Cat Friendly
The Standards of Feline Care



Creating a Better Veterinary Environment and Experience for Cats

Cats rely on their senses to assess safety. Unfamiliar odors, noises, movements, or even the sight of other animals can increase protective emotions (e.g., fear-anxiety) and behavioral responses can occur. It is vital that cats have a sense of security and control to feel safe. To promote a sense of security, practices should minimize sensory stressors. This handout is designed to help you prepare waiting areas, examination rooms, wards, and other areas where cats may be in the practice environment to prevent sensory arousal.

Waiting Area and Arrival Procedures

Provide separate waiting areas/entrances for cats (away from dogs and other animals) or a creative alternative:	
Why: Waiting areas often expose cats to unfamiliar smells, sounds, sights, and the presence of other animals. Reducing sensory arousal is critical to support a cat's sense of safety and minimize protective emotions and behavioral responses.	**How:** Use dividers, screens, or separate rooms; bring cats directly into the examination room; offer cat-only appointment blocks or a "Cat Concierge" service where clients wait in temperature-controlled vehicles until they can be taken directly into the examination room.
When: Provide for all visits; essential in mixed-species practices.	

Cover carriers:	
Why: Covering the carrier with a blanket or towel minimizes sensory arousal, increases the cat's sense of security, and minimizes distress and stressor stacking (see page 6).	**How:** Advise caregivers to cover carriers before transport with a familiar-scented or pheromone-sprayed blanket or towel. In the practice, provide pheromone-sprayed towels to cover carriers that haven't been covered in transport.
When: Offer pre-visit advice during appointment-reminder calls or messages; upon arrival, provide a towel for cats whose carriers are not already covered.	

Provide elevated surfaces for carrier placement:	
Why: Cats prefer high vantage points to monitor their environment and increase their sense of safety and security.	**How:** Add elevated shelves or perches with partitions so the carriers are not near the ground.
When: Offer in all waiting areas; this is especially important for fearful cats if they cannot go directly into the examination room.	

Schedule appointments to avoid overcrowding and long waits:	
Why: Prolonged exposure to unfamiliar environments, sounds, and smells, as well as close proximity to other animals, increases distress.	**How:** Partition seating in the waiting room; limit simultaneous appointments; call clients if a delay is recognized; give caregivers the option to wait with their cat in their temperature-controlled vehicle or reschedule.
When: Consider for all visits, but especially during peak hours.	

Examination Room Design and Procedures

Dedicate feline-only examination rooms and/or clean examination rooms thoroughly between uses:

Why: Sensory arousal can increase protective emotions and behaviors. Unfamiliar dogs are considered a predator species, which increases distress. A cat-only environment minimizes distress. Since smell is central to feline communication, hunting, social interaction, and sense of security, even odors humans cannot detect can negatively impact the cat. Any unfamiliar or residual odors (e.g., dogs or other animals) or scented products (e.g., cleaning supplies, perfumes, colognes, and deodorants) can signal danger and increase fear-anxiety and frustration, leading to distress and the cat's inability to cope in the environment. Cats also have very sensitive hearing so unfamiliar, sudden, or loud noises can heighten arousal. Cats can recognize other cats in images/photos and they can perceive staring eyes as threatening, which may increase fear-anxiety by mimicking territorial challenges.

How: Assign specific examination rooms for cats, ideally away from barking dogs, noisy spaces, areas where staff/clients congregate (use soft voices), and loud equipment. Once assigned, you can tailor for cat appointments by using cat-sized equipment. If not possible, clean the examination rooms with unscented products thoroughly between use. Avoid using alcohol for blood draws due to the strong scent (dilute chlorhexidine instead); dry areas of venipuncture thoroughly. Use white noise machines or play cat-specific calming music and minimize noise from doorbells and phones. Do not display cat-shaped statues or pictures of cats, especially if the photos include eyes.

When: For all cats and any shared examination rooms.

Prepare Cat Friendly examination room(s) in advance:

Why: It is important to prepare the room and bring in whatever is needed in advance to avoid movement in and out of the room, which can cause arousal and make the examination more difficult.

How: Use feline synthetic pheromones (see page 4). Provide cats with options of safe spaces (e.g., hiding options such as a high-sided cat bed or the bottom half of the carrier; benches, perches, safe places on the floor). Provide warmed bedding and towels because the preferred ambient temperature for cats is much higher than ours (never place cats on cold surfaces). Prepare the examination room with all necessary supplies needed for the specific patient to minimize patient distress (e.g., small pet scale, vaccines, diagnostic kit, etc. — see full list in the Cat Friendly Veterinary Environment Guidelines at **catvets.com/environment**).

When: Provide for all feline examinations.

Allow cats to acclimate and exit carriers voluntarily:

Why: Forcing an exit from the carrier increases fear-anxiety and possibly pain; voluntary exit gives the cat some control, promoting positive engaging emotions. This allows the visit to start positively and allows the veterinary team to determine how best to interact with the individual patient.

How: Place the carrier on the floor or a bench — not the exam table — and open the door. Provide treats to entice the cat to voluntarily exit the carrier. Take the cat's history and start with the non-physical examination and observation (e.g., behavior, pain, neurological assessment, etc.) while waiting for the cat to exit the carrier. If the cat does not exit on their own, quietly disassemble the carrier, allowing the cat to remain in the bottom half, partially or fully covered with a towel, to increase their sense of security.

When: Allow time at the start of the visit while obtaining the patient's history, unless the appointment is for an urgent medical need.

Perform examinations in cat-preferred locations and positions:

Why: Cats should be given choices whenever possible. Whether a cat prefers to remain in the carrier, on a bench, or on the floor, flexibility from the veterinary team helps support the cat's sense of control and safety. Forcing specific positions or locations can increase fear-anxiety and pain.

How: Give the cat the choice to sit, stand, or lie down. Examine the cat in the bottom half of the carrier, a high-sided cat bed, on a lap//bench/perch, on the floor, or under bedding — wherever the cat seems most comfortable; narrate actions calmly to caregivers. Provide soft surfaces — layer non-slip mats, pet-safe heated blankets (or warmed towels), or fleece.

When: Utilize for all patients, and make further adaptations for painful or older cats.

Weigh cats with minimal handling:

Why: Extra handling contributes to stressor stacking (see page 6); this method avoids unnecessary movement.

How: Entice the cat with treats, a toy, or praise, to walk onto a small pet/infant scale covered with a towel and tared. If the cat cannot be enticed, weigh the carrier with the cat inside, along with bedding, etc.; when the cat must be removed from the carrier, subtract to find the cat's weight OR 'tare' the carrier on the scale and place the cat within at the end of the visit to obtain the weight.

When: Weigh at the end of the visit, if possible, to reduce handling and unnecessary stressors.

Examination Room Design and Procedures (Continued)

Only use gentle handling techniques, not "restraint":

Why: Studies indicate that restraint (manual, mechanical, or physical force used to limit a cat's movement) increases protective emotions, undesirable behavioral responses, and negatively impacts welfare. In contrast, working cooperatively with cats promotes positive emotional states and minimizes fear and pain, reducing self-protective behaviors that can compromise human safety. These behaviors are normal survival responses intended to increase distance from perceived threats.

- Restraint can escalate protective emotions (fear-anxiety and pain), leading to behavioral responses such as hissing, swatting, or scratching that are undesirable to the veterinary team. It is important to recognize the cat is responding to their emotions by exhibiting behaviors to protect themselves and ensure survival during a perceived threat. Because of this, the terms "aggressive" and "fight" are not used in the context of cat handling. These behaviors are referred to as repelling responses, and have the aim of increasing distance from, and decreasing interaction with, a potential threat. Unless the veterinary team adjusts their approach to provide gentle handling methods which respect the cat's preferences, it can lead to protective (negative) behaviors and a bad experience for all.
  Note: even in an emergency, scruffing should not be an option for handling due to increased distress and pain.
- Cats perceive direct staring, looming over them, and involuntary handling as threatening sensory cues. When a cat feels unable to escape or control the interaction, protective behavioral responses (e.g., hissing, swatting, biting) are more likely to occur. Using gentle, cooperative handling reduces these responses and improves both feline welfare and human safety. Most cats' preferred places to be touched are over their facial glands and head region. At the practice, this should be respected by invitation-only (i.e., initiated by the cat).

How: All veterinary teams should develop an understanding of cats' unique interaction and handling needs (see Cat Friendly Veterinary Interaction Guidelines [**catvets.com/interaction**] and the Cat Friendly Certificate Program [**catvets.com/certificate**]).

- Do not talk loudly
- Offer a soft hand or knuckle (not a pointed finger) without getting too close so the cat can choose to sniff and interact further
- Approach the cat from the side or behind and at their level (do not loom or lean over the cat)
- Avoid direct eye contact or staring (instead use slow blinks in the direction of the cat)
- Do not corner the cat
- Use a loose towel cover to provide a hiding option to provide the cat a sense of safety
- Avoid forcing movement or holding the cat in place whenever possible, as restrictive handling reduces the cat's sense of control and increases distress
- Split parts of the exam into short segments with breaks (starting with least invasive and non-painful regions first vs. going "head to toe")
- Avoid touching areas the cat dislikes and saving that part of the examination until the end
- Consider pre-visit anxiolytics
- Offer high-value treats as a distraction and/or to reward calm or cooperative behavior
- Move slowly and deliberately

When: Use during all examinations, diagnostics and other procedures and treatments. ***Note: Trust is not transferable — each team member must build rapport with the cat before handling.***

Administer analgesics or sedation before painful examination, procedures, or treatments:

Why: Pain amplifies fear-anxiety; pre-treatment minimizes discomfort and enhances welfare.	**How:** Use drugs such as buprenorphine for pain and/or pregabalin/gabapentin to further alleviate pain and reduce anxiety (depending on the cat's health status; dose per Cat Friendly Veterinary Interaction Guidelines).

When: Administer for examinations involving painful areas or highly fearful cats.





Permission provided by: hedgehog94/stock.adobe.com (left); the Feline Veterinary Medical Association (FelineVMA). 2022 AAFP/ISFM Cat Friendly Veterinary Interaction Guidelines: Approach and Handling Techniques. **catvets.com/interaction** *(center); and Ellen Carozza (right)*

Hospitalization and Ward Procedures

Separate cat wards from dog wards to minimize visibility and arousal:

Why: Since cats are highly sensitive to sensory stimuli, seeing, hearing, or smelling unfamiliar dogs or cats usually causes fear-anxiety and frustration.	**How:** Separate cat and dog wards with solid walls and soundproofing. Cat wards should be in a quiet location away from dog wards and other noisy areas. If this is not possible, schedule appointments so cats and louder dogs aren't housed in the ward at the same time. Cages should be along one wall or back-to-back (not facing each other). If not possible, partially cover cages with towels, sheer drapes, or a shower curtain to provide visual barriers.
When: For all inpatients; this is critical in multi-species wards.	

Allow places to hide and perch:

Why: Offering hiding options and perches to monitor the environment provide a sense of control and safety, minimizing protective emotions.	**How:** Provide sturdy boxes, carriers, and/or high sided beds in cages, as well as a place to perch.
When: Provide in all cages; especially for stays longer than a day or if the cat is attempting to hide. For critical patients who need frequent monitoring, provide cat beds or towels that allow constant visibility of the patient.	

Furnish cages for comfort and to meet feline essential needs:

Why: Not meeting a cat's environmental needs increases distress. Familiar scents and soft materials help maintain a sense of security.	**How:** Provide pheromone-sprayed bedding, toys, and puzzles; offer familiar food (in small meals), bedding, and litter; play quiet cat music; separate litter, water, and food areas as far as possible. Have caregivers bring blankets and/or towels from home to mirror familiar and comforting scents.
When: Provide in all cages; especially for stays longer than a day; monitor and adjust daily.	

Control ward environment (lighting, temperature, ventilation):

Why: Cats prefer warmer environments, and cold surfaces or drafty conditions can increase discomfort and distress. Bright lights add to a cat's distress. Optimal settings aid relaxation.	**How:** Use dimmable lights and ensure fresh air without strong odors. Provide heated cages or safely warmed bedding. Towel warmers or safely heated pet mats or cat beds increase thermal comfort.
When: Offer 24/7 in wards.	

Limit handling and consider allowing caregiver visits:

Why: Excessive interaction by the veterinary team results in distress for many cats. Caregiver familiarity reduces isolation.	**How:** "Spot cleaning" of soiled areas with minimal disruption allows the cat's scent to remain and limits handling. Assign consistent team members to examine and perform procedures, with the cat remaining in the cage whenever possible. Schedule caregiver visits for quieter times.
When: For all hospitalized cats; handling only as necessary.	

Use of Synthetic Feline Pheromones

Why: Synthetic feline pheromones mimic the comforting facial pheromones cats deposit when rubbing (F3 fraction), which signals safety and reduces anxiety/arousal by creating a sense of familiarity. Veterinary behaviorists often recommend using a combined/complex pheromone with calming facial pheromones for practice use, as well as to minimize distress of unfamiliar cats in the home. Synthetic pheromones can help the cat feel safe and secure ahead of time, ultimately preventing protective emotions and the escalation of behavioral responses.	**How:** Use in waiting areas, examination rooms, and wards; spray on towels, blankets, scrubs, carriers, and/or cage surfaces (follow product instructions). Sprays or mists generally work within 15-30 minutes, so prepare materials prior to the appointment if possible; reapplication every 4-5 hours is necessary to maintain efficacy. Diffusers must be plugged in a minimum of 24 hours prior to cat appointments.
When: Start before the visit with home education on the use of pheromones in the car, carrier, carrier bedding, and towel/blanket covering the carrier. Prepare towels and blankets while setting up for the appointment. Offer a pheromone-infused towel in the lobby to cover the carrier. Utilize pheromone-sprayed items throughout the visit, especially for anxious cats and during examinations, handling, or hospitalization.	

General Staff and Client Education Practices

Train staff on feline emotions and behavior, create a Cat Friendly culture, and appoint cat advocates:	
Why: Empathetic handling prevents mishandling-induced fear-anxiety, pain, and frustration; education and practice builds consistency, creates a better experience, and increases caregiver loyalty and compliance; a Cat Friendly environment supports the unique needs of cats.	**How:** Require feline-specific CE (consider the Cat Friendly Certificate Program); designate advocates for training and protocol oversight; walk through the veterinary experience from a cat's point of view and make small creative changes to support feline needs (see Cat Friendly Veterinary Environment Guidelines [**catvets.com/environment**]).
When: Training is ongoing; especially for new hires or annual reviews.	

Educate clients on pre- and post-visit preparation:	
Why: Home preparation reduces transport/arrival distress and avoids stressor stacking (see page 6), which improves the overall experience for everyone. Returning home to a multi-cat household can create tension due to the cat smelling or looking different (bandage, clipped fur, etc.).	**How:** Provide tips on carrier training and educate on pre-visit anxiolytic medication (if applicable); See the "Cat Friendly At Home" handout, the "Purrfect Journey: A Cat Carrier Guide for Caregivers" brochure (**catvets.com/CatFriendly**) and "Visiting Your Veterinarian" brochure (**catvets.com/brochures**) for more information. Educate caregivers to slowly re-introduce a cat back into a multi-cat home after the visit (keeping the cat in the carrier and/or a separate room), and to watch for signs of tension. Read more in the FelineVMA's Intercat Tension Guidelines at **catvets.com/tension**.
When: For pre-visit: utilize during appointment scheduling or reminders. For post-visit: discuss during the appointment.	

Monitor and respond to signs of distress:	
Why: Early intervention prevents escalation of protective emotions or "stressor stacking" associated with a veterinary visit. See Stressor Stacking information on page 6.	**How:** Watch for subtle cues (e.g., ears rotated to the side, dilated pupils, splayed whiskers, tail flicking, crouched position, hypervigilance); adjust approaches accordingly to minimize feline protective behaviors. See the "Current Feline Interactions and Handling Recommendations" handout for more information (**catvets.com/CatFriendly**).
When: Monitor and adjust to signs of distress over the course of the veterinary experience (before, during, and after) because a cat's emotions can change throughout the entire visit; at the end of the visit record the cat's emotional state and helpful tips in charts for future reference (i.e., prefers to be examined on the floor, likes lickable treats, preferred venipuncture site, etc.).	

Use positive reinforcement and distractions:	
Why: Positive reinforcement of desired and positive behaviors can prolong the behavior or increase its frequency. Rewards build rapport (by tossing from a distance), distract (by offering during handling and procedures), and reinforce desirable behaviors.	**How:** Offer a variety of rewards (i.e., treats, toy play, and/or social interaction such as petting, grooming, or talking to the cat in a calming voice) to find which the cat prefers. Food acceptance is often driven more by smell and texture than taste alone, so try a variety of treat options (e.g. lickable, canned, soft, hard, etc.) and record in the medical record for future visits.
When: For all cats except those who are nauseous, anorexic, or very ill.	







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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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