Cats and Carriers

Many cats are fearful of car rides and veterinary visits, which makes it harder for us to give them good medical care. It also makes it difficult for cat owners to decide to take their nervous cats to the veterinarian for routine care and may delay an examination for an illness.

Cats can be trained to be much more comfortable with their carriers, cars, and the veterinary clinic. It takes a little preparation and patience, but will greatly improve your cat's comfort level and our ability to care for your pet. Here are some tips and links that will help you to help your cat!

**The Steps to Improved Carrier Behavior**

1. Start carrier training as young as possible. Starting as kittens teaches your pet that the carrier is just another fun hiding place, or play area, rather than a confined punishment space. Carriers that load from the top or especially those that come apart in the middle are helpful, as veterinarians can then take the top off and start their examination with the cat comfortably sitting in the bottom. Put the carrier in a room that the cat likes to be in, perhaps in a sunny location, with a soft piece of bedding to encourage exploration and voluntary use.

2. Encourage daily entry. Every day, put a piece of kibble or a treat in the carrier. When the cat eats it, calmly praise/pet it and give it a few more treats. If the cat doesn't take the treat right away, just walk away; if you try to persuade the cat, they will become suspicious! It may take a few days, but the cat should start to eat the treats, although maybe when you are not watching.

3. Gradually close the door. Once the cat happily goes into the carrier when you are around, gently close the door, give a treat, and open the door so that the cat does not feel trapped.

4. Extend the door-closure period. After several days of this, leave the door closed and walk out of the room for a few seconds before returning and giving another treat. Gradually work up to carrying the carrier to a different place in the house.

5. Begin car rides. Over days to weeks, move on to placing the carrier in the car, then short car rides, then a ride to our veterinary clinic for a treat (and petting from our staff if your cat is comfortable with it). If at any point your cat becomes nervous (crouching, ears back, etc.), go back a step and give treats until your cat is more comfortable with that level.

6. Cover the carrier when traveling. When you start taking the carrier in the car, place a towel over it; cats usually feel safer this way.

7. Add toys, treats or bedding into the carrier. If your cat has favorite toys, treats, bedding, or brushes, please bring them to the clinic when you visit (for training visits and the actual exam). This will give your cat more familiar things that he/she associates with good feelings.

8. Consider using Feliway® (pheromonal anti-anxiety spray) just before traveling. When the time for the examination arrives, the routine will be familiar and your cat will be much more comfortable. With especially nervous or suspicious cats, Feliway® can help with the initial training period as well.

Some cats, despite your best efforts, still become scared of confinement or travel. In such instances, we can help you by prescribing additional anti-anxiety medications to help alleviate the stress.