

10 Tips to Combat Cat Carrier Woes

If you've ever tried to put your cat into a carrier, you know the tooth-and-nail fight that can ensue. The good news is - there IS a way to overcome crate hate. Get prepared for your next vet trip with this 10-step advance survival plan.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Since your cat considers your home his personal territory, he's not keen to leave — especially when the destination is a veterinary clinic, and he must be in a carrier while traveling there and back
- Your cat's fear of vet visits and other outings can be alleviated by getting him acclimated to a carrier on his own turf, in his own time
- There are 10 steps you can follow to successfully help your kitty learn to view his carrier as a warm and comfy safe space
- Training your cat to enjoy being in his carrier will make traveling much less stressful for both of you

It's a fact that most kitties tend to scramble to the top of the cat tree or dive under a bed when their carrier is shown up on the scene. If this sounds like your feline BFF, trust me — you're in good company!

The reason for most crate-hate in cats is actually quite logical. Your kitty is keenly aware that the wicked thing only makes an appearance once or twice a year, and represents things felines despise, such as forced confinement, a hair-raising ride in the car, and a visit to a place (e.g., the veterinary clinic) that feels threatening.

The good news is that all the angst associated with **vet visits** and other outings can be minimized by helping your cat get comfortable with her carrier at home, on *her* timetable, and in an entirely non-threatening manner.

The truth is that most kitties will probably never enjoy being removed from their home turf to parts unknown. But if your cat can learn her carrier as a safe space, you've eliminated one of the many stressors involved in getting her from point A to point B.

10 Steps to Conquer Your Cat's Crate Hate

1. Purchase the carrier before you bring kitty home for the first time, or failing that, make sure you have it well in advance of any planned outings involving your cat. The size should be large enough for him to stand up and turn around in, but since cats like tight spaces, it should be small enough that he feels secure and safe inside.

The carrier should open from both the top and the front or side so your cat has more than one escape route, and also so it's easy to put him in the carrier and take him out of it. You also want to make sure a soft-sided carrier is sturdy enough to not collapse under the weight of the seatbelt.

Many experts feel that hard (molded plastic) carriers are safer for **car travel** because they're easy to secure by simply slipping the seatbelt harness (in a backseat, not the front seat due to the dangers of airbag deployment) through the handle on top.

2. Once you get the carrier home, it's important to make it a permanent fixture of your kitty's environment, so set it up in a location your cat spends time in. Since they tend to like high places, you might want to consider placing the carrier on a couch or chair rather than the floor.

And because cats like much warmer temperatures than we do, if possible, place the carrier in a ray of sunlight or near (but not too near) a heat source. Be sure to prop or tie the doors open so they can't accidentally close. Next, place comfy bedding in the carrier, either something your cat has been using so it smells familiar, or something with your scent on it.

3. Reward your kitty with praise, petting, and treats when she investigates the carrier, and especially if she goes inside. Remember, the goal is to gradually acclimate her to the carrier and make it a place she likes to visit.
4. The next step is to entice her with food, so place her food bowl close to the carrier. If she's still so suspicious of the thing that she won't come to her bowl, move it just far enough away so that she'll eat. Add a small amount of a special treat she loves on top of her meal to further tempt her.

Once she's eating from the bowl without hesitation, start moving it closer each meal until she's eating comfortably very close to the carrier. Next, place the food bowl inside the carrier, right at the entrance, so your cat can reach bites of food without having to actually step inside.

5. Now it's time to raise the stakes, so put a few of your cat's favorite toys and treats into the carrier at random times. The idea is to associate only pleasant, fun, yummy things with the carrier each time he explores it. Consider placing some **organic catnip** in there as well.

I've also found that spraying a feline facial pheromone like Feliway in the carrier several times a week can also be very beneficial, or using stress reducing flower essences for anxiety or fear.

6. After several days of eating out of the food bowl placed just inside the carrier entrance, it's time to push the dish further in. Move it a few inches toward the back of the carrier each day until kitty is standing completely inside as he eats.
7. Once you and your feline companion have successfully completed all the above steps, it's time for lots and lots of patience. What you must wait patiently for is the sight of your cat hanging out in his carrier, and hopefully napping there.

This process could take several weeks or even several months, which is why you must be patient while continuing to put meals, treats, toys, catnip, and other fun stuff in the carrier, and heaping lavish praise on him whenever he approaches it.

8. Once your cat is feeling at home in the carrier, try closing the door for a very short time with her inside, making sure to let her out before she becomes anxious or panics. Slowly extend the time in the crate by 30 seconds to a minute during each practice session.

When you can close the door for significant periods of time without upsetting your cat, you can start bringing her along on short car rides to get her accustomed to being in the carrier in a moving car that doesn't stop at the veterinary clinic.

9. If your cat has had a negative experience with a carrier in the past, it's a good idea to get a new carrier that is a different type from the "bad" carrier and start from the beginning following the steps above to get kitty comfortable with it.
10. Once you reach the point where your cat is spending time on his own resting, playing, and eating in his carrier, when the time comes to take him somewhere, it shouldn't be traumatic for either of you. If you have an appointment with your veterinarian at, say, 10:00 am, and your cat goes into his carrier at 9:00 am to nap, just close the door until you're ready to leave the house.

Each time you return home with your cat, go right back to providing a few meals, toys and treats in the crate so he continues to associate his carrier with goodness. Ideally, your cat will come to view his carrier as a comfy, safe space.

I leave my cat's carrier in the corner of my closet and put a few freeze-dried cat treats in it every night before bed, so she thinks the carrier is a magical treat-dispensing box. The treats are always gone by morning, and this ritual keeps her comfortable with going in and out of the carrier throughout the year.

Cat carriers are necessary, but they don't have to be a "necessary evil." If you need to travel with your cat, even just to vet visits, or heaven forbid you find yourself in the middle of a natural disaster and must evacuate your home, you want a safe, comfortable way to travel with your feline family member.

The more familiar and comfortable your cat is with her carrier, and the safer she feels in it, the less stressful it will be for her when you need to move her in it.
