VISITING YOUR VET

Taking your cat to the veterinary clinic: a guide for cat carers

Visits to the veterinary clinic are an important part of caring for your cat. However, putting your cat in a carrier and transporting them to and from the clinic can be stressful for you and your cat. Fortunately, there are many ways to make the experience more pleasant for you both.

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international cat care

Introduction

As carers, keeping our cats healthy is a top priority. The earlier an illness is diagnosed, the easier it is to treat, so regular check-ups and examinations with the veterinary team will help your cat have a long and healthy life. Trying to avoid upsetting your cat, or causing them stress associated with a trip to the vet (Figure 1) is understandable, but could harm your cat's health. This guide describes how to prepare for a veterinary clinic visit, including the choice of cat carrier, travel considerations and tips for settling your cat back in at home afterwards.

If possible, always choose a clinic accredited as a Cat Friendly Clinic for your veterinary care. For further information on how this will benefit your cat, see International Cat Care's 'Cat Carer Guide to cat friendly veterinary care' (available at icatcare.org/advice-cat-carer-guides) and catfriendlyclinic.org.

Figure 1: 'Stressors' are things that upset a cat. There are many reasons a cat may be stressed by visiting a veterinary clinic and these can 'stack up', resulting in the cat experiencing fear.
Source: International Cat Care

Positive carrier experiences

Helping your cat associate the carrier with positive experiences will help them to feel comfortable with going to the vet.

- Put something warm, soft and familiar in the carrier for the cat to cuddle up in, such as a blanket they have been sleeping on.
- Synthetic feline pheromones can be sprayed into the carrier 15 minutes before travel.
- Drape a familiar-smelling towel or blanket over the carrier to help your cat feel safe and secure.
- If possible, provide a small and tasty food treat or some toys in the carrier.
- When moving the carrier, do not hold by the handle alone, as this could make the cat feel unsteady. Support the carrier underneath to keep it level and minimise movement (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Support the cat carrier from underneath to reduce movement and keep it level.
Source: Lucy Daniels

Preparation for a veterinary visit

It is very important to get your cat used to visiting the clinic and make it a positive experience. Ideally, this preparation is started at an early age. However, adult and older cats can still benefit and become comfortable being transported in their carrier (see box).

Choosing the right cat carrier

It is important to choose a carrier that is safe and secure to avoid your cat escaping. However, there are other considerations too. Try to avoid soft fabric carriers, as these can collapse and are hard to keep clean, while 'backpack' style carriers can cause excessive movement (Figure 3). Carriers without removable tops or top openings make it more difficult for the veterinary team to examine the cat at the clinic.

A sturdy plastic carrier is preferred (Figure 4) and can be easily cleaned. The top half of the carrier can be removed, allowing your cat to be examined while remaining in the

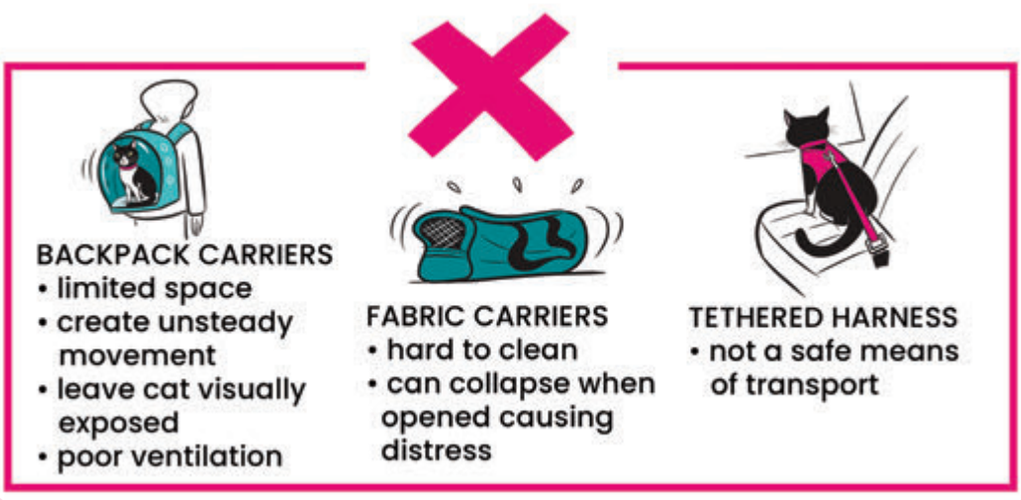

Figure 3: Some ways of transporting cats to the vet should be avoided.
Source: Lili Chin with International Cat Care

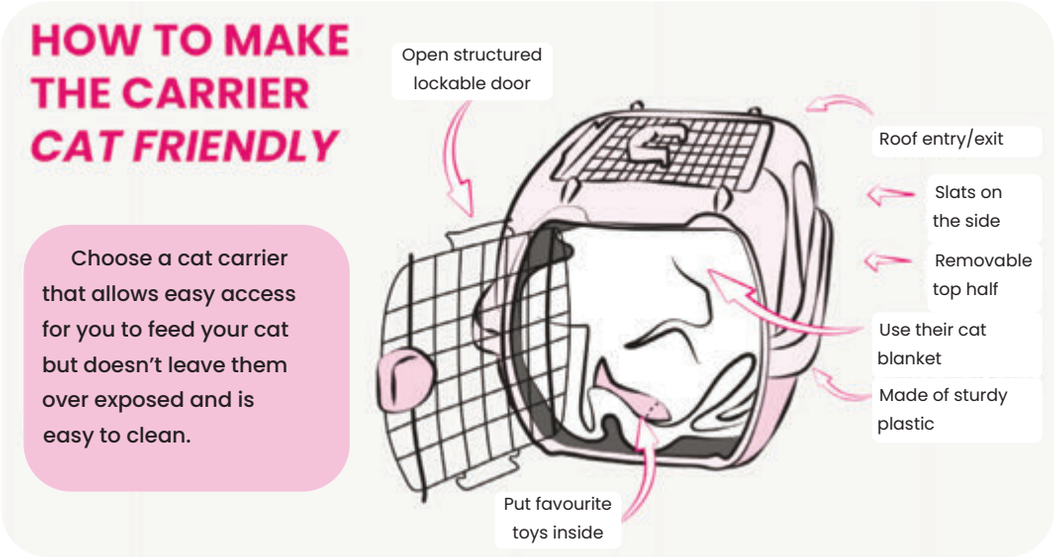

Figure 4: The right carrier choice can reduce the stress of travel and examination at the clinic. Source: International Cat Care

bottom half, feeling safe. Ensure you have enough carriers to have one per cat, as even cats that get on well should be transported in separate carriers (when stressed and confined they may behave differently).

Putting your cat into the cat carrier

Ideally, your cat enters the carrier voluntarily, perhaps encouraged by a treat or a toy, or having been trained to enter (see below). However, where a cat needs to be put into a carrier, this should always be done gently and calmly as shown in this video from International Cat Care: youtube.com/watch?v=Yhz3V4i3wH4&t=5s.

Getting your cat used to the carrier

All too often a carrier is stored away in a garage, basement or shed until needed. However, it is much better to incorporate the carrier into a part of the house the cat likes to spend time in, and sleep in, and encourage them to use it as a resting place (Figure 5). This means the carrier has familiar smells and feels comfortable for your cat. It also means the carrier is immediately available in the event of an

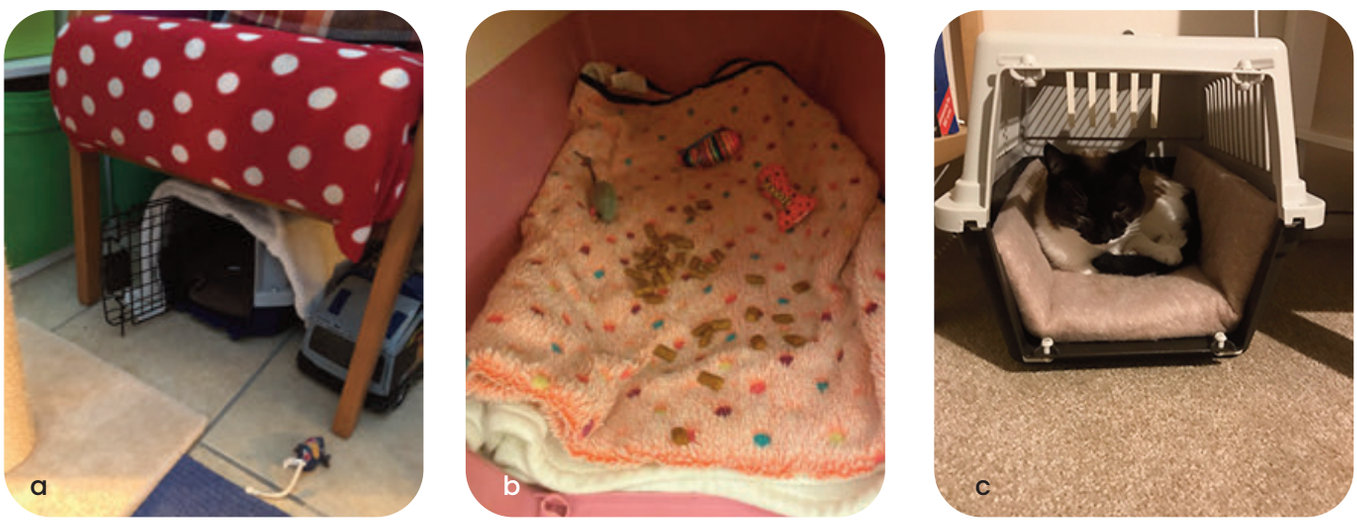

Figure 5: (a) A carrier in quiet safe position in the home; (b) comfortable blankets and treats and toys to encourage the cat to use the carrier; and (c) a cat resting comfortably in their carrier at home. Source: (a) Sam Taylor, (b) Laura Watson and (c) Nathalie Dowgray

emergency. Add a comfortable blanket and offer the cat treats regularly in the carrier so that it feels a pleasant place to be.

Training your cat to use the cat carrier

We often think that cats can't be 'trained' in the same way we might train a dog. However, cats are clever and able to learn to enter their carrier if we teach them that it can be a positive experience. Training can take time and patience, but it is worth it as your cat will need to visit the vet, or possibly travel to other places, many times during their lifetime. The steps involved in this process are illustrated in Figure 6 and in a series of videos available at catfriendlyclinic.org/cat-owners/getting-your-cat-to-the-vet.

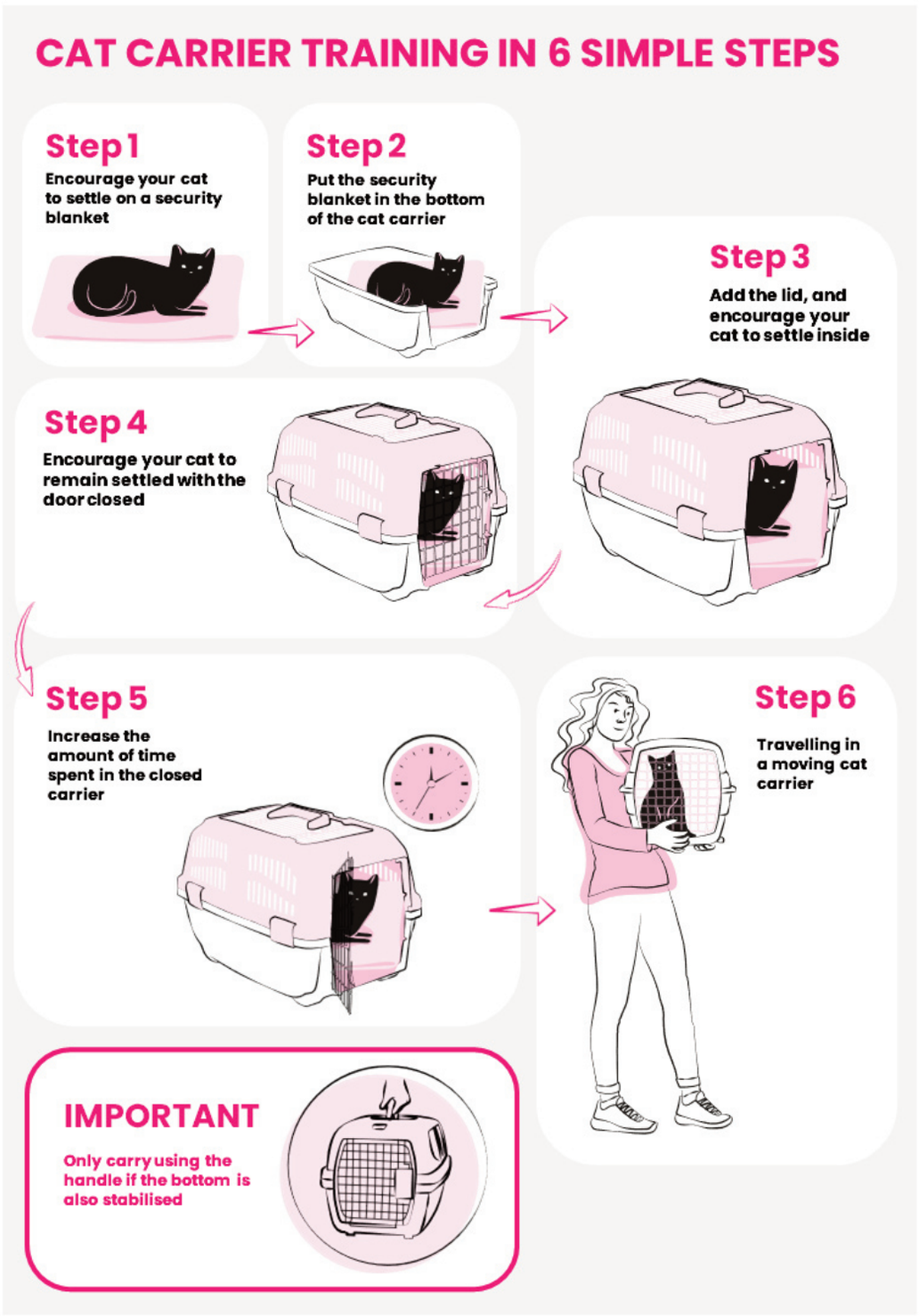

Figure 6: A guide to training your cat to feel relaxed in their carrier. Allow time for your cat to be comfortable with each step before moving on to the next. Source International Cat Care

When medication can be helpful

For some cats, travelling to the vet is extremely stressful despite efforts to improve their experience. This might be due to previous negative experiences or the individual cat's temperament. In such situations it can be very helpful to give the cat some medication prescribed by your veterinarian prior to the clinic visit. Gabapentin is the most commonly used medication for this purpose, and has been shown to be effective in reducing a cat's anxiety and helping them feel calm during travel and at the clinic. Your veterinarian can advise you accordingly, so do discuss this if your cat remains very anxious and scared travelling to the clinic. It is also a good idea to trial the medication before the actual appointment to ensure it is effective and has no side effects.

Just like us, cats can experience travel sickness, and may be sick (vomit) in their carrier, or may drool and swallow a lot without actually being sick. If you suspect your cat does feel unwell travelling, discuss suitable anti-sickness medication with your veterinarian for use prior to travel.

Travelling with your cat to the veterinary clinic

Travelling to the veterinary clinic – whether in a car, on a train or bus, or on foot – will likely be unsettling for your cat. The motion, and new and strange noises, sights and smells, may frighten them. Some simple strategies can help, including:

- Covering the cat carrier with a blanket or towel (which could also be sprayed 15 minutes before travel with synthetic feline pheromones);
- Making sure the carrier is secure in the car, ideally in the footwell behind the front seats (Figure 7);
- Using a buggy or trolley for the carrier, to reduce 'swinging' motion while walking;
- Placing the carrier on plastic sheets/ bags in case of soiling, and carrying spare blankets and absorbent tissues if taking a longer journey. Discuss with your veterinary team if your cat urinates or defecates in the carrier, as it may indicate that your cat is feeling sick or frightened;
- Ensuring the car is well ventilated and at an appropriate temperature for your cat.

Never be tempted to open a cat's carrier, whatever the type of transport, even if they are meowing, as this is not safe for you or your cat. Use a quiet, calm voice

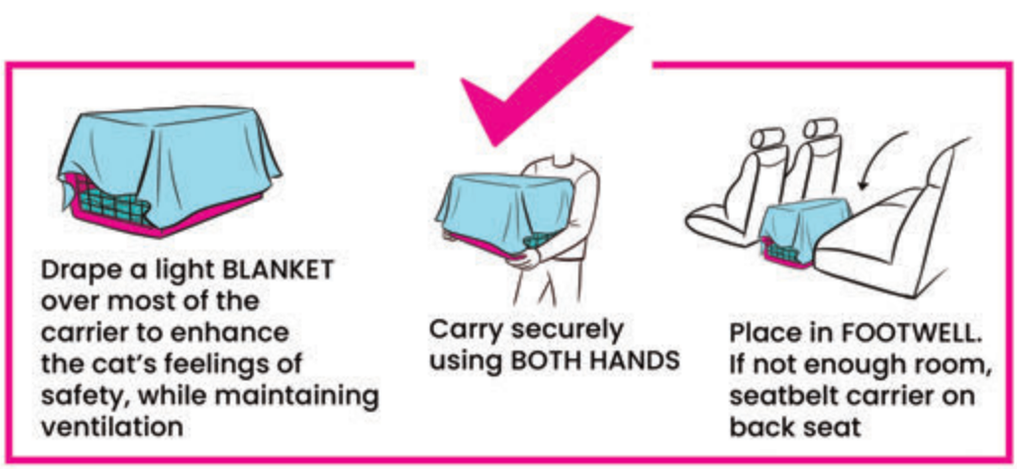

Figure 7: How to transport your cat in their carrier so they are safe and feel secure.
Source: Lili Chin with International Cat Care

to reassure them and consider carrier training, as discussed above, before future journeys; if your cat is very distressed travelling, discuss appropriate medication with your veterinarian.

Returning home

On returning home – in particular after an overnight or longer stay in the veterinary clinic – your cat will smell very different to other cats at home. Additionally, they may have a bandage, clipped hair or a collar, all of which will make them look different. This may result in cats that previously got along well, hissing or swiping at, or avoiding each other. Therefore, it is always best to reintroduce the returning cat considerately:

- Try not to overwhelm the returning cat with attention from humans or animals at home;
- Keep the returning cat in a separate room with all they need to be comfortable (food, water, litter tray and comfy bed), particularly if they have had an operation and could be still feeling the effects of the anaesthetic medication;
- The returning cat will begin to smell familiar again through grooming themselves and contact with the home environment. Placing bedding from areas where the cats rest, in their separate rooms, will help to re-establish familiar 'home' smells;
- After a few hours, or possibly a day following a longer hospital stay, gradually allow supervised contact;
- Watch the cats' responses. If there is any aggression or running away from each other they may need more time separately before trying again;
- Use of synthetic feline pheromone plug-ins and sprays where the cats spend most of their time can be helpful.

Further information and tips

We all want our cats to be healthy and happy, and efforts to make trips to the vet easier will benefit both you and your cat. Discuss any concerns with your veterinary team and refer to International Cat Care's 'Cat Friendly Clinic' resources at catfriendlyclinic.org for further information and tips.

Support our work

We hope that you found this free Cat Carer Guide from International Cat Care useful. If you would like to show your gratitude, a donation would be greatly appreciated. Every gift goes to support our work towards a world in which each cat's life experience will be as good as it can be. To find out more, or to make a donation, please go to: **icatcare.org/support-us/donate**

Thank you from all of us at International Cat Care and on behalf of cats.