

## Reducing the Stress of Veterinary Visits for Cats

### Why is my cat so stressed when I take her to the veterinary clinic?

Cats are very attached to their home territory, and most of our pet cats live a very sheltered life with a very predictable routine that does not involve travelling away from home. For most cats, a visit to the veterinarian is an overwhelming experience. The cat is taken out of its familiar home environment, usually roughly pushed into a carrier, put into a noisy car, driven to the veterinary clinic, taken into the reception area where there are intense smells from many other pets and people. They are then taken into an examination room where an unfamiliar person examines them and administers various treatments. Any one of these things can be stressful, and when they are all combined together, it's no wonder that your cat is frightened or stressed.



### My veterinarian says I should put my cat in a carrier for travel. Why?

Veterinarians recommend the use of a carrier for travel because it is the safest and most secure way to transport animals. Once you arrive at your veterinarian's office, your cat who is in a secure carrier will be safe from being bothered by other curious pets and will feel less vulnerable. A cat that is being held in your arms and becomes frightened may respond by leaping out of your arms, potentially injuring you in the process, and putting your cat at risk for injury or escape.

### What is the best type of carrier?

Individual cats may have specific preferences for a carrier, but some options are better than others. Although cardboard cat carriers (available from pet stores and animal shelters) are inexpensive and disposable, they should only be used as a temporary form of transport because a determined cat can break out of them in no time. Durable options for transporting your cat range from soft-sided carriers, to wire crates, to hard plastic carriers with wire doors. Whatever the type of permanent carrier you choose, it should be easy to clean and you should be able to get your cat in and out of it without a struggle. Purchase a carrier that fits your cat's size. If you have several cats, provide each one of them with their own carrier.

The ideal carrier is strong, lightweight, and waterproof, with a large opening to allow easy access to the cat, and an easy to remove top with 'quick release' fasteners. If you have a carrier with a removable top, your cat may be able to remain nestled in the bottom of the carrier while your veterinarian performs some parts of the routine physical examination. And if your cat needs to stay in the hospital for any reason, the bottom part of the carrier can be put into the hospital cage to provide a familiar and comforting bed.

Whatever you choose for a carrier, you should put a towel or blanket in the bottom, both to provide a comfortable place to sit or lie down, and to soak up any fluids in case she has an accident on the way to the clinic. It may be wise to take along a spare blanket and a plastic bag for any soiled bedding, just in case.

## **My cat struggles when I try to put her into her carrier. Do you have any tips?**

For most cats, the only time they ever see their carrier is when it is brought out immediately before going to the vet. Even if nothing unpleasant happened to the cat during the veterinary visit, that carrier will be associated with the car ride and the unfamiliar sounds and smells of the average veterinary office. It is these stress-inducing associations that cause cats to resist getting into the carrier.

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You can help your cat get over the fear of a carrier by developing positive associations between the carrier and positive experiences. The first thing to do is to avoid storing the carrier in the garage or basement and only bringing it out when a trip to the veterinarian is imminent. Instead, open the door or remove the top and keep the carrier out in an area where your cat likes to sleep or play. This way, the cat can begin to associate it with the familiar sights and scents of home. Set it up as your cat's own private sleeping quarters or private dining room by placing her cat bed or her food and water dishes in the carrier. Or simply use the carrier as the spot where she gets treats.

If your cat already has negative associations with the current carrier that you are using, consider purchasing a new carrier that does not resemble the old one.

Cats use pheromones to mark familiar objects, and spritzing the carrier with 3–4 squirts of Feliway®, a synthetic copy of the cat's facial pheromone, may help create a sense of familiarity or security in the cat's environment. For more information about pheromones, see the handouts “Medications to Reduce the Stress of Veterinary Visits for Cats”, and “Cat Behavior and Training – Crate Training and Travel”.

If you do not have time to develop these positive associations before your next scheduled veterinary visit, make the carrier smell familiar to assure your cat that it is a safe haven. Place a blanket, towel, or even an old item of your clothing into the carrier and spray the carrier and blankets with Feliway® at least half an hour before you are going to use it.

## **My cat doesn't like the car ride. Do you have any suggestions for reducing that stress?**

Safety is the most important consideration when transporting your cat; the carrier needs to be secure (to prevent escape) and it needs to be placed within the vehicle in a position that holds it securely in place should you have to brake suddenly. Never consider travelling with your cat loose in the car.

To reduce the stress of the car ride, spray your car interior with a couple of squirts of Feliway® 30 minutes to 1 hour before you are leaving. Bring a blanket or large towel with you, and once the carrier is secured in the car, cover it with the towel to reduce visual stimulation.

Once you start driving, try to avoid any sudden braking, acceleration, or sharp turns. Tune the radio to a soothing station and make sure the heater or air conditioner does not blow directly into the carrier.

### **What should I do when I arrive at the clinic?**

Ideally, try to schedule your appointment for a quieter time of the day if possible. If your cat is really nervous, you may want to check in with the staff on your arrival to see if you can bring the cat directly into an examination room rather than waiting in the reception area. Some veterinary clinics have a separate room for cats or a separate entrance. When you are moving the carrier from the car to the clinic, try not to tip the carrier or bang it against any doorways on your way in. Once you are in the examination room, ask your veterinarian if you can put the cat's blanket on the examination table. Your veterinarian may suggest taking the lid off the carrier so that your cat does not have to be pulled out of the carrier, or maybe can even stay in it during part of the examination.



### **Can I give my cat a sedative or anti-anxiety medication to decrease stress?**

If your cat's stress or fear is profound, AND she has no health concerns, your veterinarian may recommend giving some sort of prescription medication before the visit. However, most sedatives have side effects, and using them may not be in the best interests of your cat. Please see the handout "Medications to Reduce the Stress of Veterinary Visits for Cats" for more information.

With regard to complementary medicines, the marketplace is full of products that claim to treat anxiety. While natural products are often thought of as benign, this is not always the case, particularly when it comes to treating cats, who have different metabolic processes than we do. Please speak to your veterinarian for more information.

### **Are there any other tips to reduce my cat's stress levels during the veterinary visit?**

Unless otherwise directed by your veterinarian, do not feed your cat for several hours before her appointment to reduce the chance for vomiting or letting the bowels or bladder go during the trip.

If you have a kitten, train her to use a cat carrier as a haven early on (see handout "Cat Behavior and Training – Crate Training and Travel").

Unlike dogs, who often associate car trips with fun destinations such as the park or trail, few cats go in the car for a pleasant adventure. You can teach your cat to relax in the car by taking short trips that have a positive outcome. For example, put your cat in the carrier, give her one of her favorite treats or toys, and take a short drive that ends up back home. During the entire process, speak to her in a calm and reassuring voice.

For some cats, a Thundershirt®, which swaddles the cat much like swaddling an infant, may reduce anxiety.

One of the most effective ways to decrease your cat's anxiety level is to remain calm and relaxed during the visit. Speak to your cat in a calm and soothing voice and reassure her by petting her on her head or stroking her in her favorite spot.

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