

Carrier Desensitization

Most cats don't get the vet care they deserve because getting them into a carrier is simply too stressful.

If you store your cat's carrier in a closet (or attic, basement, etc.) and only get it out when it's time for a vet visit, your cat is going to associate the carrier with the unpleasantness of travel and being handled by unfamiliar people in the veterinary setting. Each time the carrier is brought out, he's going to remember past experiences and fight going into it.

However, you can easily desensitize your cat to his carrier and even get him to the point where he'll walk into it on his own.

First, it's important to invest in an appropriately sized plastic, hard-sided cat carrier. It should be 1.5 times the size of your cat.

Since cats take comfort in familiarity, keep the carrier familiar to them by leaving it out at all times like a piece of furniture. Put a soft blanket inside, prop the door open and your cat might even use it as a bed!

Every so often, sprinkle catnip or toss treats inside the carrier to get your cat into the habit of going in on his own. He might be cautious at first but he'll get more comfortable as he learns that nothing bad happens when he enters. Instead, the carrier becomes a cozy, fun place to be! Then, when it's time to go to the vet, don't move the carrier or the cat. Any change in the routine might make him suspicious of your intentions. Allow him to go in for the treats as usual and gently close the door behind him.

Always cover the carrier with a towel or blanket. Minimizing visual stimuli will help your cat feel safe.

Practice trips might help too. If you take your cat on occasional car rides without bringing them to the vet, the experience of travel will become less stressful because it won't come with the expectation of being poked and prodded at the vet's office. Start small, perhaps without even going anywhere at first. Encourage your cat into the carrier as described above, bring him to the car, give him a high value treat such as a chunk of tuna, and bring him back inside. Next time, just drive around the block. The following trip can be a little longer. These practice trips will show him that he can travel without anything bad happening. In fact, good things are happening! Each time, be sure to treat him with something he really enjoys.

Although your cat may still be fearful, decreasing stress leading up to the vet visit might mean lower stress at the vet too!