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Cat Behavior and Training – Crate Training and Travel

Why are cats so reluctant to travel?

Cats are highly attached to territory, and movement away from that secure base is not something that is undertaken lightly! Traveling in cars, planes and other forms of human transportation can be a very stressful experience for all concerned, in part because the cat is no longer in control of its own experience.

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For cats that are not used to being confined to a crate, being confined in a carrier adds insult to injury and the cat's fear of leaving its familiar surroundings is compounded by its fear of being enclosed. In addition, cats that are not used to the motion and sounds of the car or plane may become quite frightened by the experience.



My cat seems to get worse with every journey. Why doesn't he get used to it?

For most cats, travel is a relatively uncommon experience and there is simply not enough opportunity for any significant level of habituation to be achieved. Unlike dogs, who come to see the car as a chance to accompany their owners on what might be a fun and adventurous outing, most cats see travel as an entirely negative experience and the likely destinations of feline transport confirm this. Visiting destinations such as veterinary clinics, boarding kennels, and unfamiliar or new homes are probably the most common destinations for a travelling cat and none of these give much opportunity for teaching cats that travel is fun! Thus, each subsequent trip may be more anxiety evoking than the last.

I want my cat to travel happily in the car. Can I teach it?

"The best time to teach cats is when they are very young."

Cats can certainly learn to enjoy car travel and there are cats that actively seek the inside of the family car and happily purr for the entire journey. In most cases these cats have been taught to travel; the best time to teach them is when they are very young. There is a period in the kitten's life when it is most likely to adapt to new experiences and when it can come to accept just about anything as being normal, provided that it is fun! Unfortunately this period occurs very early in the kitten's life and therefore the responsibility for introducing kittens to car travel may need to be undertaken by breeders. However, few breeders have the time to ensure that all of their charges are taken for daily trips in the car. Realistically, it will be the new owners who need to start the introduction process and, even when the primary period of sensitivity has passed (after 2 months of age), short frequent pleasurable car trips will still be very valuable. Taking along some favorite treats or play toys and travelling to pleasant destinations on the first few trips can help to ensure positive experiences.

Although cats perching in the back window of a car may look cute it is important to ensure that your cat is under control during a journey and in most cases this will mean confining the cat to a carrier of some sort. Of course, this can lead to further fear and anxiety if your cat has not been crate trained.

My cat reacts badly to the carrier. What can I do?



One of the major sources of stress for cats during travel is confinement within a cat carrier that has only been used to transport the cat. If either the travel itself or the destination is unpleasant, the cat will develop further negative associations with the carrier, seeing it as a signal of the impending veterinary clinic visit or airplane ride. Training kittens to enjoy being in their carrying boxes can make these outings far less traumatic for all involved. Many kittens learn to use a carrier as a safe area or bed if you begin at a young age to associate the carrier with exploration, play, food or sleeping. Even when cats are older it is possible to break down the negative image of the carrier and work to make it a safe haven rather than a prison cell. For cats that get accustomed to spending time in their carrier, the carrier may actually help to settle the cat when the cat is traveling, visiting, or hospitalized. How secure an individual cat feels when placed in its carrier will depend on the amount and type of previous training, as well as individual personality differences between cats.

"The first step is to select the right kind of carrier for your cat."

The first step is to select the right sort of carrier for your cat. There are a number of things to consider. The ease of cleaning and the way in which you put the cat into, and take it out of, the carrier are factors that are likely to be determined by your own preferences. Some cats are far more relaxed when they can see what is going on around them, in which case a wire basket is better for them. Others feel more secure when they are totally hidden from view, and a solid cat carrier will be a better choice for these individuals. Cats may prefer to enter and investigate carriers that have a front opening, a top opening or both. However, for owners, removing the cat from the top may be easier, especially if the cat is not ready or willing to voluntarily leave its carrier.

Whichever type of cat carrier you purchase, the most important step is to introduce the cat to a carrier for which there has been no previous negative experience and to keep it available for the cat to investigate. You can increase the chances that the cat will use or explore the carrier by putting treats, play toys or food inside, by lining it with a warm blanket, and by keeping it in an area where the cat likes to play and sleep. In some cases, beginning with the top off the carrier may encourage investigation and as the cat becomes more comfortable the carrier can be closed. Some cats may quickly take to the carrier as a sleeping, security or hiding area. Do not attempt to force your cat into the carrier. Your cat should first learn to enjoy and feel comfortable in the carrier before you begin to use it for transport.

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I do not have time to introduce my cat to its carrier in this controlled way. What can I do to make the car trip next week more bearable?

If you must travel with your cat and have not had time to introduce your cat to its carrier, it is important to take steps to make the confinement as stress-free as possible. Putting familiar bedding inside the carrier, together with a favorite toy, can be helpful. The idea is to make the carrier smell familiar and therefore reassure the cat that it is safe.



Another possible way in which to increase the familiarity of the carrier is to apply a synthetic feline facial pheromone, such as Feliway®. This pheromone may help the cat to relax during the journey and, in trials, it has been shown to decrease the signs of anxiety in cats during car travel and during hospital stays, especially when sprayed into the cat's own carrier. In order to be most effective it must be applied to the interior of the carrier 30 minutes before you need to put your cat inside.

Should I consider a sedative for car or airline travel?

"Individual cats can act very differently to sedatives and anti-anxiety medications."

If your cat becomes distressed during travel, medication is certainly an option. However, individual cats can act very differently to sedatives and anti-anxiety medications. Selecting the right medication for any individual is not always easy. You also need to be aware that medication may not last for the entire duration of your plane trip and therefore should not be used as an alternative to the behavior therapy approaches discussed above. Your cat will still need to be prepared for its travel by being introduced carefully to the carrier and the feline facial scent might also be used within the carrier to make the journey less stressful. This applies to long car journeys as well as plane travel. If you feel that medication is necessary because of the severity of your cat's reaction to travel, you will need to discuss this in detail with your veterinarian. It may be useful to use a trial dose prior to traveling to determine the effects that it has on your cat as well as the optimum dose. Although sedatives can reduce motion sickness and may help your cat to sleep through the trip, they do not reduce anxiety and may pose some risk for cats that are elderly or have heart or other underlying illnesses. Anti-anxiety drugs and natural compounds that reduce anxiety are another option you might discuss with your veterinarian. They are a better choice for reducing anxiety but may not reduce motion sickness and are not as effective for sedation (see Medications and Consent Form and Medication – Complementary).

*This client information sheet is based on material written by: Debra Horwitz, DVM, DACVB & Gary Landsberg, DVM, DACVB, DECAWBM
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