

5 Tips to De-stressing Your Cat's Vet Visit

"Chloe, why do you always hide under the part of the bed I can't reach? I'll have to use the broom to get you out and into that damn carrier. We have to be at the veterinarian's office in 20 minutes!"

You're not alone if you can identify with the above scenario. Getting your cat to the veterinarian every year (better yet, every six months) is important, even if your cat seems perfectly fine. But doing so can be a challenge. You might feel like the harder you try to get your cat into the carrier or the car, the more resistant your cat gets and the more frustrated you become. Some cat owners might even be so discouraged that they get to the point of avoiding the veterinary practice altogether, which means their cats don't get the preventive care they need and deserve.

To keep your cat healthy by heading to the veterinarian, you need ways to make the trips less stressful. What can you do? The first step: Think like your cat. Consider what your cat must be feeling after being put into the carrier and then the car. After a stop-and-go trip, your cat arrives at a place where there are lots of strange noises and smells of unfamiliar animals. That's scary stuff for most cats, especially those that aren't used to traveling.

While it's completely normal for cats to translate this fear into biting or scratching, especially when no escape route is available, no one—cats included—wants this kind of behavior to happen. What's more, when a cat's arousal escalates to this level, some people think the cat is mean. In reality, there is no such thing as a mean cat—only one that's scared. So if your cat acts afraid of the carrier, the car, and, hence, the veterinarian, here are some tips to ease that fear—and your frustration.

1. Make the transport carrier your cat's home away from home.

Use your cat's carrier as a comfortable resting, feeding, and play location. To do this, keep the carrier out and accessible at all times, not just when you're getting ready to take your cat somewhere. Line it with a soft blanket, lay favorite toys inside, and drop in treats every now and then. If your cat still doesn't want to get into its carrier, consider getting a different carrier. It's best to use a top-loading carrier with a top portion that's easily removed. This feature lets veterinarians allow cats to stay in the bottom portion of the carrier during most of the visit, which makes cats feel more secure.

2. Train your cat to be a savvy traveler.

Get your cat used to riding in the car, beginning when it's young for best results. Start by getting your cat into its carrier and carrying it around your house. Then graduate to getting your cat into its carrier and taking short drives around the block. Eventually build up to making a fun trip to the veterinarian for a meet-and-greet play session with no exam. After all these outings—even if you don't leave your house—give your cat a fun reward, like a treat. Before heading to a veterinary appointment, give yourself plenty of time to get the cat into the carrier. And if you have time to spare, that's all the better: Letting your cat wait in the carrier before leaving can ease its stress.

3. Let your cat play peek-a-boo.

Create a hiding place for your cat in the carrier by placing a towel or blanket from your home inside. Also, drape a towel or blanket over the outside of part of the carrier. Cats feel more secure when they have a place to hide, and the simple presence of a familiar blanket or towel may comfort your cat during your visit to the veterinary office.

4. Travel on an empty stomach.

Pets often get motion sickness. If you avoid feeding your cat before traveling, you'll decrease the chance that your cat will get carsick. Plus, if your cat is a little bit hungry when it arrives at the veterinary clinic, it might be more willing to partake in the treats the veterinarian has to offer. This could make the visit more pleasant for your cat, for you, and for your veterinarian.

5. Talk to your veterinarian.

Ask your veterinarian how he or she handles fearful cats. Perhaps there's someone at the practice who's particularly tuned in to cats and can work patiently with yours. Keeping the cat in the exam room instead of taking it to the back might prevent further arousal, and many veterinarians and technicians can collect blood and urine samples right in the exam room.

Sometimes veterinarians will recommend giving your cat medications for motion sickness and anxiety before heading to the veterinary office. It's usually best to avoid giving fearful cats sedatives, because they don't calm fear but rather dull a cat's ability to respond. What's more, the sedative can make it difficult for your veterinarian to gain accurate information regarding your cat's health. If your cat is extremely fearful, it may be safest and in your cat's best interest for the veterinarian to administer an anti-anxiety or short-acting anesthetic so the doctor can perform a thorough examination and collect needed samples like urine and blood.

Communicate with your veterinarian to decide together the best way to ease your cat's fears and provide the care it needs. After all, calming scaredy cats is the best way to keep them healthy, which keeps everyone happy.

Canine Calming

Fear and anxiety aren't reserved for cats; dogs also can get nervous about visiting the veterinarian. Here are a few tips to help prepare your pooch for a fun trip to the doctor.

- **Keep the feline tips in mind.** Many of the same strategies that work with cats also help dogs. Specifically, provide your dog with a crate that it can know and love, and practice traveling.
- **Reward with food.** Giving your dog special treats is a great way to condition desirable behaviors. If you want your dog to respond well to new places, start by teaching basic commands and reward your dog with a treat when he obeys them. Graduate to giving the commands as you slowly add in distractions, such as taking your dog to the park to encounter squirrels, other dogs, and kids playing.
- **Tell the doctor.** If your dog is shy or fearful, let the veterinary office know before your visit. You may be able to choose an appointment time when there will be few other dogs and cats in the waiting room, and the staff may be able to provide a more calm place for you to wait before your dog's examination.

