Cat Friendly
The Standards of Feline Care



Cat Friendly at Home:

Beyond the Veterinary Visit

For many cats, the veterinary visit begins long before they arrive at the practice and continues after they return home. Understanding and reducing sources of distress (a cat's inability to cope) before, during, and after the appointment can improve welfare and help create a more positive experience for cats, caregivers, and veterinary teams.

Stressor Stacking

A veterinary visit does not begin when a cat enters the practice. Stressors often start at home before the appointment, continue throughout transport and the veterinary visit, and may even persist after returning home, particularly in multicat households. A cat's ability to cope is influenced by both the number of stressors experienced and how long the cat is exposed to them. This accumulation of stressors is known as *stressor stacking*.

A cat may cope with a single stressor, such as temporary carrier confinement, but additional stressors can quickly build. Fasting; carrier confinement; transportation; unfamiliar sights, sounds, and smells; loss of control; handling; pain; and changes to routine can combine and overwhelm the cat's ability to cope. When this occurs, cats are more likely to experience distress and display protective behaviors.

Understanding and reducing stressors before, during, and after the veterinary visit can improve welfare and create a better experience for the cat, caregiver, and veterinary team. See a preview of stressor stacking at the end of this document. For a more detailed discussion of stressor stacking and ways veterinary practices can minimize its effects, see the "Creating a Better Veterinary Environment and Experience for Cats" handout (**catvets.com/CatFriendly**).

Common pre-visit stressors at home include:

- Confinement in a carrier or temporary indoor confinement
- Physical interactions needed to place the cat in the carrier
- Fasting prior to procedures
- Transportation and unpredictable movement
- Unfamiliar sights, sounds, and smells during travel
- Motion sickness, discomfort, or pain during transit

When Booking Appointments

- Advise caregivers to leave plenty of time before they must leave for their appointment, including planning for traffic. Convey that when they are rushed, their cat may be affected by their distress levels, which contributes to stressor stacking.
- Communicate with caregivers about whether their cat needs to be fasted prior to the appointment.
- Talk to the caregivers about carrier training and acclimation. See the "Purrfect Journey: A Cat Carrier Guide for Caregivers" brochure for more information (**catvets.com/CatFriendly**).
- Have caregivers understand the appropriate time frame for administration of pre-visit calming pharmaceuticals, if necessary.

Pre-visit Pharmaceuticals

Fear-anxiety impacts the emotional welfare of your feline patients, and veterinary teams should be proactive about recommending pre-visit medications to minimize this rather than saving medications as a "last resort." Not only will this approach benefit your feline patients and their caregivers, but it will help facilitate safe handling for the members of your practice team. A cat who urinates in their carrier, shows inhibition, or exhibits avoidance at one visit could easily escalate to repelling behaviors, such as swatting or growling at the next visit. Pre-visit medications also improve welfare when it comes to other scary aspects of the trip such as being in the carrier, riding in the car, or hearing other pets in the waiting area.

Preventing stressor stacking leads to a successful veterinary visit, and that process begins at home.

Oral medications commonly prescribed

Medication recommendations should always be individualized based on the cat's medical history, current medications, and previous responses to treatment.

- **Gabapentin and pregabalin** are the most commonly prescribed pre-visit medications for cats. Given before travel, they can reduce fear-anxiety associated with transportation and veterinary visits. Cats already receiving either medication on a regular basis may still benefit from a pre-visit dose. Since they are (exclusively) excreted through the kidneys, dose reduction should be considered for cats with impaired renal function. *Note: Pregabalin and gabapentin may be controlled substances depending on where you live. Always follow your local medication laws.*
- **Trazodone** is a sedative that has been recommended for use as a single agent or in combination with gabapentin. There has been conflicting information about efficacy making it challenging to draw firm conclusions.
- **Maropitant** (oral) is labeled for use in dogs, but many veterinarians use it routinely to reduce nausea and vomiting in cats, and prevent motion sickness associated with car travel. Maropitant may significantly improve the veterinary visit experience for cats who vomited in transit or are drooling on arrival.

Medication trialing

- Managing caregiver expectations ahead of time will improve compliance. All medications should be prescribed well in advance and trialed ahead of the visit to ensure desired benefits without undesirable side effects. For example, gabapentin may cause ataxia. Failure to inform the caregiver of these potential side effects in advance may lead to reluctance to pre-medicate their cat in the future.
- When using medications with a dosing range, advise the caregivers to trial at the low end of the dosing interval before increasing. When using multiple medications, ask the caregiver to trial each medication individually to ensure no unwanted side effects before trialing them together.
- Share the time to maximum effects (e.g., anxiolytic effect) so the caregiver can note when to administer medications on the day of the visit.

Medication training



- In addition to medication trials, veterinary teams should coach caregivers on positive medication administration techniques. This supports the cat's ability to make choices, promotes the cat's emotional welfare, strengthens the human-cat bond, and improves compliance. Putting medication into empty gel capsules covered with a tasty lickable or soft treat is a versatile tool that can help if the cat needs multiple medications or if they are not palatable. Training cats to readily accept medications can reduce medication-related stress for the cat and caregiver, and make future treatment plans easier to implement.
- Additional formulations can also be explored for palatability, including compounded melting tabs, small tabs, flavored treats, or flavored liquids. Oral formulations are preferred as bioavailability with transdermal formulations is often unknown, and the ear handling needed for application can be aversive to the cat.

Other medication considerations

- In feline patients with high levels of fear-anxiety, or with more stressful procedures such as venipuncture or ultrasound, there may be a limit to what oral pre-visit medications can achieve. In cases where the cat is highly protective, the goal of pre-visit medications will be to facilitate injectable sedation in order to perform a thorough medical examination or diagnostic testing. Preemptive discussion with caregivers can help reduce frustration.
- Caregivers may be hesitant to use pre-visit medications because of concerns about safety, side effects, or a belief that their cat does not need them. Discussing their cat's signs of distress, explaining how it may limit the ability to perform procedures such as an oral examination, and emphasizing the benefits for both the cat's welfare and team safety can help caregivers feel more comfortable with their use.

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Cooperative Care

- Cooperative care uses positive reinforcement training to teach cats to voluntarily participate in their own care at home and during veterinary visits. By giving cats choice and control, cooperative care can reduce fear-anxiety, improve wellbeing, and decrease stressors associated with veterinary care.
- Cats can be trained to enter a carrier, step on a scale, offer a paw or leg for procedures (e.g., venipuncture, injections, blood pressure measurement), change position for examination, and/or accept oral medication.
- Common training techniques include targeting, stationing, luring, capturing, and shaping. Targeting is often a useful starting skill because it helps caregivers "ask" a cat to perform a behavior such as entering a carrier, rather than forcing compliance. This gives the cat more control over the interaction and can reduce distress.
- Do not attempt to train cats who are ill, painful, or demonstrating protective behaviors (e.g., hiding, crouching, growling, hissing).
- For more information, see the *FelineVMA Positive Reinforcement Training Educational Toolkit* (**catvets.com/positive-reinforcement**) and Cat Friendly Veterinary Interaction Guidelines (**catvets.com/interaction**).

Transportation to the Practice

- Since veterinary visits are the most common reason cats are transported away from home, safe transport and minimizing distress are important for a successful visit.
- Transport-related stress is a common barrier to veterinary care for cats.
- An appropriate carrier, carrier acclimation, and opportunities to hide are essential for reducing transport-related distress and supporting safe travel.
- For more information, please see the "Purrfect Journey: A Cat Carrier Guide for Caregivers" brochure (**catvets.com/CatFriendly**).





After the Veterinary Visit

- Returning home after a veterinary visit can sometimes increase tension between cats in a multicat household due to unfamiliar scents, changes in appearance, or altered behavior. Preparing caregivers for this possibility can help preserve the positive experience of the veterinary visit.
- Advise caregivers to reintroduce cats gradually in a predictable manner, provide opportunities for each cat to feel safe and comfortable, and consider the use of synthetic feline pheromones during the reintroduction process.
- For detailed guidance on preventing and managing intercat tension following a veterinary visit, see the *2024 AAFP Intercat Tension Guidelines: Recognition, Prevention, and Management* (**catvets.com/tension**).

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Take time to reflect with both the caregiver and veterinary team on what worked well and what could be improved to make future visits even more successful.

Cats remember veterinary experiences. Investing in a positive experience today can reduce distress, improve cooperation, and help future visits go more smoothly.

Cat Friendly Veterinary Environment Guidelines — catvets.com/environment
Intercat Tension Guidelines – catvets.com/tension

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“Stressor Stacking” During the Veterinary Visit

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A cat’s coping ability is influenced by both the number and intensity of that cat’s perceived stressors. For example, cats may cope with being temporarily confined in their carriers at home, but when compounded by enforced confinement, fasting, removal from their territory, transport, sensory stimuli in the waiting area, restraint or handling that is not gentle and often painful, and removal of their sense of security/control, stressor stacking is experienced. This often results in cats being unable to cope and consequently showing signs of protective (negative) emotions and behavioral responses.

Stressor stacking will continue not only during the cat’s visit (e.g., in response to the environment, physical examination, sample collection, treatments, and/or hospitalization), but even at home (e.g., medication administration, reintegrating with the other household cats). This creates a negative experience for the cat (who will remember it at the next appointment).

Fortunately, educating the caregiver on small changes to reduce carrier/transport stress, and changes in the practice environment and veterinary team interactions with feline patients can minimize stressor stacking and result in positive experiences for the cat, caregiver, and veterinary team.

STRESSOR STACKING

Each additional stressor adds to a cat’s overall distress.



Stress builds with each step.
Reducing stress at any point can make a big difference.

Cat Friendly Veterinary Interaction Guidelines — catvets.com/interaction

Cat Friendly Veterinary Environment Guidelines — catvets.com/environment

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