Visiting Your Veterinarian

Getting your Cat to the Veterinary Practice

Visits to the veterinarian are an important part of caring for your cat. However, putting your cat in a carrier and traveling with them to and from the veterinary practice can be stressful for you and your cat. Thankfully, there are many ways to make the visit more pleasant for you both.

Keeping our cats healthy is important to us. The earlier sickness is found, the easier it is to treat, so regular checkups will help your cat have a long and healthy life. There is often more than one reason your cat may be stressed by a veterinary visit and these can add up which may increase your cat's fear or anxiety. Avoiding veterinary visits to prevent stress could harm your cat's health. We can reduce stress by preparing for the visit which includes choosing the right cat carrier, understanding how to travel with your cat, and learning tips for when your cat gets back home.

PREPARING FOR A VETERINARY VISIT

It helps to get your cat used to their carrier, travel, and the veterinary practice to make the visit a better experience. It is easiest if visits start when your cat is a kitten, but all cats can still learn to be content traveling in their carrier.

Positive Carrier Experiences

Helping your cat feel that the carrier is a safe and happy place will help them to feel safe with travel and visits to their veterinary practice.

- Add a favorite, soft blanket or bed into the carrier for your cat to curl up on.
- Put a towel or blanket from home over the carrier to help your cat feel safe and be able to hide.
- Products that contain calming cat pheromones can be sprayed on the blankets 15 minutes - 4 hours before travel. Make sure your cat is not nearby when spraying the blanket.

RETURNING HOME

When you arrive home after a trip to the veterinary practice, your cat may smell different to your other cats. This is more likely after a longer stay at the hospital or if your cat had an operation. They may also look different with bandages, clipped hair, or e-collars. Your other cats may become upset because of the new smells on your cat, and they might hiss or fight with your cat returning from the veterinarian. They may also avoid each other. It is always best to separate your returning cat with a specific slow reintroduction:

- Keep your cat in the carrier with the door closed to monitor the response from other cats in your home.
- If there is hissing, keep the returning cat in a separate room with all they need to be comfortable (food, water, litter box, and comfy bed), especially if your cat had an operation and could be still feeling the anesthetic medication.
- The returning cat will begin to smell familiar again through grooming and contact with the home environment. Swap bedding that has each cat's scent on it to help to re-establish your cat's normal smells.
- After a few hours, or possibly longer following an operation, and based on your veterinarian's advice, slowly allow contact with the other cats.
- Watch what your cats do when they see each other. If they seem angry or run away from each other they may need more time separated before trying again.
- Using special feline pheromone plug-ins and sprays where your cats spend most of their time can help.

We all want our cats to be healthy and happy, and efforts to make trips to the veterinary practice easier will benefit both you and your cat.

For more information on getting your cat to the veterinarian, visit catfriendly.com/cat-to-vet.

Always choose an American Association of Feline Practitioners (AAFP) designated Cat Friendly Practice®, Cat Friendly Veterinarian, or Veterinary Professional, for your cat's care, if possible. For more information about these Programs and how they will help your cat, visit catfriendly.com/CFP.

You are an important member of your cat's healthcare team. You are instrumental in helping your cat have more relaxed veterinary visits and improved healthcare.

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- Ask your veterinarian if you can offer a small and tasty food treat in the carrier. You can also add some favorite toys.
- When carrying your cat in the carrier, do not hold it by the handle alone, but instead hold the carrier underneath to reduce movement and keep it level.

Choosing the Right Cat Carrier

It is important to choose a carrier that is safe to reduce the stress of traveling and the veterinary visit and to prevent your cat from getting loose. A hard plastic carrier is the safest and easiest to clean compared with other carrier types. Choose one with a top that comes off to help your cat's veterinarian care for your cat more easily. When the top is removed by the veterinarian, your cat can remain in the bottom of the carrier to feel safer during the checkup.

If soft carriers are used, they should have a large opening option at the top, and have one or preferably two door openings on either end. Soft carriers should not have a door opening that can collapse when the door is open. 'Backpack' style carriers do not have enough space for the cat to move around comfortably and can be unstable making the cat feel unsafe. A harness or collar with a leash is not a safe way to travel with your cat. If you are bringing more than one cat, each cat should have their own carrier. Even cats that get along should travel in separate carriers because the stress of travel may make them act differently towards each other.

Getting your Cat into the Cat Carrier

It is common to store carriers away in a garage, basement, or closet until needed. It is much better to keep the carrier in the place in your home where your cat likes to spend time. Add a favorite blanket or bed with familiar smells, and put treats in the carrier, making it a happy and safe space. The carrier is then easily available for veterinary visits and also emergencies.

Ideally, your cat will enter the carrier of their own choice. A treat or a toy may help, or you may even train your cat to enter the carrier. If your cat needs to be put into the carrier, this should always be done gently and calmly.

Cats are as clever as dogs and can learn tricks and commands. They can be trained to go into their carrier if they feel it is a safe place. Training can take time and patience, but it is worth it to help your cat get to the veterinary practice with less stress and more ease and comfort. As you and your cat work through the steps for carrier training, always allow time for your cat to get comfortable with each step before moving on. Videos can be found at catfriendly.com/carrier-training.

Carrier Training in Six Simple Steps

Spend enough time on each step so your cat gets used to it before moving on to the next step.

1. Encourage your cat to lay/sleep on a security blanket
2. Put the security blanket in the bottom of the cat carrier
3. Add the top to the carrier and encourage your cat to stay calm
4. Encourage your cat to remain in the carrier with the door closed
5. Increase the amount of time spent in the closed carrier
6. Pick up the cat carrier from the bottom (never just holding the handle) and get your cat to feel comfortable in the carrier

Sometimes Medicine Can be Helpful

For some cats, traveling to the veterinary practice is still stressful even when you have worked to create a better experience. This might be due to trips that did not go well in the past, or early life experiences even before you adopted your cat. When this happens, it can be helpful to give your cat some medicine from your veterinarian before traveling. Gabapentin is most commonly used for this purpose and has been shown to help reduce a cat's stress, helping them to feel calm during travel and while at the veterinary practice. If your cat is still stressed and scared even with medicine, talk to your veterinarian.

Just like us, cats can have travel sickness. They may vomit or drool during travel. If you think your cat feels sick during travel, ask your veterinarian for medicine to treat nausea.

TRAVELING WITH YOUR CAT TO THE VETERINARY PRACTICE

Traveling to the veterinary practice can still be upsetting for your cat. They can be scared by the movement of the car, and the new and strange noises, sights, and smells. Here are some helpful tips in addition to the carrier tips already mentioned:

- Cover the carrier with a blanket or thick towel before moving from your house to the car. This will help to reduce sights and sounds.
- Make sure the carrier is secure in the car. The safest space for the carrier is on the floor between the back and front seats.
- Be sure the car has good ventilation and keep it at a comfortable temperature for your cat. Try to limit loud sounds in the car by turning off the radio or music, and limiting loud voices or use of the car's horn. Playing cat-specific music can help relax your cat.
- Never be tempted to open your cat's carrier, even if they are meowing, as this is not safe for you or your cat. Use a quiet, calm voice to comfort your cat during the trip and plan to try carrier training, or ask your veterinarian about medicine for travel.