

## De-Stressing Feline Vet Visits

By Dr. Carsyn Beach, DVM (Countryside Animal Clinic)

In our office we have a sign that reads “Dogs have masters, cats have staff.” This is especially true when at home, as our cats rule the roost and demand prompt feedings. The feline’s love of the familiar, however, can make her downright difficult when trying to take her to the vet for regular visits or when she’s sick. This fearful response to the unknown makes the experience stressful for both the cat and her “staff.” Below are some tips to make the vet visit easier for everybody. It is critical in all stages to stay calm and be patient. Cats can sense your frustration and anxiety, making them fearful or anxious as well.

Why must your cat go to the vet? Because cats age much more rapidly than humans, a lot can happen in a short period of time. Cats are excellent at hiding signs of illness, but veterinarians are trained in spotting abnormalities that can easily be overlooked so intervention can occur early in the disease process. Overall, this preventive approach has a much better outcome than reactive care, both in outcome for the feline as well as in cost to owners.

### Cats and Carriers

The most effective method at reducing stress is training your cat to be comfortable with a carrier. Start this process weeks before your cat’s scheduled visit, ideally when a kitten as their brain development helps them adapt more quickly to changes. Never use the carrier as a punishment – the goal is for your cat to view the carrier as a safe haven.

Training your cat to be amenable to the carrier will take time. Keep the carrier in a common, social area to encourage your cat to enter the carrier. Start with the top removed and/or the door open to make the carrier more welcoming, include familiar soft bedding and toys, and feed her in the carrier or put her favorite treats or catnip inside for positive reinforcement. If the cat doesn’t walk in there right away, just walk away; if you try to persuade her, she may become suspicious and avoid the carrier. Once she is happy with the carrier, start closing the door, giving a treat, and opening the door. Gradually prolong the period the door is closed, then start leaving the room, and finally take for ‘rides’ around the house. If at any point your cat becomes nervous (crouching, ears back, etc), go back a step and continue treats/toys.



We recommend, as does the American Association of Feline Practitioners, using hard-sided carriers. Soft or floppy carriers often collapse down onto the cat, making them even more stressed and uncomfortable (imagine an elevator collapsing down on you). The best carriers are inexpensive hard-sided carriers that open from the top and front, and can also be taken apart in the middle. Being able to take the carrier apart in the middle allows painful or fearful cats to stay in the bottom half for exams, where they are more comfortable.

### Appointment Day

On appointment day, it is important not to chase your cat around, as this will start the visit off with a stressed feline. If your cat is not yet accustomed to a carrier, put the carrier in a small room with few hiding places, and bring the cat into the room and close the door. If your cat will not walk into the carrier with treat or toy inducement, remove the top and gently cradle your cat and put her in the bottom, then calmly replace the top.

In the car, buckle the carrier in place so it does not slide all over the car. You may also want to cover the carrier to reduce your cat's stress from unfamiliar surroundings. A feline pheromone spray (Feliway®) can reduce stress: apply to her carrier and the car 30 minutes prior to transport to help calm your cat. Some cats can suffer from motion sickness, so it may be helpful to withhold food for several hours prior to the appointment as well.

Bring your cat's favorite treats or toys for rewards or distractions during the visit. Once at the vet clinic, leave your cat in the carrier in the car until an examination room is free to avoid a bustling waiting area. In the exam room, leave your cat in the carrier and speak in a soothing, high-pitched voice to her. Avoid clutching your cat, talking or staring in her face, and invading her personal space, as these actions increase her anxiety. Noises like "shh" often sound like hissing to your cat, and should thus be avoided. Reward positive behavior and ignore negative behavior rather than trying to correct it, as this may provoke her fight-or-flight response.

### **At Home After Visit**

Once you return home, leave the cat in the carrier for a few minutes. If you have other cats, see how they react to your cat's return. Unfamiliar smells on your cat can lead the other cats in the household to suspect a stranger returning. If the cats all appear calm and peaceful, let the returning cat out of the carrier. If there is tension, take the returning cat to a separate room, close the door, and release with her own food bowl, water bowl, and litterbox for 24 hours while she regains the familiar smells of home.

For more information on reducing stressful cat visits, see the following websites:

- American Association of Feline Practitioners (<http://www.catvets.com/>)
- Countryside Animal Clinic Resources page (<http://countrysideanimalclinic.vet/resources/>)
- Carrier Training Video (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=egwBo0o2FN8>)