



How to De-Stress Your Cat's Visit to the Veterinarian

During your last veterinary appointment, did you notice that your cat was a little stressed about visiting the hospital? While most veterinary clinics try to create the best experience they can for you and your cat, some cats have a lower threshold for stress. For these cats, even a nail trim can result in a negative experience! Since both the physical *and* emotional wellbeing of your cat is important, here are some desensitization and counterconditioning exercises that might result in less stressful visits to your veterinarian in the future.

Desensitization requires you to determine the point at which your cat becomes stressed when going to your veterinary clinic, without pushing him or her beyond their stress threshold. Counterconditioning means associating your veterinary clinic with something positive.

Here's a recommended *Plan of Action*:

Step One: Desensitization

Take a drive with your cat as if you were traveling to your veterinary clinic. Ask a family member or friend to ride with you so that person can respond your cat. Watch for signs that your cat is becoming stressed, like dilated eyes (you can see more of the black than the color), a frozen body posture, or lots of loud meowing.

Once you see those signs, return home. For cats that only get in the carrier and ride in the car to go to the veterinary clinic, these signs may be noticed by just getting the carrier out or just being in the car while it sits on the driveway at your home. For other cats, they may not exhibit signs of stress until they are in our waiting room. Once you identify the point when your cat starts to become stressed, use that as your landmark.

Step Two: Counterconditioning

You want your cat to associate good things with the carrier, the car ride, and going to your veterinary clinic, so start by attempting to feed your cat inside the carrier while it is still in your home. Note that some cats may not eat simply because they are in the same room as the carrier, so you may have to go slower with them, gradually decreasing the distance between their food bowl and the carrier by as little as inches a day. When your cat is calm near the carrier, give him or her special treats like tuna, anchovy paste or lots of affection. Once your cat isn't bothered by the carrier, do the same type of desensitization with the car ride. Place your cat inside the carrier and place the carrier in the car. Ask a friend or family member to come with you and begin with short trips around the block, asking the other person to feed your cat treats and yummy food while you travel.

Step Three: Positive Reinforcement

On a day when you feel that you and your cat may make it all the way to the hospital waiting room, be sure to contact your hospital, explain to them what you are doing and see if they can arrange a time for a two minute "drop-by" visit in an exam room. Bring your cat's favorite treats so the hospital staff can feed them to him or her. If possible, request that the hospital staff try to get you into an exam room immediately in order to decrease the stressors caused by other animals in their waiting room.

We know that this seems like a lot of time and effort, but it is important to prioritize your cat's emotional wellbeing. With a little bit of effort from everyone involved, visits to your veterinary hospital can be a great experience for your beloved feline companion.

For more information, visit the Veterinary Wisdom® Resource Center at www.veterinarywisdom.com