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## Calming cats during vet visits

By Mona Miller, DVM

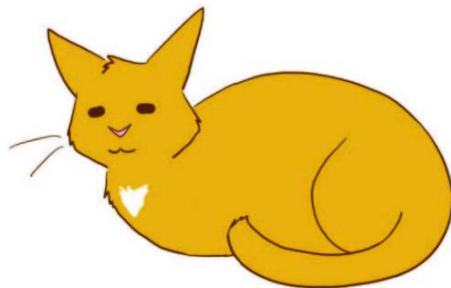


Illustration Jaya Griggs

As a continuation of a four-part series addressing fears and anxieties in pets (especially during veterinary visits), I'd like to pay some attention to our feline friends. Most cats like to do what they do, in their own time and space. If we are lucky, cats will cuddle with us, sit on our laps, allow us to pet and adore them. Cats often don't travel in cars much (there are some exceptions) and generally don't like to be put in carriers (again, some exceptions). So when it's time to take your cat to the vet for its annual wellness exam and vaccines, it can be a bit traumatic for all parties involved to find the cat, put it in the carrier that is used only a couple times a year, travel in the car and endure the howling or plaintive meows. Once you get to the vet, there's still a car ride back home, and then the "emotional punishment" that you suffer when the cat goes to hide in the closet for hours. There are many times when one of my appointments has to cancel because the owner can't find the cat to get it in

the carrier!

When cats get stressed, they can become fearful or aggressive (much like dogs and humans). The ideal vet visit would be with a calm and cooperative cat.

I always recommend a secure carrier, and I really like the top-loading ones. Cats are much easier to lift out, then to pull out, and most seem to be calmer with this technique. As an aside, I believe strongly in one carrier per cat, and secure enough to house a cat in the event of a natural disaster (earthquake, wildfires) for at least 24 hours. Cats traveling uncontained in a car, and then entering the business of a veterinary hospital is a recipe for disaster. They can get spooked by sounds, scents and sights - and go running off into the parking lot. Most vets have their own version of this story from personal experience, and there is nothing sadder than a runaway cat in a situation that was entirely preventable.

You can place calming articles in the carrier to help relieve anxiety. These can be a T-shirt that you have worn (especially helpful for cats who sleep with you on the bed), or a comfort blanket (one that the cat sleeps on regularly), or a bit of fresh catnip, or a catnip toy that the cat plays with. Calming treats, or a plant-derived product such as Rescue Remedy, may help, and most likely have no negative side effects. It's always best to check these things with your veterinarian, to ensure that ingredients are safe. Not all plant-derived extracts are safe for cats.

A particular strategy that I prefer is spray Feliway into the carrier 30 minutes prior to putting your cat in it. This is a synthetic analog of the "happy territory" marking pheromone that cats secrete when they rub their faces on objects. Feliway can be used for situational anxiety, such as travel, as well as for daily or long-term anxiety (for example, the plug-in diffuser form of Feliway is often helpful for cats who urinate outside the litter box - an article for a different day). There are no negative side effects from using Feliway.

At the vet, different restraint methods can be used by the veterinary staff. Vets, nurses and assistants are often very well-trained in reading an animal, and choose a restraint method on a case-by-case basis. Some cats feel much more comfortable hiding under a towel without a lot of pressure. Some cats respond well to being wrapped snugly in a towel, like a burrito. Others do better when "scruffed" at the loose folds of skin on the back of the neck - this brings them back to kittenhood when mama cat carried them around.

For cats that are stressed by travel to the point of physical danger (panting, high body temperature) or are too aggressive to handle, your vet might recommend anti-anxiety or sedative medications. I will cover this in my next article. Most of these medications are safe and effective. However, in some cases, cats can be so stressed that they are fractious and aggressive, and require a light anesthesia in order to do procedural items such as vaccines and blood draws.

A home-care veterinarian might be an option for cats that might not respond to the options above, including medications. It might be worth a try to see if the cat is more cooperative in its home environment. This can often work fine with fearful submissive cats, but not necessarily with aggressive cats. There are limits to what can be done in the home; for instance, radiographs can't be taken and most often, blood and urine draws cannot be performed.

In my next article, I will address medications - anti-anxiety versus sedatives. Stay tuned!



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