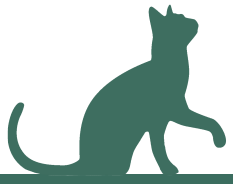
GUIDELINE BRIEFS

ISFM/AAFP CAT FRIENDLY VETERINARY ENVIRONMENT GUIDELINES



The veterinary environment plays a significant role in the cat's overall emotional state which will determine the success of the visit. As a prey species, cats are prone to fear-anxiety if removed from their normal environment. Being transported to an unfamiliar location increased perceived threats. We can prepare that space with the goal of reducing perceived threats and increasing positive (engaging) emotions.

Emotions Play an Important Part in a Cat's Response to Care



Negative or protective emotions in the veterinary setting will include fear-anxiety, pain, and frustration. Examine the practice environment and seek to reduce perceived threats that cause fear-anxiety (e.g., any smells, sounds, and sights that are unpleasant to cats). At the same time, we can provide anxiolytics and/or analgesics as needed to further minimize protective emotions.



Positive or engaging emotions, such as desire seeking, can be used to improve the cat's overall experience. Each cat will have individual preferences, so having a variety of food treats, toys, warmed blankets, and other comforting items will give us options to encourage engaging emotions in each patient.

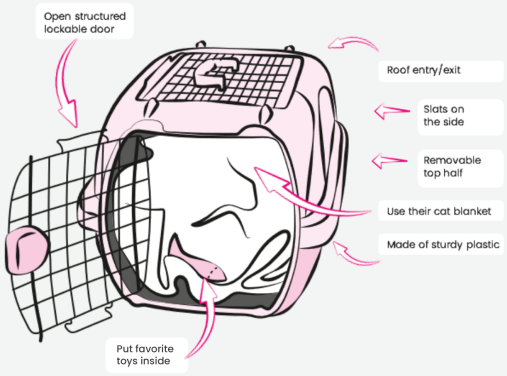
The Veterinary Visit Begins at Home

Tips to set the stage for a successful trip:

1. **Provide helpful advice and support to the caregiver in preparation for travel and the visit**
2. **Make the carrier a positive place:**
   - Keep the carrier out in a room the cat prefers, avoiding storage out of sight (e.g., basement, garage, closet)
   - Encourage positive associations with the carrier by providing cozy blankets, treats, and toys
   - Avoid any negative associations with the carrier by keeping it in a safe space the cat prefers and never medicating or doing anything the cat does not like within the carrier
   - Spray the blankets and/or empty carrier with synthetic feline pheromones 15 min prior to the cat entering the carrier for departure
   - During travel, reduce loud noises and strong smells, hold the carrier stable from the bottom, and have the carrier in a secure space (ideally, the floor behind front passenger seat)
3. **Dispense anxiolytics and/or analgesics if needed**

HOW TO MAKE THE CARRIER *CAT FRIENDLY*

Choose a cat carrier that allows easy access for you to feed your cat but doesn't leave them over exposed and is easy to clean.





Anxiolytics are Helpful for Particularly Fearful-anxious Patients

Gabapentin 10-20 mg/kg orally 2-3 hours prior to leaving the house

- Decrease dose for frail cats and cats with CKD
- For cats with CKD, decrease dose by 50-75%
- Do not put cat in carrier right after medicating!

In an unfamiliar environment, the preferred coping strategy for most cats is to escape. When this option is unavailable, as in the veterinary practice, they attempt to hide or perch to increase perceived safety and sense of control.

Access the Cat Friendly Veterinary Environment Guidelines at catvets.com/environment and cat caregiver resources at catfriendly.com/carrier.

© Copyright 2023 American Association of Feline Practitioners. All rights reserved.

Carrier image courtesy of International Cat Care

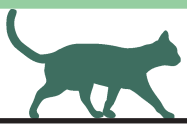
Quick Tips for Cat Friendly Spaces

ALL CLINIC SPACES

- Utilize synthetic feline pheromone diffusers throughout the practice
- Keep a quiet space: low voices, low/no phone ringer volume, reduce or eliminate sound of other species (e.g., dogs, cats, people)
- Classical and cat-specific music have been shown to decrease stress in hospitalized cats
- Eliminate visualization of other animals including clinic cats and other patients
- Provide safe places for cats to hide in all areas of the practice which increases the cat's coping ability. The goal is to increase the perceived sense of safety
- Always give the cat options in each situation, which provides them with a perceived sense of control
- Provide ways for cats with protective emotions to cope
- Provide positive, consistent, and predictable human-cat social interaction (read more in the Cat Friendly Veterinary Interactions Guidelines Catvets.com/interactions)
- Respect the cat's senses (i.e., smell, sight and hearing), as it can influence a cat's emotional health



RECEPTION/WAITING AREA



- Ideally provide a separate waiting area for caregivers with cats
- Schedule cat-only appointment times
- Take caregiver and cat directly into the examination room
- Provide elevated space for cat carriers to increase perceived sense of safety

EXAMINATION ROOM

- Reduce overhead lighting except for when needed for certain parts of the examination
- Start with 1-2 team members in the room, including veterinarian, and eliminate traffic in/out of the room. Keep the space undisturbed
- Provide warm blankets that were sprayed with synthetic feline pheromones >15 minutes in advance
- Have all equipment that will be required already in the exam room
- Perform venipuncture and other sample collection techniques IN the examination room rather than transporting cat to a new, strange place

TREATMENT AND OTHER COMMON USE AREAS

- Although treatment areas may be the hub of the practice, they are often too busy and noisy to provide Cat Friendly care. Whenever possible, other quieter and separated areas are preferable for cat care
- Remain in the examination room for all outpatient care including laboratory testing, medicating, administering sedation, etc.
- For inpatient care, separated and quiet spaces should be used. Consider taking the cat to an unused examination room. Consider designating cat-specific rooms for induction of general anesthesia, radiology, post-anesthesia recovery, etc.
- Avoid loud noises from equipment, music, staff, etc. Utilize classical or cat-specific music
- In situations where separate, cat-designated areas cannot be assigned:
  - Position cages and treatment table(s) to eliminate visual and auditory contact with other cats or other species. Provide visual barriers (over cage door, room divider screens, etc.) if needed
  - Reduce traffic (people, patients) through areas of the practice when a cat is present
  - Remove noisy animals to alternate locations, if possible



WARD AND ICU

- Position cages to eliminate sight of other cats or other species
- Cage dimensions should have a minimum height of 21 in and floor space of 432 square inches (e.g., 18 in x 24 in) for cats staying <24 hours; minimum height of 22 inches and floor space of 576 square in (e.g., 24 in x 24 in) for cats staying > 24 hours
- Provide hiding spaces in the cat's own carrier, cat beds, cardboard boxes, or other creative spaces; provide perches for more confident cats
- Bedding sprayed with synthetic feline pheromones is ideal
- Cages should be constructed of materials that are non-permeable, easy to clean or disinfect, and not likely to bend or make noise during use
- Choose cage surfaces that are non-reflective (I.e., brushed stainless steel and matte finish surfaces) or make use of high-sided cat beds to reduce reflection
- Cage space can be expanded and core resources spread out by connecting cages with portholes and/or providing vertical spaces
- Provide bedding, a hiding place, food and water (where permissible), a suitable litter box, and vertical space for perching. Separate resources as far apart as possible, including space between litter box, food, and water. Consider asking caregivers to bring toys and comfort items from home
- Consider covering the space with a towel draped over half, see-through drapery, or opaque covering as needed based on the cat's level of fear-anxiety
- Spot clean around the cat and bedding to maintain the cat's scent. Providing layers of bedding may allow you to remove a soiled layer without removing the cat's scent

© Copyright 2023 American Association of Feline Practitioners. All rights reserved.