



Playing detective...

A day in the life of a cat behaviour counsellor

Vicky Halls investigates how to remove the stress of visits to the vet

If only the visit to the vet didn't go something like this... the day arrives. If you are clever enough to have thought ahead and blocked all exit points to the house – and that secret hole under the floorboards in the airing cupboard – you may have a sporting chance of getting your cat into the basket. You don the elbow-length oven gloves and corner your cat – by this time an unrecognisable spitting, snarling banshee of a creature – and attempt to push him into the basket while he braces himself star-shaped at the entrance with a leg at each corner and flatly refuses to go in. Luck or determination may get your cat in the basket and you can start your journey. Within seconds of the car pulling away, you are greeted with a cacophony of sound from your cat and an extremely obnoxious smell that indicates both ends of your cat have produced substances that you hope will remain contained within the basket until you arrive at the destination. This is rarely the case. When you arrive you have a stinking basket and a stinking cat, both requiring the tender loving care of the veterinary nurse before you can even think about seeing the vet. Does this sound familiar? If so, you know how distressing this is for you, but can you even imagine how awful it is for your cat?

Being a territorial creature, the cat becomes closely bonded to its familiar environment and therefore experiences some degree of stress when removed against his will. When a cat is taken to the veterinary surgery, he will be exposed to many challenges: the cat basket – possibly with negative associations from previous trips – the car journey, strange smells, sights and noises of the practice, new people, other animals – dogs and cats – unwanted handling and unpleasant procedures. There may even be pain associations from previous visits to increase his anxiety.

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If cats arrive at the veterinary practice stressed, various tests carried out may be affected by their emotional state, for example their blood glucose levels, heart rate and respiration rate will rise. The acute stress response, known as 'fight or flight', kicks in as the cat instinctively prepares for danger. Most would choose flight as the most effective means to escape danger, but if confined in a basket in an unfamiliar place, the sense of threat may be so extreme that aggression may be exhibited. This makes it even more challenging to examine and treat a highly fearful cat.

The modern veterinary practice understands the concept of a feline-friendly environment. Finding the most cat-sensitive surgery near you is the first step to removing the trauma associated with your cat's healthcare. I believe that prevention is better than cure on this particular issue and give the following advice for those owners familiar with the sweaty paws and urine-soaked car journeys associated with the trip to the vet.

Stress free travel

- The ideal cat carrier is strong, relatively lightweight, secure and easily cleanable. Baskets with an opening at the top are always preferable as this enables you to lower your cat in from above, always an easier manoeuvre if there is any degree of reluctance
- Leave the basket out permanently at home in a convenient location rather than shutting it away and only bringing it out when your cat is about to have a bad day. Instead, turn it into a warm bed with the occasional food treat or toy inside so that it becomes a familiar and constant part of your cat's life
- If you are taking more than one cat to the vet, provide each with his own basket, no matter how friendly they are with one other
- Plan scheduled trips for vaccinations, dental treatments and preventative health care by making an appointment at a time when the journey to the vet will be outside rush hour
- Unless told otherwise by your vet, withhold food for four to five hours before the journey to keep the likelihood of vomiting, bowel and bladder activity to a minimum
- Spray the inside of the cat carrier with a Feliway® spray 15 minutes before introducing

your cat – use sparingly with one spray in each corner and two on the floor and roof of the carrier. This is a synthetic analogue of naturally occurring cat pheromones secreted from glands in the cheeks and face that provide a message of security and familiarity

- A lining of plastic sheeting, newspaper and then a towel or washable blanket will be sufficient to deal with any toilet mishaps en route. It is probably worthwhile taking a spare set and a plastic bag for soiled bedding just in case
- In addition to the bedding inside, take a towel or blanket with you on the journey that smells reassuringly of home. This can be used to drape over the basket in the car. The vet may wish to use it to surround your cat with the security of home during the examination
- Secure the basket in the footwell on the passenger side or on the seat using the seatbelt. Ensure that the basket is upright and not tilted to one side
- Turn the car radio off or reduce the volume and use a gentle, calm voice to occasionally reassure your cat but there is no need to match his every moan with one of your own
- Drive as smoothly as possible with minimal harsh braking or acceleration

Once you have arrived and are in the reception of your vet practice, be aware of the impression the other patients will have on your cat. If there are shelves provided, place your cat basket on a high level, away from perceived danger and cover

the basket with the blanket – some cats prefer to have a small opening through which they can peer just to keep an eye on all the dangerous things. If the reception fills with agitated and barking dogs, you may even consider returning to the car and requesting that the receptionist call you or signal through the door when it is your turn to see the vet. Switched on receptionists may offer you and your cat a quiet space away from the furore to wait, if the facilities are available, or request politely that the agitated dogs and their owners wait outside.

Hopefully all your careful preparation will have resulted in a stress-free visit, but there is one further consideration if you have other cats that were spared the vet trip patiently waiting indoors. Cats communicate predominantly using their sense of smell and the familiar communal odour that a group of cats creates helps to bond them. That scent changes when one cat takes a trip to the vet and acquires a mix of threatening and unpleasant smells from the surgery. This can cause a dramatic response when the cat is brought home and the others fail to recognise their companion. To avoid this happening to you, keep the returning cat in a separate room initially for at least the first few hours – or overnight if he's spent the whole day away – to enable him to groom to re-establish a familiar odour. You can assist this process by stroking and generally giving affection but be careful not to over fuss a post-operative patient. Be guided by the vet or nurse who will give you the appropriate aftercare advice. ●

