

Purrfect Journey: A Cat Carrier Guide for Caregivers



WHY CARRIER PREPARATION MATTERS

Regular veterinary care is important for your cat's health. Checkups help find problems early, when they are easier to treat, and help your cat live a longer, healthier life. Travel to the practice can be stressful for both you and your cat, but good preparation can make it easier. Choosing the right carrier and helping your cat feel comfortable in it can make visits calmer and more positive.

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SETTING THE STAGE FOR A CALM APPOINTMENT

A good carrier experience helps your cat feel safe from the start. Cats feel most comfortable in familiar spaces, so making the carrier a normal part of your home and routine helps build trust. This helps prevent stress from building up (stressor stacking) and helps your cat feel better about travel and veterinary visits. When your cat starts off calm, the whole appointment goes more smoothly.

CHOOSING THE RIGHT CARRIER

Safe and Easy to Clean

- Pick a carrier that is sturdy, well-ventilated, and has a secure door that prevents escape.
- Choose one that is easy to clean, leakproof, and water-resistant.

Comfortable

- Add an absorbent soft towel or blanket that smells like home on the bottom of the carrier.
- Include treats or toys that are familiar to make your cat feel at home.
- Make sure the bedding doesn't slip and stays in place so your cat feels secure.

Entry and Exit

- A carrier with a removable top makes checkups easier and lets your cat stay in the bottom of the carrier during the appointment.
- A carrier with floor-level entry allows your cat to walk in on their own, giving them a greater sense of control.

Privacy

- Cover the carrier with a towel sprayed with synthetic feline pheromones 15 minutes before the cat needs to enter it. Covering the carrier helps your cat hide to feel safe and secure, while also blocking sights and sounds that can be stressful.
- When traveling with more than one cat, use one carrier per cat.

Carriers to Avoid

- Soft carriers that do not hold their shape, collapse easily, and/or are difficult to clean.
- Backpack carriers that let the cat move too much and expose your cat to too many sights.
- Carriers without removable tops.

CARRIER TRAINING TIPS

If the carrier only comes out for veterinary visits, your cat may become fearful or anxious when they see it. Leave it out in a main living area of your home so your cat gets used to the carrier before they go in it. Go slowly and be patient. Use rewards your cat loves (e.g., treats, toys, petting, or praise). Every cat is different, so find what works best for your cat. Only train your cat when they are healthy and not in pain, fearful, or anxious.

HELPFUL TRAINING METHODS

Shaping

- Teach a behavior in small steps using a sound, word, or hand signal that your cat associates with a reward so your cat learns gradually.
- Reward each step (look→move closer→stand near it→touch→enter→lie down).

Targeting

- Teach your cat to touch an object with their nose (like a stick with a lickable treat on it).
- Hold the stick near your cat's nose and reward with a treat when touched → move the stick farther away and reward each time your cat touches it → increase the distance of the stick as your cat learns.

Luring

- Use a treat or toy to guide your cat into the carrier and provide a reward (e.g., place food near the carrier door to guide your cat toward it or use a toy to lure your cat to the door).

Rewarding Naturally Occurring Behaviors

- Reward your cat for doing the behavior on their own without being lured. Reward the behavior when the cat does it to help your cat learn to repeat it (e.g., when your cat lies down in the carrier on their own, say "Good job!" and give a treat or toy).

CARRIER TRAINING STEPS

1. Encourage and teach your cat to lay/sleep on a blanket (shaping technique).
2. Place that blanket in the carrier (with the top off). Reward your cat for going near or inside (targeting, luring, or capturing techniques). Do not move to the next step until your cat lies down on the blanket.
3. Add the top to the carrier and reward for staying inside and for calm behavior.
4. Use the targeting or luring techniques to train your cat to walk into the carrier with the top in place.
5. Close the door briefly and give your cat their preferred reward.
6. Slowly increase time inside with the door closed.
7. Lift the carrier from the bottom (never just holding the handle) to get your cat used to the movement and provide rewards to reinforce positive behavior.
8. Cover the carrier and take short car rides (see more on back).

Do not move to the next step until your cat is calm and comfortable. Go slowly. Some cats learn fast, while others may need weeks or months to learn.



TIPS:

- If your cat lies down or sits on their blanket with the carrier top in place, give a reward to reinforce the behavior.
- If your cat leaves the carrier, you can use luring/targeting techniques to encourage them to re-enter the carrier.
- Use the "rewarding naturally occurring behaviors" technique if your cat goes into the carrier on their own.

AFTER TRAINING

Many cats will rest comfortably in the carrier at home once they have been carrier trained and they have learned that the carrier is a safe space. Keep the carrier in a quiet, safe place where your cat can see and access it.

DURING TRAVEL

- Support the carrier with two hands underneath the bottom, and never hold just by the handle.
- Keep the carrier level and steady, and try to drive smoothly to minimize sudden movement.
- If helpful, use a stroller or cart to transport the carrier (you can train your cat to use these as well).
- Plan a calm and smooth trip to the veterinary practice, avoiding loud noises, people, other animals, and traffic.
- Take short practice car rides once your cat feels comfortable in their carrier.
- The carrier should be secured on the floor of the vehicle, behind either the driver or passenger seat. If seat belts are used, they should only be used with carriers that are crash-test certified (centerforpetsafety.org/cps-certified). If not, this may inadvertently result in the carrier being crushed.

WHEN MEDICATION CAN HELP

If you feel that your cat would benefit from anti-anxiety or sedative medication before traveling to the practice, reach out to your veterinarian's office to discuss options before the appointment.



See catfriendly.com/carrier and catfriendly.com/training for more information.

