

# Cat Friendly Practice

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As research has shown, there are more companion cats than dogs. This should mean that veterinary practices see more cats than dogs, but the opposite is true. Many cat owners avoid veterinary visits for a variety of reasons. One major reason is that they are convinced that their cat hates the experience. Another is a lack of understanding of the need for preventive health care for creatures who seem to be independent and healthy. Clients also dislike the experience of the 30+ minutes that precede the visit during which conflict arises around the carrier, the traumatic experiences in the automobile and the disruption of routine that is so important to cats.

Cats seem to experience forceful handling by their otherwise predictable and beloved human as a betrayal of their trust. The car, carrier and veterinary establishment are unfamiliar to a creature who values a sense of control and familiar routine. As a veterinary team, we may not understand cats, their behavior cues, or normal behaviors. We may feel as if cats are more of a nuisance, take too much time or will potentially cause injury. Our attitude is conveyed through approach, body language and other forms of communication apparent to both cats and their owners.

When a cat visit becomes disruptive we lose the fundamental opportunity to form the trusting relationship we need to have with our clients so that we can practice the best medicine. We lose the chance to calmly build rapport, establish trust and educate clients that is so crucial to our future with them and their cat.

The solution to declining cat visits, to resulting welfare issues, and to our ability to serve this patient population is to become cat friendly. We must create a practice culture in which the entire staff is committed to improving the experience of the feline patient and their owner. We must incorporate this into staff training and education, into the practice physical environment and into our plans for the future.

We must begin by educating our clients. By sharing with them our knowledge of the characteristics of the feline, we can teach them to have reasonable expectations, to understand the subtle signs of illness, and to prevent unacceptable behavior before it starts. By understanding the social groups in multiple cat households and how the social structure of cats has evolved, we can decrease the stress experienced by companion cats and their owners. We can teach breeders and “accidental” breeders to raise well-adjusted flexible, social kittens who will become wonderful cats for the people who adopt them. We can teach them how to lower the household stress by giving them a better understanding of their cats’ needs, sensory awareness, and perception of safety.

Our outreach has to be where our clients are, i.e., on the internet. We need lively web sites with important educational links. We need Facebook pages that are constantly updating and providing tips and entertaining topics that engage the clients before we meet them in the practice. Our educational efforts can result in happier households and healthier cats. Clients need to understand how cats prefer being alone when eating, why play is important and how cats interact with each other and humans.

The Bayer Brakke study showed that the recession did not cause the decline in visits but rather, unmasked a phenomenon that has been going on since the late 1990’s. This investigation made several recommendations regarding the goals that would improve cat visits including understanding the client household, addressing handling, communication, and safe transport.

Becoming cat friendly is not a construction project; it is seizing this opportunity to harness the talent and intellect of the staff to change behavior and attitudes. Cat friendly practices nurture relationships with clients by employing open communication and active listening. The staff becomes deeply committed to achieving skills in gentle handling, understanding behavior, and the unique medical and surgical needs of cat patients.

Change in the busy veterinary practice is difficult. One of the most important roles in affecting the practice culture is to assign a Cat Advocate to the project. That person is not responsible for doing all the work to become cat friendly but to make sure the work is done. Cat friendly is not a project, it is a cultural shift within the practice that must be continually monitored and assessed. Education plans, physical changes, communication training are ongoing. By evaluating the cat and client’s experience from before the visit to the time they leave, we can establish a plan for improving that experience.

The first experience of the practice environment is often the first phone call. Using that contact to educate clients or potential clients about resources available to help make the pre-visit experience less stressful are key. Questions about carriers, automobile transport and other cats in the household can be satisfactorily answered. Resources can be sent in a variety of ways from web links, pdfs or written brochures.

The physical presence of other animals in the reception area is a key consideration for reduction of stress. Many strategies for reducing the negative effects can be implemented including, separate entrances, separate waiting areas, or “cat only” days. Voices should be kept low, sounds kept to a minimum, unnecessary odors like perfume or cologne avoided. Visual barriers can be employed to keep cats from seeing dogs or other cats. Staff members must be counseled not to look directly in the face/stare at cats.

In the exam room, the cat should be allowed to walk out of the carrier while the doctor is speaking calmly with the client. If the cat leaves the carrier, remove it from sight as it has become the most familiar thing in the room and the cat will be inclined to return to the carrier. If, after an appropriate time, the cat remains in the carrier unwilling to exit voluntarily, remove the lid of the carrier. This is far less stressful than other ways of removing the cat. Towels can be employed to help fearful cats remain calmer.

One of the most critical skills required for becoming cat friendly is to learn to read how cats communicate their emotional state through their body posture, facial expression and movement. Fear is the #1 cause of “bad behavior” in the veterinary environment. By learning to assess emotional states, we can avoid a fully aroused state that takes a cat 30-40 minutes to recover from. Cats leave behind a scent from their pads that indicates stress. Careful cleaning between appointments is not only important for disinfection but also to remove this form of communication between cats.

A cat examination room should contain all of the equipment and supplies needed to perform most outpatient services. By approaching in a calm manner, keeping the people in the room to a minimum, using quiet voices, towels for restraint if needed, and being flexible about the order the exam is performed in, there will be more successful experiences than usual. Scruffing or stretching should never be necessary and is counter-productive. In a calm environment the doctor can talk through the exam, making sure clients understand what is being done and the value and importance of the physical exam.

Many gentle techniques are described in the photos in the Cat Friendly Practice (CFP) program that offer ideas regarding restraint. The examination table may be the least necessary piece of equipment in the room. Cats may prefer the bottom of a carrier, a lap, a chair or the floor and should be accommodated. Moving cats by picking them up adds a level of stress to an already fearful cat. The reflex response to fear is to flee thus maintaining all four feet on the floor is very important to a sense of control and reassurance. Every effort should be made to avoid taking the cat to the “back” of the hospital. The exam room is now somewhat familiar. To move to a foreign space offers new stressors, different smells, bright lights, more animals, people, and noises.

Cats who must be admitted to the hospital have an increased need for a sense of familiar comforts. This can be provided by asking the client to bring known items from home; bedding, brushes, food, bowls or toys. Soft bedding, a place to hide and gentle nursing techniques are critical. For cats who enjoy social interaction, petting, brushing and other forms of interaction can be employed.

The cat ward should be separate from dogs and other animals, big enough so that cats cannot see one another. Cages should not face each other. Cats passing each other for treatment or discharge should be shielded from view. When removing a cat from a hospital enclosure, allow the cat to come forward or use bedding, towels or the bottom of the carrier to slide the patient forward. Do not loom about the cat or block the light.

The entire inventory of equipment, instrumentation, physical facility should be examined to make sure they are appropriately sized for the feline patient.

The Cat Friendly Practice program provides veterinary practices with ALL of the information, tools and techniques for becoming cat friendly. There are ten areas to evaluate with resources to achieve compliance with all of them. This program will continue to evolve and grow as new phases are implemented. The next of these will be Preventative Health Care. To participate the practice must have one AAFP member, identify the Cat Advocate for the practice and use the website, manual and checklist to achieve either gold or silver CFP status.

In recognition of this effort, the program provides you with a toolkit to market your practice as one that has made this significant effort and to distinguish yours from other practices that have not. A searchable website will allow clients to look for Cat Friendly Practices in their region. Beginning in the fourth quarter of 2012, the AAFP will begin a national consumer awareness campaign to encourage cat owners to seek a Cat Friendly Practice. The work you do to become cat friendly will pay off in improving the health and wellbeing of more cats and increase growth in your cat patient population.