

Cat carriers - relieving the stress of the journey to the vet

The acceptance in recent years that young to medium-aged cats can be afflicted with chronic pain and arthritis, has led to changes in the design and housing of cats in particular in relation to correct litter tray size and design, and hospital cage design. What seems to have been overlooked, writes Dr Aine Seavers MVB MRCVS, is that we also need to address the size and design of the 'cat carriers' used to take cats on car journeys, especially when the purpose of that journey is to take the cat to the vet.

I wrote this article after sitting in a vet lecture on behaviour and having to bite my tongue (not something I am usually known for) as the audience was shown how a cat was 'trained' to accept its cat carrier. It took that owner and their poor cat seven long days, but eventually, the cat went into the cage without a struggle. I wanted to put my hand up and suggest I could have gotten the cat to accept the cage in minutes. Why? Because I would have used a different-sized cage.

No one else seemed to notice how tiny the carrier box was relative to the cat. We don't force our children to wear shoes several sizes too small, nor strap dogs up in harnesses that cramp their movement, yet we constantly shove cats into boxes/carriers that are simply too small. And surprise, surprise, the cat doesn't cooperate.



Figure 1. On the left, the author's preferred cat cage for normal cats. Centre and right are examples of long carriers that can be held close to the body.

INADEQUATE CARRIER BOXES: A SOLUTION

For many cats, simply changing the style of the cat carrier can make for a huge positive improvement in the cat's behaviour. It is a given that all cats should travel to a vet clinic in a safe carrier of some sort, but I strongly discourage the use of most of the popular traditional cat carriers for my clients. I do so because often I see adult cats transported in the very same cat basket bought when the kitten was first purchased; which was perfect for the kitten, but not so for a fully grown cat. As a result, you end up at the vets with a stressed, cramped, often highly painful cat (sometimes two cats) who has simmered into the red zone of fear and aggression by the time of arrival at the vet clinic. So begins a lifelong tale of woe.

To avoid this, I encourage clients to use a small dog basket or a fabric portable kennel or carrier (no fabric for feral cats). These dog carriers tend by default to be of a wider and or/ taller shape so that even a tall cat can walk into it without

painfully crouching and so can then settle comfortably inside. Most of the dog carry cages have a wider door width, which is kinder on the cat's whiskers as well.

Importantly, many hard-case dog cages also tend to have air vents or slots on the sides shaped either as circles or portholes, rather than the long, narrow, vertical, slatted, slit-style seen on many cat cages. I am suspicious that those rows of narrow slits on the traditional cage top-side may create a strobing light action as the car moves along, a strobing which for many cats would be quite distressing.

Some cats love to look out and see where they are going, which they can easily do in the Unipet "wire-mesh-top-with-plastic-bottom" carry boxes.

If the cat is of the type that prefers to hide, then a light towel over three sides of that box does the trick. For non-feral cats, the fabric dog kennels or cat carriers are very useful given that they provide extra space without the extra carry weight of a plastic cage.

LONG CARRIERS

The long fabric cat carrier as in Figure 1 works because despite being narrow, the ends and top zip right off so the cat walks, or is placed, into the bed base, then zipped in. These long carriers are also ideal as the owner can carry the basket secure in their arms to avoid the swinging action that occurs when boxes are carried one-handed. As prey animals, cats would only normally experience a swinging, off-the-ground motion when being carried by a larger predator. Hence, it's always a good idea, after box-carrying a cat, to allow it a few moments to recalibrate its surroundings in the now stationary basket at its destination, before you even attempt to handle the cat.

LARGE CARRIERS

Figure 2 shows a 10kg (22lb) large male cat sitting calmly in a dog carrier. However, that was not how he started out. A new client had presented me with a tiny blue cage which 'contained' this huge cat. The elderly owner and companion were covered in band-aids as a visual testament to their struggle to get this cat into the cage. They were both completely unfazed and reported their bloody struggle as simply the norm for the previous eight years of this cranky cat's life. Once I opened the carrier, the cat extricated himself, as fast as any oversized animal could exit an undersized container.



Figure 2.

After I had finished examining the cat, the owner lifted the original blue carrier back onto the consult table, whereupon the cat turned, nipped the owner, and then turned towards me as if to say, "You're next!". I walked out of the room and came back in with the green and white carrier box in Figure 2. I calmly invited the cat to enter, which he calmly did, so I sent him home in it.

The cat so loved the bigger box, happily going in and out of it at home, that the owner ended up purchasing the box from me. At subsequent visits to the vet clinic, he would sit calmly in it with the door open, until I was ready for him, walk out on the heat-packed bed, allow a certain amount of physical interaction with me, then walk calmly back into the box signalling detente was over. He allowed us about 60 calm seconds to close the cage door, any longer and the spitting and slashing would start. Problem solved.

SAFE SPACES

Now that the design and size of the transport cage for the cat have been sorted, owners need to teach the cat to love the cage as a happy safe part of the furniture in its home. Cats' preferences are extraordinarily fickle, one day sleeping right next to humans, next sleeping alone in the linen closet. Knowing this fickleness means one can cheat and use the transport boxes or cages as day beds and treat treasure troves in the house for the cat.

Depending on the cat's personality, I either advise leaving the cages in a quiet calm area or in the case of my demanding heat-loving Siamese, I leave the boxes where the morning sun can stream in and warm the outside of the boxes.

I leave small food treats and toys in the boxes to keep the cats curious about what might be in the boxes at any given time.

Never store the carriers in the garage or outdoor shed out of sight so that it only appears when the cat is being taken somewhere unpleasant, i.e., vet clinics or boarding etc.

It's important for owners to note that, while a cat may hide in small spaces at home from which it can easily free itself whenever it wants, such spaces are not comparable to the small area in a locked carrier or cage. Those same cats found curled up in an escapable, small basket at home can't free themselves from a small cage during a bumpy, stressful car journey. Once owners realise that, they can begin to understand why cats hate being shoved into traditional cat carriers.

An additional tip: really stressed cats should get their cages topped up with a Feliway spray regularly at home and especially on the day of the vet visit. If the owner is not asthmatic, I would also have the owner lightly spray some Feliway on the car's back seat, some 20 minutes before the cat's basket is clipped in there for the car journey.

Take-home message: Pay more attention to how cats arrive at your clinic and advise clients how to upsize their cat's carrier if necessary.

Reader Questions and Answers

1. SELECT THE FALSE STATEMENTS BELOW:

- A. Spray the cat carrier with Feliway once the cat is secured inside the carrier
- B. Cat carriers should be hidden from sight at home until actually needed to transport the cat
- C. Kitten owners need to be educated from the first vet check-up re the absolute need to upsize the kitten carrier box to a larger size once their cat reaches maturity
- D. Small dog transport boxes make excellent adult cat carriers.

2. SELECT THE CORRECT STATEMENTS BELOW:

- A. The swinging action of a carried cat box triggers a strong stress concern in any cat contained within that box

- B. Always carry a cat box in a constant swinging motion so as to calm the cat inside
- C. Allow the cat time to acclimatize to its surroundings at the clinic before opening the cage
- D. Place the carrier directly in the flow of the car's cooling air-conditioner vents

3. FERAL CATS ARE BEST TRANSPORTED IN A:

- A. Lightweight cloth or fabric cage
- B. Solid framed cage
- C. Cages sprayed with Feliway at least 20 minutes before use
- D. 2 + 3

ANSWERS: 1A and B; 2A and C; 3D.