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Travel – Airplane Travel with your Cat

I'm planning an airplane trip and would like to take my cat with me. What arrangements are necessary?

Cats travel on planes every day. Although some highly publicized mishaps occur on rare occasions, most can be avoided if some simple precautions are followed.

It is crucial to contact your airline well in advance of your trip and discuss travelling requirements for your cat to avoid a last minute crisis.

"Take direct flights whenever possible, and try to avoid connections and layovers."

Take direct flights whenever possible, and try to avoid connections and layovers. Sometimes, this is easier to achieve if the travel occurs during the week. Avoid the busiest travel times so airline personnel will have extra time to handle your cat. The well-being of your cat could be a source of concern if the baggage connection between flights should be missed.

Determine whether the airline has requirements for "acclimation." In the event that you are unable to book a direct flight, your cat and carrier may be left outside the plane for a period of time. To avoid liability on their part, some airlines require a letter from your veterinarian stating that your pet is acclimated to a minimum or maximum temperature. It is important to find out if the airline requires that your veterinarian give a precise acclimation temperature, such as 20°F (-7°C) for a specified period of time.



Verify the airline's policy regarding baggage liability, especially with respect to pets. In some cases, your general baggage liability coverage will include your pet. Check your ticket for liability limits or, better yet, speak directly with the airline. If you are sending an economically valuable pet to another person via air, you may need additional liability insurance.

"Some airlines will allow one pet in coach and one in first class, with some provisions."

Some airlines will allow one pet in coach and one in first class, with some provisions. You will need to book in advance with the airline if you plan to travel with your cat in the cabin. Your cat must remain within its carrier during the flight, and must not disturb your fellow passengers. There may be an additional cost for this privilege. Before purchasing it, check the cage dimensions and airline requirements so that there won't be a problem stowing the carrier beneath the seat. Some airlines require that the pet be able to stand upright in the carrier. A collapsible fabric carrier is suitable for this situation.

Are there any special veterinary considerations?



Have your cat examined by your veterinarian in advance of the trip, especially if it has been more than a few months since the last health check. This is especially important for senior cats (over seven years of age). Travel by plane can pose a risk for cats with heart or kidney disease, or with some other pre-existing medical problems. Some short-faced breeds such as Himalayans, Persians and Exotic Shorthairs can run into respiratory difficulty if they are in a confined carrier or are placed in the cargo compartment of the airplane, especially in hot or humid weather. If any of these concerns apply to your cat, be sure to discuss the advisability of airplane travel with your veterinarian.

Purchase any pet supplies that you might need in advance of your trip. These include heartworm and flea preventive or any prescription medications that your cat may require. If your cat is on a specific diet, especially a therapeutic diet, you need to ensure that it will be available at your destination or take along a sufficient supply.

"If you are travelling to a foreign country, you may need to provide a specific international health certificate signed by a government-approved veterinarian or other government official."

Be sure that you have written proof of current vaccinations, especially rabies vaccination, and a valid health certificate. These documents cannot be obtained "after the fact." You must be able to present them on demand. If you are travelling to a foreign country, you may need to provide a specific international health certificate signed by a government-approved veterinarian or other government official. The specific requirements vary by country, either within North America or to other continents. It is your responsibility to ensure that you meet all criteria for your chosen destination. Some countries have specific requirements for blood testing or anti-parasitic treatment that must be performed within a certain time interval prior to the trip. The specific requirements can be obtained from the consulate's office, or by searching government websites for the country of interest. It may take several days to weeks to get test results or obtain the appropriate paperwork, so be sure to research your destination's requirements prior to travel. You should also inquire about any quarantine requirements for your cat, especially if you are travelling to an island country.

How should I prepare my cat for the flight?

Your cat should always travel with an updated identification tag attached to a collar or harness. The tag should contain contact information in case the cat escapes from its carrier. You should include a leash for secure restraint in case the cat needs to be taken out of the carrier. Make sure that the carrier has been clearly marked with some form of permanent identification, including your name, telephone number, flight schedule, destination, and the telephone numbers of someone at the point of destination. For additional security, all pets that travel should be microchipped prior to travel (and you should take a copy of the number with you for reference). For further information, see our handout "Microchipping".



"Do not tranquilize or sedate your cat unless you have discussed this with your veterinarian."

Do not tranquilize or sedate your cat unless you have discussed this with your veterinarian. Cats do not tolerate some medicines well and giving over-the-counter or prescription pharmaceuticals can be dangerous, even fatal. Altitude and pressurized cabins can create additional stress on your cat. Your veterinarian will advise you on safe medications if you feel that your cat needs to be sedated for travel. In order to determine the most appropriate dose, your veterinarian may recommend giving a "test dose" of the medication to determine its effect in advance of the trip.

Avoid feeding your cat within 4–6 hours of the flight. You should provide fresh water until boarding time. Take along a supply of drinking water to provide your cat with fresh water during layovers and waits. Give your cat fresh water as soon as you arrive at your destination. If you have a senior cat with marginal kidney function, it is important that it not be deprived of water, even for a few hours. There are collapsible water containers that should fit in your cat's carrier and can be left filled during the flight. Discuss this with your veterinarian. In these cases, try to book a direct flight with no layovers.

What should I look for in a travel cat carrier?

Your cat's travel carrier will be its "home" for much of your trip. It's important to choose the right carrier for its comfort. Here are some helpful guidelines:

- The carrier should provide sufficient room for the cat to stand up and turn around easily, but not so large that the cat can be tossed about inside during turbulence. Remember that airlines have special requirements for onboard carriers so be sure to check with them before your destination.
- The walls of the carrier should be strong enough to prevent the sides from being crushed. The flooring of the cage should not allow urine to leak through the bottom. You can place a disposable absorbent puppy-training pad or an underpad designed for bedridden people with bladder control problems in the bottom of the carrier.
- The carrier should have good ventilation. Mesh panels and numerous holes or slits are characteristics of a good quality carrier.
- The carrier must have sturdy handles for baggage personnel to use.
- The carrier should have a water tray that is accessible from the outside so that water can be added when needed.
- Try to familiarize your cat with the travel carrier before you leave for your trip. Give your cat access to the carrier both with the door open and closed. This will help eliminate some of your cat's stress during the trip.



Pet stores, breeders, and kennels usually sell carriers that meet these requirements. Some airlines recommend specific carriers that they prefer to use. Check with the airline to see if they have other requirements or recommendations.

What about a carry-on kennel?

Cats may be allowed in the passenger cabin as long as the carrier will fit under the seat. Soft, airline-approved, carry-on kennels, sometimes called Sherpa bags, are available. Be sure to check with your airline regarding their specific carry-on policies and requirements. There may be an extra charge to take your cat in the passenger cabin.

What arrangements should I make at the destination site?

- Be sure that your hotel or destination will allow cats. There are many internet sites and travel guidebooks with this type of information. Do not try to "sneak" a pet into a hotel. This will not only result in your being given a financial penalty or asked to leave, but also gives a negative impression of pet owners in general. If we want more hotels to accept our pets as guests, we must obey the rules and be sure that we are exemplary guests.
- Bring your own litter pan and food and water bowls for the hotel room.

"Place a "Do Not Disturb" sign on your hotel door so that housekeeping will not inadvertently let your cat escape."

- Place a "Do Not Disturb" sign on your hotel door so that housekeeping will not inadvertently let your cat escape. Plan to have your room cleaned only when you are present and your cat is safely in its carrier.
- It is probably best to put the cat in the carrier or confined inside a closed bathroom whenever you plan to leave the room.
- Should your cat get lost, contact the local animal control officer immediately. If your cat is microchipped, advise them of its number so that you can be contacted directly.

Remember, advance planning is vital to making the trip an enjoyable experience for both you and your cat. By applying a few common sense rules, you can keep your traveling cat safe and sound.

This client information sheet is based on material written by: Ernest Ward, DVM

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