loyalty and higher perceived value*, supporting sustainable revenue without steep fee increases. In this environment, Fear Free methodologies can contribute to *safer care* and a *more resilient business model*.



Conclusion

This comparative review found that Fear Free Certified Veterinary Practices reported *consistently lower workplace injury rates* over five years, with *reductions up to 24%* in key categories tied to patient handling: animal-related trauma, musculoskeletal strains, and procedural accidents.

While not proving causation, the *consistency and magnitude* of these findings strongly suggest that Fear Free-aligned handling, communication, and environmental strategies contribute to *safer working conditions* for veterinary teams.

The implications extend beyond safety. In an industry facing *rising costs*, staffing challenges, and pricing pressures, fewer preventable injuries

can *enhance financial stability*, reduce administrative burdens, and support *team continuity*, ultimately strengthening client trust and practice sustainability.

Integrating patient-centered, low-stress approaches may benefit not only animal wellbeing, but also staff health and clinic resilience. Further research could clarify these relationships, yet the patterns here highlight Fear Free methodologies and the CST Safety Score as a *valuable elements* in broader workforce safety strategies. Practices seeking to enhance staff safety and operational resilience are encouraged to explore Fear Free certification and the CST Safety Score to assess their impact on team safety and operations.



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