There & Back Again

A guide to getting your cat in the carrier, the car, and other adventures
Dedication

To all the wonderful feline patients we have meet and the people lucky enough to live with them.
Meet the FelineDocs

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Starting the adventure

chapter one
So why not the carrier?

Cats love to hide in bags, boxes, and anything they can get into… so, why not the carrier?

It’s a great question, and it takes understanding of the cat to answer the question – and to change it so that the cat also goes to their carrier.

Cats love places to hide – as soon as a cardboard box or paper bag comes into the house, most cats jump in. They do so because they are curious creatures, and love places to explore – that is, on their own terms. And they also like the security of something around them and a place to rest alone – tall cat beds, cubby holes, etc.

Cats also hide as normal behavior as a way to cope in response to a perceived threat or danger.

What is threatening to a cat?

Anything that isn’t familiar. Allowing them to have the choice to hide at home when someone unfamiliar comes home, and making the carrier a safe haven when they go somewhere unfamiliar, such as the vet hospital, is ideal.

So… why not the carrier?

Imagine for a moment that you are a cat, sleeping in a sunspot, and your favorite person brings out this box that you only go into when you’ve had experiences that have been fearful in the past. You run to hide, and your person acts uncharacteristically, chasing you around the house, then grabs you, and shoves you into this box. You are then carried in the box that jostles back and forth, put in a car, and there is a scary ride to an unfamiliar place where people treat you in ways that are unfamiliar, uncomfortable, and frightening. How would you react to protect yourself?

Instead, bring the carrier out of the basement or garage, and place it in a room where your cat likes to be. Putting it in a sunbeam is an added plus. Place a fleece or other soft bedding or clothing that has the scent from their favorite person into the carrier. Always leave the door open. Every day, toss a favorite treat or kibble into the carrier. Walk away and do not try to encourage your cat to go into the carrier; cats like choice, and will eventually start going in if they don’t feel pushed or forced. Once your cat starts going into the carrier, reward calmly, praising is a soft voice and giving it more treats.

There are several excellent videos to help you make the carrier a positive place. They can be found on the CATalyst Council website

1. First, take a look at the cat’s trip to the veterinary visit for their point of view.
2. Then move on to other videos on how to make it easy to get your cat into the carrier:
   - In this first video, I want to emphasize that I am working here with cats in a shelter that have never been exposed to a carrier.
   - In the following 2 videos, Dr. Jacqui Neilson, veterinary behaviorist, clicker trains her cat, Bug, to get into the carrier.
   - And last, but not least, on YouTube, my 16 year old buddy, Watson, stars at my veterinary hospital, showing how to get into the carrier. He spent the first 9 years of his life fighting the carrier and hating the vet hospital; So it can be done, no matter how much your cat hates the carrier.

If the cat is suspicious, and doesn’t enter the carrier right away, toss in the treats, and walk away! Don’t try to encourage or coax the cat into the carrier – - they will become suspicious, especially if they have
had previous negative experiences with the carrier in the past. Do this every day to start with, and don’t forget to walk away. Cats will soon eat the treats, first it may be when you aren’t watching. And most of them will start to spend time in the carrier.

**Sense of Control:** To protect themselves, cats want to have a sense of control over their environment. Cats are more secure if they have options to hide and the ability to monitor their environment from a higher place.

If instead of putting them on exam tables at the practice, we allow them to choose whether to be on the floor, in the carrier, or in another place, we will be much more successful in our goals for feline healthcare and reduction of feline – and client! – stress.

Fortunately, if the cat has access to the carrier at home, it becomes a safe hiding place for them at the veterinary hospital, and we can do part or all of the examination while the cat remains in the bottom half of the carrier.

Towels are also good to allow cats to “hide” from us (if the cat doesn’t see us, we aren’t there!). Hiding is an important protective mechanism for caged cats. Providing a box, a bag, the carrier, a tall cat bed or other “hide-out” will greatly reduce the stress of the caged cat, and gives the cat the choice to stay in hiding or to come out.

**Since cats need to feel a sense of control…**

In addition to quiet places to sleep, cats need safe places to hide. They need to be able to scamper or jump to safety from perceived threats – the bark of a neighbor’s dog, the ring of a doorbell, a frightening crack of thunder. Your cat will especially appreciate easy access to elevated hiding places, such as a cleared spot on a closet shelf or a strategically situated cardboard box. When the threat is gone, your cat will venture out from the hideaway to investigate the commotion – and, if feeling safe, return to batting a toy about or gazing out the window.

The refuge provides your cat a haven from unfamiliar or risky situations. Give your cat plenty of time to adjust to change.

Cats can be trained to use the carrier as a haven. The carrier should be a comfortable, secure place where the cat can rest. Instead of just using it for veterinary visits, which can lead to cats becoming fearful of the carrier, educate clients to leave the carrier out and open at all times. If this is not possible, have clients bring it out regularly for training sessions not associated with veterinary visits, as well as several days before the appointment. Leave a favorite blanket or towel in the carrier, as well as treats and toys. Cats can be trained to go into the carrier to a phrase such as “in”, “travel time”, “treat”, etc. The easiest way is to regularly entice the cat to enter the carrier by throwing in favorite treats, and immediately say the word(s) in a gentle tone, coupled with praise and additional treats.

If the cat still won’t go into the carrier, recommend that they wipe down the cat with a towel and then use the towel to wipe the carrier. The towel is best left within the carrier. The cat will be more attracted to the carrier because it already has his or her scent. The carrier may also be sprayed with Feliway 5-10 minutes before using the carrier. There are data supporting use of lavender or camomille to induce changes in activity associated with a more relaxed state in dogs. This still needs to be investigated in cats.

Carriers that provide the option of loading from the top as well as loading from the front make it easier to get the cat into and out of the carrier in a non-stressful manner. The ideal carrier also allows the top and bottom to be taken apart. The screws or clips can be removed or opened, and top half of the carrier can be removed so that a more timid cat can be remain in the carrier bottom during the veterinary examination.

**Understanding the cat**

Cats have retained many behaviors of their wild ancestors. They are excellent hunters, with a strong ability to sense and avoid danger. In order to protect themselves, cats don’t display pain and illness as dogs and humans do.

Cats don’t like change – unless it is something they choose to do. Trips to the veterinary hospital, the hospital environment, and handling by unfamiliar people are huge changes for cats.

Cats are social animals, though their social structure is different from humans and dogs. If sufficient food resources, cats choose to live in social or colonies. Females live together cooperatively, nursing and
raising the young, cats choose affiliates with whom they are social. The cat’s perceives its world through its senses, most of which are highly sensitive compared with ours. Cats also communicate with their senses, providing scent marking, visual and auditory cues. The primary goal of cat communication is to prevent altercations; cats fight only as a last resort, when other communications have failed.

Sarah Heath: One of the important feline coping strategies in terms of social stress is to hide and in many modern multi-cat households this is often not possible due to the human preference for floor to ceiling furniture and open plan rooms! Lack of access to retreats can result in cats feeling exposed and vulnerable and when coupled with insufficient supply of other vital resources, such as food and water, the result can be chronic stress which leads to self-directed behaviours such as over-grooming.

Let’s now develop a plan for one of the more challenging situations that you as cat owners have – getting your cat to the veterinary hospital. We know that veterinary care is tremendously important for your cat, but how do we make the visits more familiar and allow the cat to have control? It’s actually not that hard if we remember to follow the Happy Cat Rules, and break our plan down into steps to help our cats have what they need to cope. And the underlying concepts can be used with any care at home, and when introducing your cat to new situations or people.

The absolutely most important step is to bring your cat out of the basement, garage, or closet, and move it permanently to a room where your cat likes to be. For example, the cats that “own” my husband and me hang out in the kitchen when we are home, and their carriers are in the kitchen. Place a fleece jacket – or other soft piece of clothing that has your scent on it, or a blanket or soft cat bed that your cat loves to sleep on, into the carrier. This provides a comfortable place for your cat to rest, and a safe haven – cats feel more secure if they have a hiding place in unfamiliar situations.

It may take awhile for your cat to get used to the carrier because of previous negative experiences associated with it. Remain calm, and toss some favorite treats – either dry kibble or food treats that your cat likes, or catnip – into the carrier every day. If you need to use treats, use the most favorite ones, and only for the carrier experience, at least until your cat comfortably rests or sleeps in the carrier on its own.

If your cat is afraid of the carrier because of previous negative experiences, start by tossing the favored treats in front of the carrier. Then walk away. Let the cat choose to go into the carrier itself. He or she may start at night, when they know that you cannot close them into the carrier – that is a success! It may take 2 weeks, but if done calmly on your part, it can lead to a calmer and more content kitty in our busy households, and less stressful travel and veterinary visits for your cat – and you!

Once your cat is routinely going into the carrier, calmly close the door and move a treat. After several days of this, close the door and move the carrier to another room. Reward. Eventually, get your cat comfortable with car rides, and “friendly” visits to the vet, where your cat can get treats and go home. It’s best to call before you come to schedule a time when it isn’t too busy so that it will be easier on your cat.

Bring favorite treats and toys whenever you bring your cat to the veterinary hospital. Again this helps with familiarity. Also it allows you to calmly distract your cat from other things happening at the vet. Make sure to separate your cat from unfamiliar cats while at the clinic. Although cats are social animals, with some more outgoing than others (like people!), even the most curious and outgoing cat is likely to be frightened by others in an unfamiliar environment such as the veterinary hospital, where there are unfamiliar smells, sounds, and sights of unknown cats and people.

Try to remain calm yourself to help keep your cat calm. Cats are intuitive, and they pick up on our fear and anxiety. Also, watch your cat’s body language for signs of fear – ears back, even if slightly; pupils dilated; body tense, fur standing up, or crouching position – and calmly cover the carrier to allow your cat a comfortable and familiar hiding place.

If your cat is still anxious during car rides or veterinary visits, talk to your veterinarian about Feli-way, a synthetic feline cheek pheromone, which helps calm most cats and makes the environment more familiar. There are also anti-anxiety medications that can be prescribed, or anti-nausea for the car sick kitty.
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Your cat does not have to dread the veterinarian

As a cat, I totally sympathize with your cat; going to the vet can be stressful. In fact, disrupting my schedule for any reason is an offense to which I do not take kindly. But I have come to understand that semi-annual checkups are necessary to ensure I remain the lean, healthy, Adonis-like creature that I am. I am sharing the following tips to help your cat come to the same understanding:

1. I’ve said it before, but just in case you missed it, I will say it again. Get your cat to like its carrier. It can be done, and your cat will thank you for it because it will give him an additional place to snooze. My carrier is always left out and open with my favorite blanket in it, and I can frequently be found napping inside. Check out this video to learn what else you can do to help your cat get over its fear of the carrier.

2. You might want to consider finding a cat-friendly veterinarian. The American Association of Feline Practitioners has developed a program that certifies veterinary practices as “cat friendly,” and has a list of them on their website. I love my cat-friendly veterinarian! She knows that I want to stay in my carrier if at all possible when she is examining me, and the waiting rooms at her practice are segregated by species so I don’t have to come nose-to-nose with a curious collie while I’m waiting to see her.

3. Make the trip fun. I love hearing how wonderful I am. Even better, I love it when you pet me and reward me for how wonderful I am. Tell me and show me frequently during the trip that I am the most amazing creature in the world for putting on my brave face and allowing my schedule to be disrupted for a trip to the veterinarian. I’m a complete sucker for that.

Your cat is an important member of your family – I know I am — and, as such, needs regular preventive health care, no matter how much he or she may protest. Did you know that dental disease affects 68% of all cats over the age of three? That most cases of diabetes could be prevented if the 53% of cats that are overweight were on the proper food? A simple checkup can help detect and treat preventable diseases and conditions that can cut a life short. Yikes! It hurts to even type that.

Even if you can’t get your cat into the veterinarian during Take Your Cat to the Veterinarian week, you can work on getting your cat used to its carrier and that make that important appointment for a preventive healthcare examination by your veterinarian. Some veterinarians even make house calls! So don’t delay … you work on that appointment and I’ll work on talking my owner into that house call thing. (Hmmm…never leaving bed. Sounds good.)

The CATalyst Council is a national organization which includes a wide variety of animal health and welfare organizations as well as corporate members of the animal health industry that are working together to improve the health and welfare of America’s favorite pet. It was founded in response to troubling statistics released by the American Veterinary Medical Association that indicate an increase in our nation’s pet cat population coupled with a decline in veterinary care for those cats. More information about the CATalyst Council is available at catalystcouncil.org.
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How to get the adventure going
Pleasant pet visit

Fear is the primary cause of misbehavior. Knowing this can help prevent problematic veterinary visits.

Getting your cat into the carrier

1. Keep the carrier out in the home. Put treats inside. Train cats to view the carrier as a safe haven and “home away from home.” A quick response is crucial in case of disaster or emergency.

2. Carriers that have both a top and a front opening are best. Top-loading carriers allow for stress-free placement and removal of the cat. A removable carrier top enables cats to be examined while remaining in the bottom half of the carrier. Do not “dump” a cat out of the carrier.

Adjusting to car rides

1. Always put the cat in a carrier or other safe container.

2. Take the cat for regular car rides, beginning with very short ones, to places other than the veterinary hospital.

3. To prevent car sickness, do not feed before traveling.

4. Reward verbally, with positive attention, and with treats.

Veterinary Visits

1. Bring along the cat’s favorite treats, toys, and blanket.

2. Perform regular home maintenance procedures, including grooming, nail trimming, teeth brushing.

3. “Play vet” procedures that mimic temperature taking, ear cleaning, and pill ing can help cats better adjust to the veterinary hospital and to future home care when necessary.

4. Regular trips to the veterinary hospital for “fun” visits involving no examinations or procedures provide owners and staff with the opportunity to reward the cat with praise and food treats.
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What happens when you get there
How to properly restrain a cat

I was describing “respectful” feline handling to a group of people. The most common question was, “What?! You are not suppose to scruff cats? That’s how their mother’s disciplined them when they were kittens.” Great place to start. Mother cats do carry their kitten by the scruff. They do not discipline them in this manner.

With some cats, this restraining manner can have the opposite desired effect. There are other more respectful methods and scruffing should be a last resort. Having your body weight dangled does not make good common sense.

Most of us do not need to restrain their cats at home. Occasionally it is necessary for medical care or nail trimming. Towels are an excellent method of restraining. When we use this at the clinic we call it a “purrito.”

There were also questions about how to “punish” a cat for “bad” behavior. Cats on a whole respond better to leaning with positive reinforcement. Yelling and punishment teach your cat nothing and may be counter productive.

Most of the “bad” cat behaviors that occur at home are normal for cats. Unfortunately the cat’s human companions are not always appreciative of these behaviors.

One of the most important aspects of working with your cat is for you to go outside your human box and think like a cat. Not easy, but not impossible. You will be amazed at how more enriched your life and relationship with your cat will become.

Resources:

- More information about handling
- More information on positive reinforcement training

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Etiquette on coming home after the vet clinic

How many times have we heard about problems in a multiple cat home after a veterinary visit. We humans are often to blame! When we come home from a hard day of work, we walk in and announce our arrival. Cats do not do this and never appreciate abrupt returns in any form. Not even the matriarch gets to come home loudly.

I have been educated by two girl kitties, that have disliked each other for almost 15 years now, in the same household. When one goes to the vet, her return home will be the worst part of the experience! I was doing things all wrong. I noticed by watching barn cats here in Georgia that when one returns to the group after a kill and a solo meal, they hang on the periphery and almost “sneak” back into the group when the opportunity presents itself. The most amusing part is that they do it several times a day and the colony seems to debate accepting the departed member on every return.

Now, when I take one of my girls home, I do not make my initial entry with the “offender”. I first enter the home and feed and greet the girl that stayed at home. When I used to come in and announce the arrival, the cat coming out of the carrier always bolted out of sight and seemed very embarrassed. I had them breaking a well-established cat code! After a little time has passed (very little, 1 minute or 2), I will covertly exit the home and then re-enter through a different door when possible. I will then “sneak” the cat into the home and make the carrier disappear. When the cat is seen next, it is almost like she
was stuck in the closet for the day. They still do not like each other, but they are instantly back to normal with none of the drama that used to accompany the return.

So now you know! Do not make abrupt entries into the home with your kitties. No one in fur appreciates the move. If you are able to help any visitors to your hospital with this advice, just send thanks to Lilly and Delilah!

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Take me along

I love traveling with my cats, but my Sphynx cat, affectionately referred to as "Naked", gets car sick within minutes of starting a car ride. I thought I'd share what I do to try to keep Velvet from vomiting and almost always defecating during the trip.

1. I try my best to make sure she hasn't eaten for 6-8 hours prior to her being placed in her cat carrier.

2. About 30 minutes before she goes in her carrier I give her ⅛ of a .25mg alprazolam tablet along with ¼ of a tablet of Cerenia. The alprazolam is to keep her calm and the Cerenia is to stop nausea. I always make sure I follow the medication with a little water to help make sure the medication reaches her stomach quickly and doesn't irritate her esophagus as she is swallowing.

If this doesn't work for a cat of yours that gets motion sickness, consider having your veterinarian prescribe acepromazine. It is also given about 30 minutes before traveling and is a great sedative. Your cat's third eyelid will likely show and your cat might look pretty loopy, so don't be surprised when your notice an unfamiliar facial expression on your cat when the medication is in your cat's system.

Another option is to give Dramamine which you can purchase at your local pharmacy. A typical 10 pound cat should get ¼ – ½ of a 50mg tablet. It should also make you cat drowsy. Meclizine (Bonine)
is another over the counter motion sickness medication that is doses at 12.5mg per 10 pound cat. For really severe car sickness you can add in a little Cerenia.

Try these medications when you have an opportunity to take a short car ride so you can test dosing and drug combinations. Your veterinarian is your best source when deciding which drugs to use since he or she will know your cat best.

Whichever drugs you use, make sure you are prepared when traveling with a cat that gets motion sickness. I always keep a harness on my cat when she is in her carrier in case a clean-up is needed. I attach a leash before she is allowed out or her carrier that is always lined with an absorbable puppy pad before my trip commences. I have waterless soap for me and even keep disposable exam gloves in my car. Disposable wipes like Clorox wipes work well to clean the carrier and of course, I keep plastic bags in the car as well for storing soiled puppy pads and used wipes until I find an available trash can.

Yes, it takes preparation and patience if you decide to travel with a cat that gets sick in the car, but it is well worth it when you reach your destination and your trip is made that much more enjoyable by having your cat along!

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Winter is in full swing. It is the time to think about escape. Or for those cat lovers who live in warmer climes, a change of scenery to refresh and reenergize, often beckons. As travel plans are being made, one important question often is: would our feline friend be better with their veterinarian, at home, in a boarding kennel, or traveling with us?

Just as no two cats are alike, no option is the right one for every cat. Some general considerations are: how long will you be gone, how old is your cat, and is yours a single or multiple cat household? Then there are individual traits to consider. How does your cat handle visitors? Is there a secretive or elusive eater in the family? If left at home would anyone be able to monitor this cat’s food intake? How well does your cat travel?

The most common situation is where the cat must stay at home with a cat sitter, in a boarding facility or at a veterinary hospital. For some of our felines, the question is easy. Cats with medical needs, such as diabetes, chronic kidney disease, or frail health, should stay with your veterinarian so they will be monitored by skilled professionals. After a cat has had a day or two to adapt to the environment, boarding time offers a good opportunity to have planned lab tests performed, such as a blood glucose or blood pressure measurement. It is frequently the easiest time to get a urine sample, if your doctor has requested one.
When young cats (under 7-9 mos of age) are home alone, they can get into trouble due to pent up energy with no one home to entertain them. Cords and knickknacks become toys with their attendant problems. These cats are best left in someone else’s care, such as a boarding facility.

For adult healthy cats (9 mos to 15 years), with proper planning, staying at home may be the best solution. There are several strategies for making a cat’s time at home alone successful. Someone should visit your cat at least daily, and preferably twice daily to feed and clean if your trip is more than two or three days. Additional litter boxes should be provided - at least one more than the normal number. Caretakers may not be as fastidious as you are. Their cycle of visits may not match your cat’s litter box usage pattern. An extra litter box, or even two, will decrease the likelihood of accidents occurring. Leave clear feeding instructions describing amounts to be fed with exact measurements, as opposed to rough guidelines (e.g. one half cup not the more inexact handful). Leave unwashed articles of your clothing for the cat to sleep on. Put them in the cat’s usual sleeping places. Being able to smell you will be reassuring to your cat. If you are planning an extended time away, make arrangements for a sitter to spend an hour or so daily in your home to interact with your cat – especially if your cat is a social cat who likes company and play time. A tape recording of your voice played periodically may be comforting if your cat is particularly attached to you, or is shy around strangers. If you are hiring a cat sitter, please check their references and schedule a visit to introduce the sitter to your cat to make sure you approve of the observed interaction. An extra litter box, or even two, will decrease the likelihood of accidents occurring. Leave clear feeding instructions describing amounts to be fed with exact measurements, as opposed to rough guidelines (e.g. one half cup not the more inexact handful). Leave unwashed articles of your clothing for the cat to sleep on. Put them in the cat’s usual sleeping places. Being able to smell you will be reassuring to your cat. If you are planning an extended time away, make arrangements for a sitter to spend an hour or so daily in your home to interact with your cat – especially if your cat is a social cat who likes company and play time. A tape recording of your voice played periodically may be comforting if your cat is particularly attached to you, or is shy around strangers. If you are hiring a cat sitter, please check their references and schedule a visit to introduce the sitter to your cat to make sure you approve of the observed interaction. If these arrangements are difficult or impossible, then your cat would most likely be best served by staying at a boarding facility. Use logic for choosing a boarding facility similar to that which you would have used to choose a cat sitter. Ask your friends or your veterinarian for recommendations. Be sure to visit and observe the facility ahead of time.

Sometimes the best choice is for your cat to travel with you. No matter how you are traveling, make sure your cat has some form of permanent identification to greatly increase the likelihood of you and your cat being reunited if your cat should escape. Microchipping is the ideal method of identification. Speak to your veterinarian about the quick and easy procedure. As was mentioned above, an unwashed article of your clothing placed in the carrier will offer comfort. A towel or blanket sprayed with Feliway, a calming pheromone, placed in the carrier one hour before use with your kitty placed in the carrier 20 minutes before leaving helps to decrease travel anxiety. Minimize motion sickness by not feeding your cat the day of the trip. This will also decrease the probability of your cat urinating or defecating in the carrier while traveling. When you arrive at your destination, take your cat in the carrier into the room you’ll be staying in. Get food, water, and a litter box ready, then let him out. Place the carrier on the floor with the door open. Your carrier can act be a place of security during your visit. Generally speaking it is best to keep your cat in your room for the duration of your stay. While it may seem like a small space, remember it is much larger than a boarding cage and your cat can easily familiarize himself with the new surroundings.

If you are traveling by air, first contact the individual airline to see what it requires to allow your cat to fly. Ideally your cat will fly in the cabin with you. Call the airline early to make the reservation. Most airlines limit the number of pets that can fly in the cabin. Your cat should wear a harness attached to a leash in the carrier. Unless the rule has been changed, cats are required to be out of their carrier during screening and a frightened cat can be difficult to restrain in your arms. Many airlines will require a health certificate within a specific number of days prior to departure. Most airlines require proof of a current rabies vaccination.

If you are traveling by car, your cat should travel in a carrier and be secured in that carrier any time you exit or enter the vehicle. If your trip is more than four hours, stop and offer water periodically and have a disposable litter box available.

There is no exact answer to the question: what is best for your cat when you travel? You know best the physical and emotional requirements of your feline family member. Your veterinarian will be happy to consult with you about any specific questions or concerns you might have. Choose the option that will allow you to enjoy your vacation knowing that you have done your best to make sure your cat is healthy, happy, and safe.
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