

Creating Cat-Friendly Veterinary Experiences

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Initiatives have been developed to help clinics increase veterinary visits for cats and improve the level of health care that cats receive. For Canada, these two options are available:

- Feline Veterinary Medicine Association (formerly American Association of Feline Practitioners). Practices can earn a “Cat Friendly Practice” designation. Approved practices receive marketing materials and are listed in an online database. Certificate programs are also available for veterinary team members.
- Fear Free Pets provides courses to help veterinary team members learn how to prevent and alleviate fear, anxiety, and stress during veterinary visits.

Why do we need cat-friendly practices?

Statistics about feline veterinary care have been published in the United States and Canada showing that cats visit the veterinarian less often than dogs for various reasons:

- Difficulty getting the cat to the veterinary clinic
- A low level of owner awareness of cats’ basic medical needs
- Difficulty recognizing subtle signs of illness
- The perception that cats can take care of themselves
- The belief that indoor cats are protected from most illnesses
- The low perceived value of cats, since most cats are acquired for free
- Owner discomfort and stress associated with experiences at the veterinary clinic

Understanding the physiological and behavioural responses to stress experienced by cats:

- Cats are bonded to their home environment and seldom leave it by choice. Being forced into a strange environment makes a cat uncertain about its safety and causes anxiety and distress.
- Cats prefer to avoid danger and confrontation by running away or hiding, strategies that are not easy to employ during veterinary visits.
- Young kittens rarely experience anxiety at veterinary visits, but it may become apparent as the cat matures.

Getting to the hospital

- Each cat should travel to the veterinary clinic in its own carrier; it is unsafe to allow a cat to move freely inside an automobile. Placing more than one cat in a carrier is unwise as redirected aggression can occur in fearful situations.
- Solid sturdy carriers that open at the front and top or with easily removable tops are preferred.
- The carrier should provide the cat with an enclosed, safe feeling; coated wire carriers or cage-type carriers should be covered to provide privacy.
- Feline facial pheromone can be sprayed on a towel and placed in the carrier 15-30 min before the cat is put inside.
- Travel should be on an empty stomach to prevent motion sickness and make the cat more interested in treats while at the clinic.
 - Motion sickness: maropitant (Cerenia) 1 mg/kg, PO)
 - Anti-anxiety medications: gabapentin (50-100 mg/cat, PO, 2-4 hours before travel) or trazodone (50 mg/cat, PO, 1-2 hours before travel).

- Other tips can help desensitize cats to carriers:
 - Leaving the carrier out in the home so that it is familiar
 - Feeding the cat in or near the carrier
 - Placing catnip or toys in the carrier
 - Training the cat to enter the carrier on command for a reward
 - Acclimating the cat to the car and carrier with occasional short trips that are not to the veterinary clinic

Arrival at the clinic

- There should be visible signs that the veterinary team care about cats: posters, photos of team members' and clients' cats, cat products, and cat-specific information.
- Veterinary staff interacting with cats and owners should be knowledgeable about general cat care, behavior, handling, medical and surgical needs, and cat breeds.
- A separate waiting area or even separate appointment times for cats are appreciated by most cat owners. Cat-friendly waiting areas should be quiet with softer lighting when possible. Tables or shelves should be provided so that carriers can be placed off the floor.
- The owner and cat can be placed in an examination room (quieter place) as soon as possible.
- Minimizing waiting times helps reduce stress for both cat and owner.

Examination room

- Allow the cat to adjust and venture out of the carrier on its own if possible.
- Cats are sensitive to sights, sounds (e.g., voices, equipment, doorbells), smells (e.g., perfumes, disinfectants, alcohol), and touch. Attention should be paid to these details to reduce anxiety.
- Many cats are more comfortable remaining in the carrier (with the top removed), or being examined on a lap, on the floor, on a shelf, or even on the scale after being weighed. When possible, allow the cat to remain on the towel or bedding that came with the carrier.
- Exam table surfaces should be made of non-slip materials or covered with a non-slip mat.
- A feline facial pheromone plug-in diffuser(e.g., Feliway) should be placed in waiting areas, examination rooms, and in areas of the clinic where cats will be housed.

Respectful handling

- Most of the undesirable behaviours exhibited by cats in veterinary clinics are induced by fear.
- Physical confrontation is the last resort for most cats; their efforts are first focused on avoidance and escape.
- The more control the cat has during the visit, the less forceful and aggressive the handling, and the more patient the approach, the better the outcome.
- Many anxious cats can successfully be examined with the use of a towel to cover the head as reducing sight of unfamiliar people and places can reduce fear.
- Cats should be approached calmly and talked to quietly.
- Minimal restraint is the best approach for cat handling; make use of techniques such as allowing the cat to stay in the bottom half of the carrier.
- Always start with the least invasive procedures and progress to those more likely to be stressful later in the appointment.

Hospitalization

- Caging should be in a ward separate from dogs.
- Cages should be placed so that cats cannot see one another.
- Cage materials should decrease sounds and maintain heat, features that are not consistent with metal cages.

- Ideally, vertical space and hiding places should be provided with a shelf, as well as placement of a box or even the cat's own carrier in the cage.
- The cage should have enough room to place the food and water as far as possible from the litter box.
- Feline facial pheromone can be sprayed on towels or bedding 15-30 minutes before use.

Resources

American Association of Feline Practitioners (AAFP) and International Society of Feline Medicine (ISFM) guidelines (<https://catvets.com/guidelines/practice-guidelines>):

- 2022 AAFP/ISFM Cat Friendly Veterinary Interaction Guidelines: Approach and Handling Techniques
- 2022 ISFM/AAFP Cat Friendly Veterinary Environment Guidelines
- 2012 AAFP Feline-Friendly Nursing Care

Feline VMA Cat Friendly Practice program: <https://catvets.com/cfp/veterinary-professionals>

Fear Free Pets: <https://fearfreepets.com/>