

Most pet cats will need to be placed in a carrier at some time in their life. Yet, many cat owners say that their cats' discomfort in the crate and car is the main reason they don't take their cat to the vet. Cats need regular veterinary care to live their longest, healthiest lives. Having a cat trained to readily go into their crate can literally save their life in case of an emergency if you must leave your home in a hurry (in case of an approaching fire, flood or hurricane). Cats are smart and as easily as they can learn to dislike a crate, they can also learn to see the crate as a place where good things happen.

Start With The Right Carrier

A carrier with a variety of openings (top opening and both ends) is ideal for a veterinary visit. This way, the veterinarian can remove parts of the carrier to examine the cat - often without having to move the cat at all. This results in a more comfortable experience for the cat because they can stay within the perceived safety of the carrier. If your cat already has a strong fear of their crate, offering a new crate that looks completely unlike the previous crate may help your training proceed faster, but is not a requirement for success.

Make the Crate Great!

- Begin by leaving your carrier open and available to the cat in the home at all times.
- Feed your cat near the carrier. If at first she won't eat near the carrier, move the food bowl as far away as necessary to get her to eat. You can even make this easier by adding some special tasty treat to the food bowl, such as a bite of canned tuna or chicken; whatever your cat finds really special. (see additional suggestions below)
- Once your cat regularly eats from the bowl, begin moving the bowl a few inches closer to the carrier every few days until she will eat next to the carrier.
- After the cat has eaten next to the carrier for several days, place the food bowl directly inside the carrier entrance so she only has to place her head inside the carrier to eat.
- During this time, never close the door on the carrier. Take the door off (if you can) or wire or prop it open to be sure that it doesn't accidentally close and startle her.
- You should also place different toys and an occasional treats into the carrier and allow the cat to find them there. Stuffed mice, catnip toys—if your cat has shown an interest in catnip in the past—feather toys, or some cat grass are all good choices to lure your kitty into the carrier to relax inside for a few moments. Spraying a synthetic feline facial pheromone (such as Feliway®) in the carrier may also help.
- After several days of eating food with just her head inside the carrier, move the food bowl further into the carrier. Move the bowl a few inches into the carrier every day until the cat will go inside the carrier completely to eat. When practicing any of these steps, if your cat suddenly begins refusing food treats, this means you have moved too fast and your cat is obviously uncomfortable. Stop the procedure, and next time you practice, return to the point where your cat accepts the food.
- After several weeks (maybe even months, depending on the cat) you should find her occasionally resting in the carrier and using it as any other favorite sleeping area. Once she is this comfortable with the carrier, you can begin closing the door for a few seconds at a time with the cat inside. Your schedule of closing the door might be 10 seconds today, 15 seconds tomorrow, 20 seconds the next day and so on. At this point, you may want to move the carrier into a family room where you can practice these sessions while you're watching television or doing some other activity where you can keep a close eye on the cat. If the cat ever acts distressed about being in the carrier with the door closed, release her immediately. And next time you close the door, only leave it closed as long as the cat had tolerated it on the previous session.

Finding Your Cats Favorite Treats

- Finding the best and most tempting treat is a necessity for rewarding the cat for making choices that you like, such as resting in her crate.
- Some favorites might include: Low-fat cream cheese | Low-fat whipping cream | String cheese | Boiled or canned chicken or turkey | Canned tuna | Baby food (chicken or beef) | Commercially produced treats for cats, such as Churu or other “lickables “ or dehydrated salmon or tuna.
- Identify the treat your cat likes by first offering it in non-threatening situations, such as around meal times or play times or when petting your cat and giving her attention.

The next step... the car ride!

Once your cat uses the carrier regularly as a resting place, you can proceed to habituating the cat to car rides.

- With your cat in the closed carrier, take her to the car, feed her treats, and bring her back inside.
- After doing this a few times, leave the cat in the car for one to three minutes with her favorite treat, then bring her back inside. Repeat the procedure often, never leaving her so long she voices displeasure.
- If at any point, the cat refuses the treat, she’s been left too long; go back to the point at which she would last eat the treat and repeat that step several times before increasing the time in the car. As long as she eats in the car, she’s relaxed and you can move on.
- Next, try starting the car for a few seconds, turning it off, and returning the cat inside. Repeat the procedure, slowly increasing the time until you can leave the car running for three to five minutes without distressing your cat. If you park your car in a garage, open the garage door when the motor is running. When you’ve started the car and left it running several times, your kitty’s ready for a short drive.
- Once she tolerates short rides, take your cat regularly for brief drive-through errands, such as dropping mail in a post box. Just remember, temperatures in a car can reach extremes rapidly, so don’t leave your cat alone in the car. When it’s 85 degrees outside, temperatures in a car can climb to more than 100 degrees in 10 minutes.
- Provide a few treats for the ride if your cat doesn’t get car sick, and reward her with attention. Once your kitty’s comfortable with car travel, a trip to the veterinarian shouldn’t be so upsetting. Just continue occasional trips that don’t end at the veterinarian.