

Getting Your Cat to the Veterinarian- Practical Tips from the AAFP and ISFM

Providing good health care, especially preventive health care, can allow your cats to have longer, more comfortable lives. However, this cannot happen unless they see the veterinarian for needed care. Many cats dislike going to the veterinarian, and that starts with the difficulty of getting the cat into the carrier. If we can make this step easier, the entire veterinary visit is usually less stressful.



Understanding your Cat's Behavior

- Cats are most comfortable with the familiar and need time to adjust to the unfamiliar. The visit to the veterinarian is often difficult because the carrier, car, and the veterinary hospital are usually unfamiliar. Respect your cat's need for time to become familiar with new situations, people, and places.
- Stay calm. Cats can sense our anxiety or frustrations, which may cause them to become fearful or anxious.
- Cats do not learn from punishment or force. Give rewards to encourage positive behavior. For example, if your cat is sitting calmly in or near a carrier, give a treat. Likewise, rewards can be given to help your cat become familiar with the type of handling that may be encountered at the veterinarian (e.g. handling paws, ears, and mouth). A treat is what is highly desirable to your cat, which may be in the form of food, play, or affection. Be persistent and reward every time.



Helping Your Cat Become Comfortable with the Carrier

The goal is for your cat to learn to associate the carrier with positive experiences and routinely enter voluntarily.

- Make the carrier a familiar place at home by leaving it in a room where your cat spends a lot of time.
- Place familiar soft bedding inside the carrier. Bedding or clothing with your scent can make them feel more secure.
- Place treats, catnip, or toys inside the carrier to encourage the cat to enter at home. Often, you will first see that treats are removed from the carrier during the night.
- It may take days or weeks before your cat starts to trust the carrier. Remain calm, patient and reward desired behaviors.
- If you still have trouble, you may need to assess the carrier itself.

Getting an Unwilling Cat into the Carrier

If your cat needs to go to the veterinarian right away and is not yet accustomed to the carrier, the following may help:

- Start by putting the carrier in a small room with few hiding places. Bring the cat into the room and close the door. Move slowly and calmly. Do not chase the cat to get it into the carrier. Encourage the cat with treats or toys to walk into the carrier.

- If your cat will not walk into the carrier, and your carrier has an opening on the top, gently cradle your cat and lower it into the carrier. Another option is to remove the top half of your carrier while getting the cat to go into the bottom half, and then calmly replace the top as pictured above.
- Use familiar bedding inside the carrier. Consider use of synthetic feline facial pheromone (Feliway®) analog spray in the carrier at least 30 minutes prior to transport to help calm the cat.

Coming Home – Keeping the Peace in a Multi-cat Household

Cats are very sensitive to smells, and unfamiliar smells can result in one cat no longer recognizing another. Aggressive behavior can occur when one cat senses another as a stranger. These suggestions can help avoid problems between cats following a veterinary visit:

- Leave the returning cat in the carrier for a few minutes to see how all your cats react.
- If all cats appear calm and peaceful, let the returning cat out of the carrier.
- If you sense tension between the cats, or if previous homecomings have resulted in conflict, keep the cat in the carrier and take it to a separate room to avoid potential injury from an upset cat. Provide food, water, and litter box for a minimum of 24 hours while it regains the more familiar smell of home.
- If there is still stress after this time, contact your veterinarian for more advice on slower introduction or medication to help the process.
- A synthetic feline pheromone (Feliway®) can help provide the sense of familiarity.
- For future visits:
 - Use familiar bedding or clothing with your scent, as it retains the smell of home and helps with reintroduction.
 - Use a synthetic feline pheromone (Feliway®).
 - Bring both cats to the veterinary practice together. This can prevent future conflict as both cats will carry the scent of the clinic.

Source: American Association of Feline Practitioners (AAFP), International Society of Feline Medicine (ISFM). Your Cat's Environmental Needs. <https://catvets.com/public/PDFs/ClientBrochures/Cat-to-VetHandout.pdf>