

AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF FELINE PRACTITIONERS

# Ten Solutions to Increase Cat Visits



Developed from the  
Bayer Veterinary  
Care Usage Study III:  
Feline Findings



# Ten Solutions to Increase Cat Visits

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## Introduction



A new study conducted by Bayer HealthCare, in collaboration with the American Association of Feline Practitioners (AAFP), reveals significant opportunities for veterinary practice. The Bayer Veterinary Care Usage Study III: Feline Findings conducted in November 2012 is the third in a series of studies sponsored by Bayer HealthCare LLC Animal Health Division.

Though there is a broad decline in veterinary visits, this and earlier studies indicated that cats are especially underserved. Bayer and the AAFP formed a new collaboration to clearly understand the obstacles to feline veterinary care and develop innovative solutions to overcome these barriers.

Based on the research from the Bayer Veterinary Care Usage Study III: Feline Findings, the AAFP has worked to develop **Ten Solutions to Increase Cat Visits**. These solutions provide practical tips for veterinary practices to implement in order to alleviate many of the obstacles to routine feline veterinary care.





# 1

## Make the First Visit Count



***Eighty-three percent of cats are taken to the veterinarian within the first year of ownership, but over half of them do not return.<sup>1</sup>***

This represents an important opportunity for veterinarians to educate clients about the importance of routine preventive healthcare. So how do we get these clients to come back after the first visit? We have to provide education to new clients and those who have not brought their cats to see you in years!

### **Unplanned Acquisition**

In many cases, cats are unplanned acquisitions. More than 50% of clients report that they did not seek ownership – their cats “found them” – and 69% did not pay anything for their cats. Since this procurement of cats is so informal, most cat owners receive little or no initial instruction on proper veterinary care.<sup>1</sup> It is important to educate each new client with information on nutrition, environmental needs, exercise, socialization, social groups in multicat households, parasite control, zoonotic disease prevention, and other lifestyle considerations that will help make the addition of a new cat into the family successful. If the veterinary team does not provide adequate education, both verbally and with take-home information, clients will seek it from other sources. We know that clients are getting a great deal of their information from the Internet and other sources outside of the veterinary industry. We need to provide that information during the first visit and also include it in our online sources like websites, social media pages, blogs, and videos so that clients view the veterinary practice as a trusted source for information.

### **Value of the Visit**

They don't know if you don't tell them. Research has proven that new clients do visit the veterinary practice, however many do not come back because they do not know or understand the need. Only 63% of clients claim that their veterinarians recommended annual examinations.<sup>1</sup> Those who received such recommendations are significantly more likely to have

visited a veterinarian during the past 12 months. This represents a valuable opportunity for veterinarians to establish the importance of annual examinations.

Use conversational language to explain to each client how routine veterinary visits can help the cat both now and in the future. The client

needs to understand the importance of preventive care visits to the cat's healthcare plan. Convey that yearly physical examinations aid in assessing the cat's nutrition, lifestyle, environmental enrichment, and behavior.

Develop an “elevator speech” about the need for routine care and make sure that all team members are on board, then relay it at every preventive or new-client visit. A full 56% of clients say that they would bring their cat to the veterinarian more often if they knew it could prevent problems.<sup>3</sup> Veterinary practices need to explain how routine preventive care visits enable earlier detection of disease or conditions, which can help with treatment or care applications. In many situations, early detection can positively affect the cat's quality of life. Consider relating relatable concepts; for example, one year in a cat's life can equal five years in a human life, and over that time a cat can develop health problems that require attention from a veterinarian. We need to show clients that preventive care is better than reactive care and can increase the quality and quantity of the cat's life.

### **Frequency of Examinations**

The American Association of Feline Practitioners recommends that preventive care examinations for all cats should occur a minimum of once yearly, and more frequently for senior cats and those with chronic conditions.<sup>2</sup> When this document discusses annual visits, note that decisions regarding specific frequency of visits should be based on the individual needs of the cat.

## Make the First Visit Count continued

Clients also report two additional concepts that would increase their satisfaction with their veterinary practices: A comfortable waiting area that is not stressful for the clients or cat, and educational materials that help clients better understand their cats' healthcare needs (Solutions #2 and #9).<sup>1</sup> Both of these items are addressed in the American Association of Feline Practitioners' (AAFP's) Cat Friendly Practice program (Solution #10).

Verbalizing the physical findings as the examination is being done (Solution #5) and implementing feline-friendly handling (Solution #3) are two other ways to convey value.

### Engage and connect with the client during the physical examination.

- Use words like “we” or “us” to emphasize the collaborative nature of their pet’s healthcare.
- Tell the client:
  - “You are an important part of your pet’s healthcare team.”
  - “The information we discuss along with a thorough physical examination will provide us with a plan to help your pet remain healthy.”
  - “Because our pets age more rapidly than we do, preventive care examinations are a crucial part of a healthy lifestyle.”
  - “A thorough physical examination is the most important part of healthcare for your cat.”
  - “An evaluation of the individual lifestyle of your cat will allow us to plan appropriate preventive measures to keep your cat healthy and comfortable for her/his whole life.”
  - “We can often detect conditions that may affect your cat’s health long before they become significant so we can manage or cure them before they become painful or more costly.”
  - “As a member of the family, your cat deserves the best possible care. We can decide together how best to accomplish that by meeting at least annually to talk about your cat and any changes that have taken place in her/his life. With the information you bring and a good physical examination, we can make a plan that meets the needs of your cat and the family.”
  - “You will receive an examination report (card) at the end of the visit to summarize the healthcare plan we have discussed and a reminder about your cat’s next visit.”

age appropriate. Reinforce calm petting and appropriate play, and demonstrate gentle handling techniques. Keep in mind that the extra effort invested now in connecting with younger family members and teaching them about cat

The AAFP’s  
Environmental  
Needs Guidelines  
can be found  
online at  
[www.catvets.com](http://www.catvets.com)



ownership and care could provide future benefit. Currently, young adults index significantly below average for taking their cats to the veterinarian. Cat owners under 25 years of age are the only group for whom Internet searches exceed veterinary consultation for cat health information.<sup>1</sup> Impressing upon your youngest clients the benefits of proper veterinary care could help to change this trend in the future.

Since the research shows that most clients do visit the veterinary practice during the first year of cat ownership, this is when appropriate outreach and education is especially important. Consider creating special Kitten Classes, Kitten Care Packets, or even a series of Kitten Visits for new clients. Breaking up kitten visits into multiple appointments can be beneficial in many ways: you avoid overwhelming the client on the first visit; you give the kitten an opportunity to acclimate to the carrier, your practice, and the car ride; and you have multiple opportunities to showcase the value of your practice by providing professional guidance and assistance at each visit. You can also teach the client about how their kitten will mature and what to observe or do within the next year. Provide a checklist or take-home information and explain that you will discuss it during the next wellness visit. This helps the client become invested as a member of the cat’s healthcare team, provides specific deliverables, and reinforces the message about coming back for routine care.

### Teach Appropriate Cat Care Kitten Care

Cats are influenced greatly by early experience. Exposure during this sensitive period of socialization is critical to molding a cat’s behavior and can dictate what kinds of experiences it will be able to tolerate for the rest of its life. If a kitten is handled in a calm and positive manner by different people, it will tend to be more sociable towards humans than one that was not. This socialization is hardwired during a small, early window during the first three to seven weeks in the kitten’s life, so it is important for the kitten to bond to human scent and handling during that critical time.<sup>4</sup>

Teach clients how to properly and safely handle their kittens. Show them techniques to use at home. Always ask a question during the history data-gathering to determine whether children are present in the household. If there are, consider providing tips to the parent(s) or encouraging inclusion of the children during the visit if it would be



## Teach Appropriate Cat Care continued

One exception can be with cats acquired from shelters, since many are already vaccinated, spayed, or castrated. Consider working with shelters to encourage them to provide their clients with information about visiting the veterinary practice. You can also use social media, your website, or blogs to educate and reach new or potential clients.

## Normal Behavior

Many clients do not understand that cats are genetically programmed to hide signs of illness and injury.<sup>1</sup> This is because cats are unique as the only companion animals that are solitary hunters, as well as being both predators and prey. Teach your clients which behaviors to be aware of and provide appropriate brochures, pictures, or models to reinforce your advice. A visible limp, frequent vomiting, and/or finding a lump are physical signs that prompt clients to contact their veterinarian. Other signs, especially subtle ones like changes in grooming, avoidance, sleeping more, or personality changes, are not as likely to result in a call to your veterinary practice.<sup>1</sup> Explain to clients that your team is always happy to answer questions by phone, text, or email. Put together a list of website links that are good resources for different healthcare questions, including the importance of environmental enrichment. Explaining these recommendations during the first visit will help clients develop routines and behaviors that will

make it easier for them to bring their cats back to your practice. They will develop trust in you as they view your compassion and dedication to the health of their cats.

## Individualized Healthcare Plans

Specific discussion about areas such as nutrition and diet, enrichment, exercise, parasite control, and many other lifestyle considerations should be included during every wellness visit. During a client's first visit to your practice, be sure to explain the importance of discussing the cat's individualized lifestyle and plan for care. Emphasize the need for you and the client to revisit these items every year in an effort to maintain the cat's health, provide preventive care, and ensure a good quality of life.

## Connect with the Client

It is important to develop trusting relationships with clients so they consider you to be the expert for the health and wellness of their cats. By fostering cooperative relationships, you show clients that they play an integral part in their cats' healthcare. Explain that when a client relays information about a cat's unique qualities, such as personality traits, behaviors, feeding patterns, and toileting habits, it can help you during the examination process. Show appreciation to clients who are compassionate caregivers, who display dedication to their cats' health by bringing them in for routine wellness care, and who have chosen to come to your practice.





# 2

## Provide Resources Specific to Cats



A huge part of improving the experience for cats and clients is making the changes necessary to develop a practice culture where every person is constantly focused on enhancing the experience of the feline patient.

### Waiting Room or Reception Area

Your waiting room and reception staff are responsible for creating both first and last impressions for cat and client during a visit to your practice. A well-designed reception experience with cat-friendly staff can set the scene for a low-stress visit for the cat and a positive experience for the client. Clients report the comfort and stress of the waiting room is one area where they are least satisfied with their veterinary practice. A solid 54% indicate that there is room for improvement in the comfort of the waiting area, and 61% report that stress associated with the waiting area can be decreased.<sup>3</sup>

The waiting room should be of sufficient size and have seating to accommodate the normal caseload of your practice. It should be clean and free of excessive noise and odors. The overall aims should be to create:

- A calm and unthreatening environment for the cat to wait in so that it is not frightened by the time it reaches the examination room.
- An atmosphere that reassures your clients that this is a practice staffed by people who care about both them and their cats.

When the cat initially enters your practice it will attempt to assess the safety of this new environment. The waiting room should be designed and used in a way that minimizes the threats cats may feel (i.e., visual, aural, olfactory, etc.). The ideal would be to completely separate dogs and cats visiting the practice, but this is not always possible in all practices.<sup>4</sup>

### Options for Creating a Cat-Friendly Waiting Area or Experience:<sup>4</sup>

- A separate or dedicated cat-only waiting room.
- Physical separation of the waiting room into two different areas for dogs and cats (e.g., benches back-to-back with tall plants in between, so that dogs and cats face opposite walls). Avoid visual contact between dogs and cats, and have barking or noisy dogs wait elsewhere.
- Cats should encounter minimal human and animal traffic while in the waiting area and when going to the examination room. Some clinics create a separate doorway into the consulting room from the cat waiting area so cats can enter the consulting room without having to risk an encounter with a dog.
- Routine cat appointment times could be scheduled separately from dog consulting times. Thus at any one time, the waiting room will only be used by either dogs or cats.
- Whenever possible, take cats directly to an examination room so that they don't need to wait in the reception area. If your practice has a separate entrance, this can be utilized to avoid contact with other pets.
- If your practice cannot implement any of these options, the cat and owner can wait in the car until the examination room is free. Your Client Service Representative should stress that the cat should not be left alone in the car and that the client will receive a call or text when you are ready for them to come into the practice.



**Other Important Considerations for the Feline Waiting Area Include:<sup>4</sup>**

- Have an elevated area near or at the reception desk where clients can place cat carriers (above the head height of most dogs).
- Prevent or reduce any noises from the examination rooms reaching the waiting area.
- Display clear notices asking clients with dogs to keep them away from cat carriers, and reinforce this by asking dog clients to be considerate of cats in the waiting area.
- Try to ensure that clients and cats are not left to wait for excessive periods in the waiting room, but are able to move to the examination room as quickly as possible.
- If a cat is known to be or becomes obviously stressed in the waiting room, put a blanket or towel over over the carrier and bring it to the examination room as soon as possible.
- Direct visual contact with other cats can also be very threatening and stressful. If your waiting area for cats is small, this can force cats to be close to each other at busy times. Measures to help overcome this include:
  - Erecting small partitions between seats to separate cats in the waiting area.
  - Providing clean blankets or towels to cover the carriers, and encouraging owners to bring their own blankets or towels for this purpose.
- Cats feel insecure if they are placed at floor level. Having shelves, perches, or chairs to place cat carriers on is very useful. These should ideally be about 48 inches or more from the ground and have partitions (or use covers) so that cats are not confronted with each other. An alternative is to have a bank of compartments within the waiting area in which carriers can be placed while owners are waiting (or when they are paying).

Your practice will need to work out the measures that are practical and usable for your situation, but the key to creating a truly cat-friendly waiting area is to consider the needs of cats, and then carefully plan the best way to meet these. Clients will recognize your efforts and it will make them more likely to return and more likely to follow your recommendations for care.

In addition to the physical design and use of the waiting area, other measures that will help reassure your clients include:

- Receptionists and technicians who understand cats, can give good basic advice on feline topics (including general care, behavior, worming, flea control, neutering, etc.), and can provide direction to relevant sources of reliable information, including local cat adoption contacts.
- Evidence displayed in the waiting area of membership or participation in professional cat organizations, feline-related qualifications or continuing education that staff members have undertaken, and including information about staff who are the “cat advocates” in the practice.
- Images or displays of cats, photographs of clients’ cats, and details of in-house practices, promotions, lectures, cat educational evenings, etc.
- Cat magazines and relevant cat information for clients to browse through, including information about transporting cats to and from the practice, how to medicate cats, and other useful educational material.<sup>4</sup>

**Hospitalization and Cat-Only Ward**

A dedicated feline-only hospitalization ward really is essential to your having a cat-friendly practice. The difference this makes to stress levels and comfort for hospitalized cats is enormous. However, location, size, and layout are also vital to the success of having a cat-only ward, along with consideration of the cage size and layout. If possible, the ward should be large enough to contain a set of electronic scales suitable for weighing cats to enable daily monitoring of inpatients without having to remove them from the ward.

Having completely separate locations for canine and feline patients is preferable. The cat ward should be physically separated from the dog ward with solid walls, and should allow for complete closure for safety and security. The ward should be calm, quiet, and positioned away from noise (e.g., washing machines, banging equipment, typing on keyboards, other pets, etc.). It should have appropriate lighting, ventilation, and temperature control for the feline patients housed.

If you have a practice where dogs and cats absolutely have to be housed together, using the synthetic Dog Appeasing Pheromone (DAP<sup>®</sup>) may help reduce agitation in hospitalized dogs, and this can have a secondary beneficial effect on cats. If feasible, organize a timetable that allows for different species to be admitted for routine operations and investigations at different times or on different days. If that is not possible, try to implement a visual separation so that cats cannot see dogs or other cats. Large shower curtains or towels can be used, but be dutiful and closely observe cats that need constant monitoring.



## Provide Resources Specific to Cats continued

If there is an aggressive or noisy cat in the practice, try to keep it separated so that the other cats cannot hear it. Similarly, when performing procedures on a cat that is hissing or yowling, prevent other cats from seeing or hearing it as they may become distressed.<sup>4</sup>

### Feline-Only or Feline-Friendly Examination Rooms should:<sup>4</sup>

- Be clean and hygienic, and have adequate light and ventilation.
- Have enough space for the veterinarian, the client(s), the cat(s), and a technician without being cramped.
- Allow complete closure for privacy and for safety (to prevent the cat escaping), preferably with locks on the door to ensure no one can enter the room if you are dealing with a particularly nervous cat.
- Have a floor and table constructed of materials that allow thorough cleaning and disinfection. Stainless steel examining surfaces should be avoided because they are cold, noisy, reflective, and slippery. A rubber mat on a stainless steel table can help overcome some of these problems. Heated tabletops, in some situations, can be more comfortable for the cat.

### In addition:<sup>4</sup>

- If there are outside windows, it is essential that these have safety features to prevent the escape of cats (e.g., cannot be opened far enough to allow a cat to escape, have a safety cage around the outside, etc.).
- Within your practice, there should be a room in which cats can be examined that can be fully darkened (no light) to facilitate adequate ophthalmic and dermatological examinations.
- Hand washing and disinfection facilities should be available to allow washing of hands between feline patients and disinfection of surfaces.
- Breakable or harmful items should be kept in cabinets, as an agitated cat may run around the examination room, including over shelves and surfaces, and may cause damage or be injured if care is not taken.
- The room should be designed so that there are no small holes or gaps that the cat can easily get into or underneath, from which it can be difficult to get the cat out.
- The use of synthetic feline facial pheromone sprays and diffusers (Feliway®) may help to provide a more relaxed atmosphere, although no amount of analogue feline pheromone will replace good handling techniques. Follow the instructions carefully, as using more pheromone than required is not necessarily better.

### Location of the Ward and Visibility of Cats

The ward should be in a location that is easily accessible and does not require cats to be taken through busy or noisy areas to get there. However, it needs to be close enough to other areas to ensure that the cats are frequently observed. Put cats as far away as possible from entrance doors, stainless steel sinks, telephones, and other noisy, busy areas. Timid, frightened, or very ill cats generally need more quiet areas, but observation must still be frequent.

Provide space for your staff to work and observe the cats without getting too close to the cage of a nervous cat. The room needs to be wide enough to get cats in and out of the cages without them having to be held directly in front of another patient. Cats should be prevented from seeing dogs and other cats when at all possible, including when being caged. If necessary, use towels or shades to cover visibility, but ensure that your team is still able to appropriately monitor the cats. The careful use of glass panels in doors and partitions, or even having a glass wall, may greatly enhance the ability of your staff to observe cats easily without being intrusive.<sup>4</sup>

### Examination Room

Ensure that any “alarm scents” left by preceding patients are removed by cleaning the examination table and providing good ventilation. The aim should be to provide a safe, nonthreatening examination area where cats can be examined calmly and effectively.

If possible, maintain a minimum of one dedicated feline examination room, and add more if your feline caseload supports it. Equipment that is essential to the examination should always be in the room prior to the cat and client entering.<sup>4</sup>



This section has been adapted from the Cat Friendly Practice resource, *A Guide to Creating a Cat Friendly Practice*.

# 3

## Provide Feline-Friendly Handling



### Create a Practice Plan

Your veterinary practice should develop a team approach that includes educating all team members on appropriate handling techniques and cooperative client communication. Each member of your team should have a solid foundation in the strategies used in caring for both cats and clients, and should understand feline behavior. Veterinarians estimate that 50% of their cat owners consider a trip to the veterinarian to be stressful, versus only 20% for dogs.<sup>1</sup> It is therefore important that you develop a feline handling plan that is adopted by all members of your veterinary team, because it provides clients with a consistent experience. Your practice can be very successful if you adopt

an approach tailored to individualized cats and situations.<sup>5</sup> Written practice protocols can eliminate confusion and reinforce standards, and can also be included in job descriptions. It can be helpful to have your best handler teach other members of the team by providing demonstrations and interactive participation with cats that are familiar and compliant. Implementing even small steps can make it a less stressful experience for all and can increase the confidence of your veterinary team when treating cats.<sup>5</sup> The AAFP's *Feline-Friendly Handling Guidelines* can be found at [www.catvets.com/guidelines](http://www.catvets.com/guidelines).

### Feline-Friendly Handling Can Lead to:<sup>5</sup>

- Reduced fear and pain for the cat.
- Reinforced veterinarian-client-cat bond, trust, and confidence, and thus better lifelong medical care for the cat.
- Improved efficiency, productivity, and job satisfaction for the veterinary team.
- Increased client compliance.
- Timely reporting and early detection of medical and behavioral concerns.
- Fewer injuries to clients and the veterinary team.
- Reduced anxiety for the client.

### Integrating Feline-Friendly Handling into the Visit

Fear is the most common cause of feline aggression in the veterinary practice. Your team should be educated on the subtle signs of feline behavior and feline-friendly handling. Perform as much of the physical examination as possible wherever the cat is most comfortable. For some this is in the bottom of the carrier but for others it may be the veterinarian's lap, on the floor, or under a towel.

Open the carrier door to allow the cat to explore the surroundings while you are communicating with your client and obtaining

history. The beauty of carriers that can be taken apart in the middle is that you don't need to take the cat out of the carrier. If the cat will not leave the carrier voluntarily, quietly and calmly remove the top half of the carrier so the cat can remain in the bottom half for as much of the examination as possible. Many veterinary staff have been taught to dump the cat out of the carrier, but this is frightening for the cat and does not allow for a sense of control or exploration of the environment. If the cat is highly aroused, slowly slide a towel between the top and bottom of the carrier while the carrier top is removed; this provides a safe hiding place for the cat and can help protect the handler.

During the examination remember to speak softly and calmly. Your team should be able to recognize when the cat may need a break from the examination. Be patient and move slowly during the examination to minimize stress and best elicit the cat's cooperation.

### Value to the Client

Feline-friendly handling can decrease fear and anxiety for the cat, and can also decrease the stress on the client. It is one of the most important aspects of the visit for our clients. They want to trust that their cats are safe and comfortable while in your care. If your veterinary team does not show compassion and respect when handling the client's cat, the client may feel the team lacks skills or does not understand cats. When clients see that you are able to handle and examine their cats in a calm and respectful way, they develop a higher level of trust in you and loyalty to the practice.

The trusting relationship you form with the client is the foundation for your ability to practice good medicine. When your clients develop trust they are more open to education and giving you permission to do the best you can for their cats. When practice protocols are in place your clients know what to expect from the practice, which provides them with confidence in your team and can increase the likelihood of their returning for additional visits.



# 4

## Educate About the Pre- and Post-Visit Experience



In order to increase the frequency of preventive care visits and keep clients coming back, we have to help educate cats and their owners about ways to reduce stress during the veterinary visit.

### The Visit Starts at Home

Approximately 58% of client's report that their cats hate to go to the veterinarian.<sup>3</sup> We need to realize that for clients, the visit starts a long time before they walk through the doors of your veterinary practice. First the client has to dig the carrier out of the garage, then they have to fish the cat out from under the bed, try to coax the cat into the carrier, and listen to the cat yowl during the car ride – all before they even get to your practice. No wonder clients are stressed just thinking about the visit!

This pre-visit period is critical to the success of the visit. All veterinary team members should have a good understanding about the true length of a veterinary visit for cat owners. For the client and the cat, the visit starts at home and continues all the way through returning home again, especially in a multi-cat household. When all of the team, including receptionists or client service staff, understands that the visit is longer than the time a client spends in your practice, they can begin to develop a script for conveying this understanding to the client. Additional ways to provide education and information about handling techniques to current and potential clients is through outreach on social media pages and websites or to local groups. Your practice can also use these forums to educate and relay the types of carriers that are the most conducive for the team to work with during the examination and communicate that loaners are available.

### Carrier and Vehicle Acclimation

An important educational opportunity can be had in helping clients overcome obstacles in getting the cat into the carrier. Only 18% of clients report having received instruction on making cat transportation to the veterinary practice easier or

### Help cat owners reduce the stress of getting their cat to your practice.

- Provide scripting to the reception/client service staff regarding questions about carriers, use of Feliway®, use of towels, and acclimating the cat to the carrier.
- When scheduling appointments, ask “Do you experience any difficulty getting your cat into the carrier?”
- Use collaborative language like, “I know it can be hard to get your cat into the carrier” or “May we help you with some ideas to make it easier?”
- Keep a collection of clean, disinfected carriers that can be taken apart easily to offer as “loaners” to clients.
- Consider mailing or handing out a brochure and Feliway® Wipe to new clients, those who have expressed difficulty, or those who come in to borrow a carrier.

less stressful.<sup>1</sup> Just getting the cat to the clinic can be one of the most stressful experiences for a client, but with your help this can be overcome.

The appointment phone call is a client's first impression of your practice. Providing information during this call about getting the cat into the carrier shows your commitment to ensuring the best possible experience for both client and cat before they even step through the door, and goes a long way toward creating trust and building rapport. Each client should be asked about the pre-visit experience both when booking the appointment and during the actual visit. Your client will appreciate that your practice is interested in reducing their and their cat's stress, and this will further their loyalty to your practice.



# 4

## Educate About the Pre- and Post-Visit Experience continued

### Carrier and Vehicle Acclimation continued

Adjust your education tactics depending on the age of the cat. It can be easier to train kittens, as they can assume this activity as part of their life experiences. Explain to clients the importance of acclimating their kittens to the carrier and car ride, since it can decrease the stress of getting their cats to the veterinarian in the future. For older cats, alternative methods will have to be practiced, as they will need time to adjust to the carrier.



To further help clients with the pre-visit experience, teach them how to acclimate their cats to the car ride. They can start with brief, benign, around-the-block trips in the car. These trips should include positive reinforcement upon returning home, such as treats, play, or brushing. If a client reports that their cat became ill on a ride, suggest that they try it again on an empty stomach before discussing alternate options such as medication.



A helpful resource that provides details for clients is the AAFP's *Getting Your Cat to the Veterinarian*, which can be found at [www.catvets.com/guidelines](http://www.catvets.com/guidelines). This brochure can be used to provide tips to the veterinary team, given to clients when they express difficulty, or sent to new clients before the first visit. Be

sure to remind clients that they should never use force or punishment, but instead must be patient and reinforce and reward with treats or toys. The AAFP's Positive Reinforcement Statement can be found at [www.catvets.com/guidelines](http://www.catvets.com/guidelines).

### After the Visit

Often it is forgotten that acclimation back into the home setting can also be a stressful experience for the cat and client. For clients in multi-cat households, be sure to emphasize that cats are very sensitive to smell, which could result in one cat no longer recognizing another or becoming aggressive. Provide suggestions for re-integration before your client leaves the practice. This topic is also covered in the AAFP's brochure called *Getting Your Cat to the Veterinarian*, found at [www.catvets.com/guidelines](http://www.catvets.com/guidelines).

### Communication with Clients

- Introduce yourself to the client and the cat. Speak quietly and calmly.
- Make eye contact, be "in-the-moment," and use reflective listening.
- Be aware of non-verbal communications such as body language and facial expressions. Don't stand over clients or cats – get down on their level or sit next to the client.
- Repeat questions or concerns in order to clarify, show you are listening, or lead into a recommendation.
- Use open questions: How? Why? When? Where? Describe how.... Tell me about....
- Avoid negative words or phrases, especially if they imply that the owner did not do something correctly. Use more caring and helpful language. Instead of "It looks like Fluffy isn't getting enough exercise," say "I think Fluffy could benefit from more exercise."
- Demonstrate empathy to show you care. Offer words like "I understand," or "That can be difficult."
- Offer solutions or work together to come up with creative answers.
- Acknowledge how much owners care or have done and then relay recommendations for change.
- Use relatable language, and repeat your recommendations at the end of the visit.
- Thank the client and patient for coming and tell them you look forward to their next visit.



# 5

## Enhance the Feline Examination



### Convey Value

#### History Taking

Taking the patient's history provides you with information about the cat and other pets, as well as a description of recent care and activities. It also helps you learn about the relationship between the client and their cat. This is when the client gets to talk about their pet and share any concerns they would like you to address and acknowledge. It is also a time when they get to evaluate how engaged your practice is in working with them. This is especially important to the client's bonding with and developing trust in your veterinary team.

#### Communication and Questions

If your team does not effectively relate to your clients, it can result in noncompliance, confusion about recommendations, failure to return for routine or follow-up care, and other negative outcomes. By implementing small changes, you can make a connection to build trust and create better relationships with your clients.

#### Narrate the Examination

Most clients do not realize exactly what and how much is being done during the physical examination. Many clients believe you are "patting the cat" and do not know you are assessing for illness, disease, pain, and other conditions or complications. Explain to clients what you are looking at, what you are looking for, and what you are seeing. Convey normal findings as good news. Only 41% of clients say they are completely satisfied with the services provided by their veterinarian, with no room for improvement in the value for money spent. This leaves great room for improvement in communicating the worth of your practice.<sup>1</sup>

When you narrate the examination, your client can discern the complete health assessment you perform, leading to a better understanding and increased awareness of the value of the visit.

### Narration Example

Instead of only physically examining the cat, be sure to verbalize the entire experience AS YOU ARE DOING IT. "As I am palpating Fluffy's abdomen I am checking for painful spots, normal organs and anything unusual that might be significant. I see that everything appears to be normal so we will move on to her..."

Explain to clients what you are looking at, what you are looking for, and what you are seeing.





**Team Approach****Gaining Understanding and Agreement**

Communicating what you are doing and why may help alleviate “sticker shock” at payment time and also increase the value of the visit.<sup>3</sup> Many clients do not want to feel as though they are being pressured into having procedures performed or

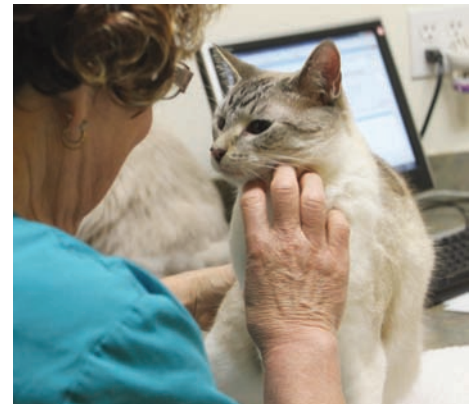
diagnostic tests run on their cats. They would instead like to be well-informed of the reasons for suggested treatment, all of the options available, and the possible results of each. Your practice should focus on evidence-based medicine with a customer- service mentality. Final decisions regarding treatment should be made collaboratively by your team and your client based on the options discussed.

As you review your recommendations with a client, summarize the visit and confirm their understanding and agreement before taking any further steps. Relay the importance of a test or procedure to rule out a potential disease, illness, or condition so the client feels more comfortable with the cost, especially if there is a healthy diagnosis. This will also help the client to develop trust in and loyalty to your practice as they recognize your investment in their cat’s health. Include information about what the test or diagnostics will tell you and how that information will help the cat.

At that point, offer to have a treatment plan created for the client. The treatment plan, with appropriate fees, should be reviewed with the client by a qualified team member. If the client cannot agree to the treatment plan as written, objections or concerns should be reviewed and discussed with the veterinarian and a “Plan B” should be created. Use collaborative words to allay discomfort. “We all have families and challenges to consider when we make decisions like this. I understand completely.” It is important when presenting “Plan B” to convey that this may not be an optimum treatment plan and may not have as high a success rate, whether it is a diagnosis or a form of therapy. “We will do the best we can together with the considerations that we have for this alternate treatment plan.” Be specific about what each plan will involve and what answers it could provide.

**Client Understanding and Agreement Examples**

- “Does that make sense?”
- “Is this what you meant?”
- “Based upon these observations in the physical examination and what you told me that has been happening at home, I would recommend we consider tests X and Y to see if we can determine what is causing these problems. Do you agree?”
- “What I learned from my examination and what you have told me, though very significant, is not quite enough for me to determine the cause yet. Tests X and Y should tell us more about what is going on. Do you agree with this plan?”





# Enhance the Feline Examination continued

## Avoid the “Back” of the Hospital

Performing common procedures such as blood collection, medication administration, cystocentesis, and subcutaneous (SQ) fluids in the examination room can comfort the client and remove the fear of the mysterious “back room.”

When you remove the cat from the examination room, your client wonders, “What is being done to poor Fluffy that couldn’t be done here?” This anxiety worsens if they can hear “yowls” from their cat or even sounds from dogs and other cats that are also in the “back.” Always offer to have the client leave the room if they seem uneasy or uncomfortable, as many are happy to do so. It is better for the client to leave the room than to increase the cat’s

stress moving them to the “back,” as it can take 10 minutes for a cat to acclimate to a new environment.<sup>6</sup>

Give the client a tour of the facility if you are performing procedures in another room or hospitalizing their cat. They will be comforted in knowing where their cat will be, and demystifying the area reassures them that nothing is being hidden or kept from them. Many people also learn by seeing and experiencing, which can enhance their perception of the value of your veterinary practice. If you are giving a tour to a client, be sure to point out all of the specific areas or equipment that you have introduced to make your practice more cat-friendly.

## Veterinary Teams Become Client Coaches

Relay to your clients that you and your team are available by phone, text, or email should there be any follow-up questions or concerns. Encourage your veterinary team to become engaged with clients and show care and compassion for their cats. Use open-ended questions to encourage dialogue and conversation with your clients. In order to train all of your team members on these techniques, spend some time conducting role-playing exercises. Use expressions like, “I want you to meet our team. They are all very cat-friendly. Each of them has a lot of experience with our cat patients.” When appropriate, consider having team members give clients personal business cards for your practice. They can say, “I know this was a lot of information today. Feel free to contact me if you think of any questions after you leave.”

Consider creating on-going programs to provide education to your clients. An example includes creating weight loss programs since 58% of cats in the United States are overweight or obese, and there was a 16% increase in diabetes mellitus in cats from 2006-2010.<sup>7,8</sup> Safe weight loss programs for cats can improve the health of cats, as well as increase cat visits by providing education to your clients and enhance the relationship we build with cat clients.

## Describe Cat-Friendly Initiatives

- When discussing treatment plans, hospitalization, or providing a tour of your facility, be sure to describe the ways in which you have implemented feline-friendly initiatives.
- “We include these lovely warm beds and hiding places in the cat’s room (or enclosure, never “cage”) to make their stay as comfortable as possible.”
- “In our dentistry suite, we have digital x-ray to fully evaluate every cat’s mouth, just as your dentist does for you.”



# 6

## Reinforce and Reward Good Behavior



### Communication with Owner

Praise your clients for bringing their cats into the practice, no matter how long it has been since the last visit. Communicating the need for routine care and complimenting a client for being active in their cat's healthcare reinforces the value of the relationship. A client may feel vulnerable during a visit due to their lack of knowledge about their cat's condition or failure to communicate with you about it earlier. Messages from you that inspire fear or include negative comments or energy can add to a stressful situation and can make the thought of future visits unappealing. Be supportive and positive with your collaborative language, actions, and reactions toward the cat and the client (Solution #3).

If you have specific recommendations for the cat's care, reinforce them throughout the visit. Discuss your recommendations during the examination, emphasize them again as you summarize the visit, and then provide them in take-home information (Solution #9). Repeating your recommendations using different methods and language can help the client learn, convey the importance of the information, and encourage compliance.

Finally, let your clients know that you understand they have other options and that you appreciate their choosing your practice to provide a high level of care for their cats. Approximately 76% of clients report receiving such a message from their veterinarians.<sup>1</sup>

### Educate Clients on Behavior and Positive Reinforcement

Feline behavior problems are a common complaint among clients and are also one of the biggest reasons clients decide to surrender their cats. Teach new and seasoned clients appropriate techniques for playing with their cats and rewarding good behavior. Explain that many behavioral problems and questions can be addressed with a simple phone call to your practice. A helpful resource for clients is the AAFP's brochure, *Your Cat's Environmental Needs*, which can be found at [catvets.com/guidelines](http://catvets.com/guidelines).

Emphasize that punishment of the cat should be avoided, as it can lead to fear, aggression, or stress-related problems. Your veterinary team should be well-versed in suggestions for redirecting negative behavior. Clients should know that cats learn best from positive reinforcement; rewards should be given immediately and can vary for each individual cat.<sup>9</sup>

Clients also must be informed about a cat's subtle signs of sickness and pain. Although they believe they would know if their cats were in pain or sick, many clients fail to recognize the first indicators for feline health problems. Consider providing a brochure or information on your website about these signs so clients know when they should call you.





# 7

## Be More Assertive in Recommending, Reminding About, and Following Up on Care



### Recommendations

Emphasize the need for regularly scheduled preventive care at the beginning of the first visit and be sure to communicate that message throughout the examination. Clients will immediately recognize you as the expert if you make recommendations and provide accompanying educational explanations. Communicate that routine preventive care often leads to early identification of more serious problems, diseases, and conditions. Recommendations should be realistic for the client and should be explained in terms of benefit to the cat and the human/animal bond. This keeps your recommendations from being interpreted by the client as pressure or simply financially motivated.

It is also important that you believe in what you recommend to clients. Although nearly as many veterinarians own cats as dogs, only 17% state a preference for cats, and 20% of cat-owning veterinarians have not conducted a thorough examination of their pets over the past twelve months.<sup>1</sup> If you are recommending a minimum of annual examinations to clients, you must ensure that your team follows the same recommendation. Telling a personal story about your own cat often resonates well with clients.

### Reminders

Your veterinary team should reinforce messages and recommendations by delivering them to clients in multiple formats. Support and emphasize these messages by providing clients with take-home materials (Solution #9).

Currently only 32% of veterinarians schedule the next wellness examination before the cat leaves the practice.<sup>1</sup> Scheduling appointments in advance increases the chances of continuing regular veterinary visits and discourages the client from delaying an appointment. If your practice decides to begin long-term advance scheduling of appointments, methods for reminding clients about their upcoming visits must be adopted. Ask clients for their preferred method of communication and note it in their records.





# 7

## Be More Assertive in Recommending, Reminding About, and Following Up on Care continued

### Follow-up

With technology at your fingertips, you have many options for communicating with clients, including postcards, letters, holiday cards, emails, text reminders, newsletters (print or electronic), phone messages, and social media. Client preferences for receiving communications differ. Discuss several methods that would work easily at your practice and consider offering your clients a limited choice. Offering variety will show that you are dedicated to identifying the needs of your clients, may help with client retention, and can help maintain consistent routine appointments. Use at least three forms of reminders and remind delinquents at least two more times.

The phone is still a reliable method of communication with most clients. Consider unconventional ways to utilize verbal phone communications such as going through your database and calling lapsed clients just to ask how their cat is doing. In many instances it will prompt a reminder of the need for a visit and an appointment can be made.

Tracking compliance is an important part of follow-up. While 95% of practices use appointment reminders, 58% of practices did not check client compliance with these reminders.<sup>1</sup> Many software systems will allow you to perform a comparison of the last few years. You should also consider evaluating the effectiveness of your reminders to see what communication vehicle has been the most successful for your practice.

Your practice can also follow up within 24-72 hours after a patient visit by phone, email, or other method preferred by the client. Ask how the cat seemed to handle the visit overall, if the cat is feeling better or if he/she is taking the medication, and if the client has any questions regarding the healthcare plan moving forward. Such follow-up contact by you or a staff member will add to the value of the visit.

Community outreach is another important method for promoting your practice and educating members of the public. Consider reaching out to students, civic clubs, shelters, adoption facilities, pet stores, breeders, and rescue groups to provide a variety of feline education. Consider creating education classes about what cat owners should know prior to adoption in order to educate them about home care and veterinary needs before they adopt. Helping them decide which cat(s) to adopt is also very helpful. For example, if they plan to adopt more than one, siblings are already a bonded pair.

You can also create and promote hospital tours, participate in public service, and provide educational sessions to allow members of your community to view you as an expert source for feline care. Cross-promotional opportunities may also be available in your area; this is where you provide information about services offered by another business (i.e., a pet store or realtor) at your practice (via counter, handout table, or bulletin board) and they do the same for your practice at their facility.



# 8

## Identify Lapsed Cats



### Start with Your Existing Clients

The easiest way to identify lapsed cats is to start with your existing clients. Do they have a cat that you do not know about? Did they adopt a new cat? Did any of their family or friends adopt a new cat?

Often, a client who owns multiple types of pets does not understand the need to tell their veterinarian that they have a cat. This is because 51% of clients perceive cats as low-maintenance, 70% are not convinced that cats hide symptoms, and 81% believe their cats are in excellent health and self-sufficient.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, many people who own cats also have dogs, and the presence of dogs in the household actually results in less frequent visits for cats.<sup>1</sup> Find the un-served or under-served cats in your practice by asking about other household pets at every visit and tracking reminder compliance.

During emergency and illness visits, ask about other household cats that you may never have seen before or have not seen in some time. Your clients could be of the mindset to only obtain veterinary care when there is a problem. Educate them on the value of routine care, since the cost of prevention can often be much less than the costs associated with treatment once a problem is identified.

While 40% of practices routinely ask about other household pets during the first visit, of that group only 48% always encourage clients to schedule a physical examination for any pet not seen in last 12 months.<sup>1</sup> This could be a huge opportunity for your veterinary practice to work with current clients who are already familiar with your team. If clients are hesitant about or resistant to scheduling visits for their cats, explain the benefits of routine veterinary care (Solution #1), provide them with take-home educational materials, and note the presence of other household pets in their records.

### Provide Incentives and Be Flexible

Currently, 48% of practices offer a discount for veterinary examinations of multiple pets, so weigh the benefits of such a program while keeping in mind your local or state laws around discount offerings.<sup>1</sup> Go through existing clients and follow up with a personal call or email to any who have not visited your practice in a while. Stressing the importance of care and providing persistent and repetitive education increases the likelihood of additional veterinary visits for these underserved cats.

You could also consider offering routine-care packages or loyalty programs. Assess your practice's options, consult local and state regulations, and explore additional alternatives that would work for your team. Approximately 52% of clients would like their veterinary practices to provide additional options for payment, and 40% say that offering an annual plan would be a way to increase the frequency of veterinary visits for their cats.<sup>1</sup> From the research, cat owners were very interested in learning more about opportunities including coupons for the veterinary visit, annual plans with monthly payments and discounts for multiple pets. They report that these offerings could increase the likelihood of visiting the veterinary practice more often<sup>1</sup>. Clients want to feel that a visit to the veterinarian is money well spent, so try to be as flexible and upfront about payments as possible.

# 9

## Provide Take Home Resources



**Sixty-five percent of clients report that their veterinary practices could do better in providing educational material to help them more fully understand cat health needs.<sup>1</sup>**

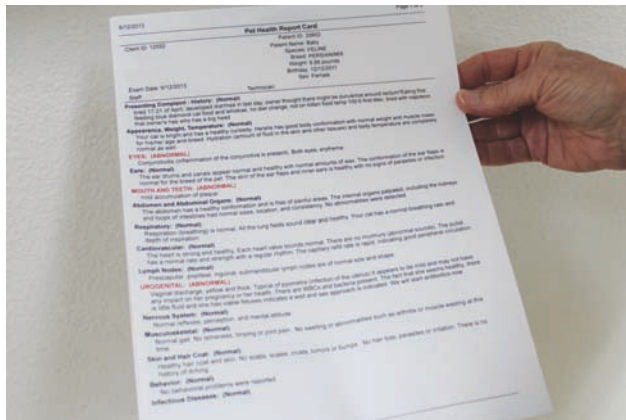
### Report Cards

When clients are in your examination room it can often be a stressful experience for both them and their cats. Even when you verbally educate clients during the examination, it is extremely beneficial to reinforce your message points by sending clients home with information about the items discussed. A report card or one-page summary sheet about the examination can emphasize your recommendations for care until the next advised visit. It should also provide results for everything that was examined that day to assist in conveying the value of the visit. When asked, 18% of clients state that receiving written report cards from their veterinarians after each visit would be likely to increase the frequency of those visits.<sup>1</sup>

Report cards should include a timeframe for the cat to come back for follow-up or preventive care. If you are able to schedule the next appointment during checkout, be sure to provide a written reminder on the report card. If possible, and as a convenience for clients, consider offering checkout while they are still in the examination room. This can make the client feel that the practice has gone above and beyond to make them feel comfortable and also eliminates extra time spent in the waiting room.

### Educational Brochures

Send clients home with informative brochures they can read at their leisure that will reinforce your recommendations, address their additional concerns, and/or provide answers to question they may have forgotten to ask. Such educational materials are abundant, so obtain the brochures that best reinforce your practice's beliefs. The AAFP has client brochures on a variety of topics that can be downloaded from [www.catvets.com](http://www.catvets.com).







Many clients believe the common stereotype that cats often live to a ripe old age with minimal veterinary care, and more than 80% think that their own cats are in excellent health and very self-sufficient.<sup>1</sup> Clients therefore place little importance on vaccinations and routine preventive examinations. Taking advantage of feline-friendly opportunities to improve preventive care, client education, and early diagnosis of disease are ways to help clients ensure a longer, better quality of life for their cats. This builds a strong and more productive practice relationship with the client and improves the quality of care for the cat. Learning strategies to lessen the stress of the veterinary visit can encourage more frequent use of veterinary services. The AAFP has developed the Cat Friendly Practice (CFP) program to help veterinary practices become cat-friendly in both the physical environment of the practice and the way in which medical care is delivered.

### Elevate the Delivery of Care

The CFP program seeks to transform and elevate the delivery of feline veterinary care by:

- Laying the groundwork for the delivery of care to the underserved feline population.
- Identifying trends and baseline species information essential to understanding cats.
- Acknowledging the essential role of the client in the veterinary visit.
- Providing support to veterinarians and their teams to create a cat-friendly practice environment.
- Outlining strategies for introducing changes in the delivery of care that incorporate a better understanding of the distinct needs and behaviors of cats.

By taking the steps necessary to become a Cat Friendly Practice, your team will create an environment that values the needs of feline patients. At the heart of the Cat Friendly Practice is the potential for building productive relationships with your clients that will result in improved care of your feline patients.



Why you and your cat deserve a Cat Friendly



Vet designed. Owner approved. Cat preferred.



The AAFP has many resources to help elevate your feline knowledge and comfort, including Practice Guidelines, Client Brochures, an Annual Conference, continuing education (CE) tracks at other major veterinary conferences, online webinars, and the Cat Friendly Practice program.

The CFP program contains tools for your practice to integrate a feline perspective and embrace the standards needed to elevate care for cats. It equips you with the tools, resources, and information to improve the treatment, handling, and overall healthcare of cats. The CFP program lays the groundwork and sets the standard for providing optimum feline care, and supports you in creating a cat-friendly environment that can reduce stress for cats, clients, and your veterinary staff.



### Self-Assessment

A practice checklist guides your practice by allowing you to self-assess and incorporate essential criteria by using the educational resources provided. Many of the techniques contained in the practice checklist are readily achievable because they focus on approach and organization. The program does not require remodeling of your practice but provides creative solutions for you to help decrease stress during feline-care visits. The most important step is to recognize that there is a need to make these adaptations in order to provide a higher quality of care to cats.

### How to Get Started

The time it takes to complete the application and approval process varies by practice. It can depend on how many cat-friendly initiatives you have already implemented and how much time you are able to dedicate to assessing your practice and implementing new items. An informational brochure, *First Steps Toward a Cat Friendly Practice*, can be found at [www.catvets.com](http://www.catvets.com).

Your practice must have at least one AAFP veterinarian member in order to access the Cat Friendly Practice program resources. Everything can be completed online in an easy-to-use format, and you can save your work as you proceed. There are **ten topic areas**, each with a video that discusses the importance of implementing these criteria in your practice. Checklist criteria items are supported by the manual, *A Guide to Creating a Cat Friendly Practice*, as well as by supplemental educational resources and photos.

There are two status levels within the program: Silver and Gold. Silver Standard status is for practices that meet the essential standard criteria for a Cat Friendly Practice. The Gold Standard status is for practices that have incorporated the optimum level of Cat Friendly Criteria.

Once your practice meets the criteria, your application is evaluated for approval. Once approved, your practice officially becomes an AAFP Cat Friendly Practice. Each Cat Friendly Practice receives a complete CFP toolkit that includes a status certificate, poster, and numerous marketing pieces that give your practice the tools, printed documents, and knowledge to make the most of your CFP status. You will also be listed in the Cat Friendly Practice online database so clients can search for and find your practice. The CFP program is dynamic and ongoing. The AAFP will regularly send you new resources and support materials to enhance your participation and keep your practice at the leading edge of feline care.

**More information about the Cat Friendly Practice program can be found online at [www.catvets.com](http://www.catvets.com).**



### Ten Topics to help you become a Cat Friendly Practice:

1. Staff Training & Continuing Education / Client Communications
2. Veterinary Practice / Waiting Room
3. Feline Handling & Interaction with Clients
4. Examination Room & Clinical Records
5. Wards Facilities
6. Pain Management / Operating Room & Anesthesia
7. Surgical Equipment & Dentistry
8. Diagnostic Imaging & Laboratory Facilities
9. Treatment / Health & Safety
10. Preventative Care by Life Stages

As your practice goes through the assessment process, you will have the opportunity to:

- Evaluate attitudes and care provided to feline patients.
- Examine your practice environment and equipment from the perspective of the specific needs of cats.
- Assess and implement practice skills, training, and education.
- Understand the importance of becoming recognized as a Cat Friendly Practice.



## Conclusion

These ten solutions provide a great opportunity for veterinary practices to connect with their current and prospective feline clients, as well as enhance the delivery of care to cats. A full 78% of veterinarians agree that cats represent one of the most significant missed opportunities for the veterinary profession.<sup>1</sup> It is imperative that the profession works to address this opportunity, and the AAFP Cat Friendly Practice offers a practical, step-by-step program that can make a difference. It is good for your feline patients, it is good for your clients, and it is good for you and your practice team.

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## About the American Association of Feline Practitioners

The American Association of Feline Practitioners improves the health and welfare of cats by supporting high standards of practice, continuing education and scientific investigation. The AAFP has a long-standing reputation and track record in the veterinary community for facilitating high standards of practice and publishes guidelines for practice excellence which are available to veterinarians at the AAFP website. Over the years, the AAFP has encouraged veterinarians to continuously re-evaluate preconceived notions of practice strategies in an effort to advance the quality of feline medicine practiced. The Cat Friendly Practice program is the newest effort created to improve the treatment, handling and overall healthcare provided to cats. Its purpose is to equip veterinary practices with the tools, resources, and information to elevate the standard of care provided to cats. Find more information at [www.catvets.com](http://www.catvets.com).

## About the Bayer Veterinary Care Usage Study

The first phase of the study focused on the decline in veterinary usage from the pet owners' perspective, identifying six root causes: the economic impact of the recession; fragmentation of veterinary services; the use of the Internet versus office visits; feline resistance; perception that regular medical check-ups are unnecessary; and cost of care.

The objectives of the second phase were to: identify any correlation between clinic revenue and pet visits; identify the use of successful practice tools; and establish the degree to which veterinarians are utilizing services identified in phase one of the study. Results were based on a nationally representative, quantitative online survey of 401 companion animal veterinarians. Find more information at [www.keepcatscomingback.com](http://www.keepcatscomingback.com).



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