

MAKING YOUR PRACTICE *Feline-friendly*

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Client tips

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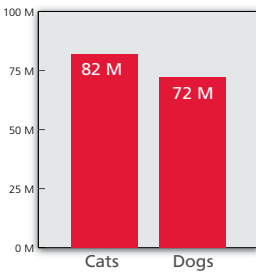


Historically, small animal practice evolved in an environment focused on treating sick patients and maintaining cleanliness. Little thought was given to managing patient stress that might result from pets coming to an unfamiliar place with unfamiliar people and other animals. Since dogs were usually the majority of patients seen, veterinary services and products were available primarily for canines.

Cats have come into their own

Over the past two decades, the cat has surpassed the dog as the most popular pet in America. According to the American Veterinary Medical Association's Pet Ownership & Demographics Sourcebook, 2007 Edition, there are 82 million pet cats versus 72 million pet dogs in the U.S. Despite the growing popularity of the cat as a companion pet, the data also show cats are twice as likely as dogs not to visit the veterinarian. It is not because cat owners lack love or caring, according to information presented at the 2005 Pet Health Industry Summit, sponsored by Banfield Research.

Pet cats & dogs in the U.S.*



* American Veterinary Medical Association Pet Ownership & Demographics Sourcebook, 2007 Edition.

Cats need special handling

Many cat owners lack knowledge about feline health, behavior, and the importance of wellness care. Cats are masters at hiding illness and pain, so a cat may be sick or uncomfortable without anyone knowing. Routine exams and diagnostic testing are important to detect problems in their earliest stages, when they are easiest to resolve—especially for cats. However, millions of cats do not receive needed veterinary care for many reasons. One is that cat owners find it difficult to catch, place in a carrier, and take the cat to the veterinary hospital. Another is that the often stressful visits to the veterinarian are avoided to preserve the special bond between cats and their owners. A feline-friendly practice will make it easier for clients to bring cats to the veterinarian and have a more enjoyable experience.

Benefits for your practice

Preparing for less stressful and more successful veterinary visits for feline patients is a win-win situation for all. Benefits include:

- Making veterinary visits safer and more relaxing for cats and their owners.
- Gaining trusting relationships between cat owners, veterinary teams, and feline patients.
- Improving the health and well-being of feline patients because veterinary care becomes more regular and consistent.
- Achieving more accurate outcomes from diagnostic tests because they are not altered by stress.
- Improving veterinary team safety while working with feline patients.
- Improving job satisfaction and enjoyment while working with feline patients.
- Attracting more cat owners and feline patients to the practice.
- Increasing profitability because feline patients will be seen more frequently.

Key Points

- Cats have surpassed dogs as the most popular pet in the U.S.
- Cats are twice as likely as dogs not to see a veterinarian.
- Cat owners often lack basic knowledge of feline health, behavior, and the importance of wellness care.
- Cats require special handling, however, hospitals can be made feline-friendly.
- Staff and clients can learn to make the hospital experience better for everyone.



Understanding cat behavior

To make hospital visits more feline-friendly, we need to think about the experience from the cat's perspective. From the veterinary team's point of view, cats can be "evil," "attack cats," or just plain "difficult." From the client's point of view, the cat is merely "naughty," or the veterinary team doesn't understand the pet and handles her too harshly. To better understand the cat's predicament, imagine that you are the patient.

The cat's point of view

- Your owner shoves you into a carrier after chasing you around the house.
- You endure an upsetting and unfamiliar car ride.
- You arrive at a strange place where there are a lot of other animals, smells, and sounds.
- Your senses of smell and hearing are heightened because you don't like the unfamiliar.
- A strange person dumps you out onto a table.
- You certainly don't like strangers handling you.
- These new and unwanted experiences make you fearful and anxious.
- You are so frightened that you may urinate, defecate, or vomit.
- You are likely to bite or scratch to defend yourself.
- If you end up staying at this awful place, when you go home the other cats in the household don't like you because you smell different.

This is not exactly an experience any of us would appreciate!



Getting great results

The good news is that there are many ways to make your practice more feline-friendly. Staff education, cat-centered hospital routines and setup, and client education are chief among them. Each hospital or clinic is different and by brainstorming with your veterinary team, you can identify the steps that will be most helpful for your situation. Many alterations are easy and inexpensive to initiate, yet provide wonderful benefits for everyone.

Staff Tips

FELINE-FRIENDLY HANDLING

- All staff members can learn to better understand cats and why they react as they do (see **The cat's point of view** opposite).
- Everyone on the veterinary team should learn and understand the **Leyhausen body posture** and **facial expressions scales** on pages 6 and 7.
- Quiet, respectful handling and minimal restraint are best (also see **Client Tips** on page 11).
- Speak calmly and quietly to the cat and client at all times.
- Accuracy of tests will be enhanced when fear and anxiety are minimized.
- Offer treats for all positive behavior (e.g., being calm, playing, purring, or sitting quietly while examined).
- Try to complete the exam and sample collection in the exam room so the pet owner is assured of your calm and gentle technique (avoid taking the cat to "the back" if possible).
- Employ the feline-friendly **Hospital Tips** on pages 8 and 9.
- Implement a cat owner education program and hand out the **Client Tips** on page 11 (available for download at HillsPet.com/CatVetTrips).

MANAGING FEAR, AGGRESSION, AND PAIN

- Fear, the main reason cats act aggressively, must be minimized.
- Use of a feline-safe analgesic (e.g., buprenorphine) keeps the older or painful patient comfortable and allows for stress-free exams and diagnostic testing.
- A highly fearful, aggressive, or painful cat should receive antianxiety medication (a good short-acting antianxiety medication is alprazolam), sedation, or anesthesia in addition to an analgesic prior to examination.

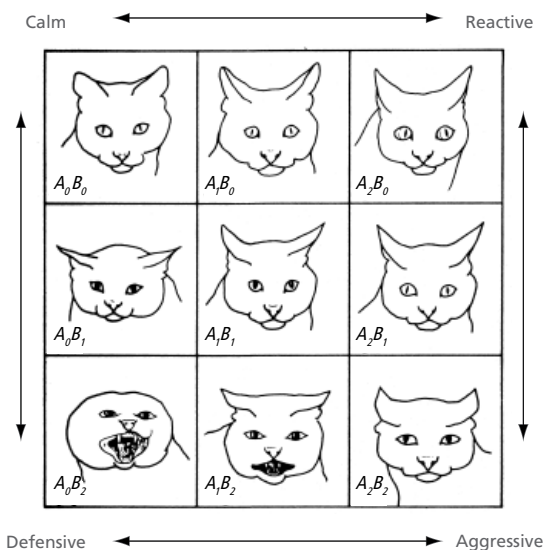


Cat behavior

Cat communication[§]

Cats communicate with body posture; ear, tail, and head position; and facial expressions or a willingness to make eye contact (see **Leyhausen scales** on these two pages). Cats also communicate via tactile, auditory, and olfactory means. For example, tactile communication includes rubbing against other cats and people, grooming, and nose touching in greeting. Auditory communication includes purring when others are around and the cat is content. Mewing and meowing (“talking”) can be very soft or very loud in stressful situations. Olfactory communication consists mainly of fecal or urine marking (spraying) to define territory.

Leyhausen facial expression scale*†



Series examples:

A_0B_0 to A_2B_0 = cat becoming reactive

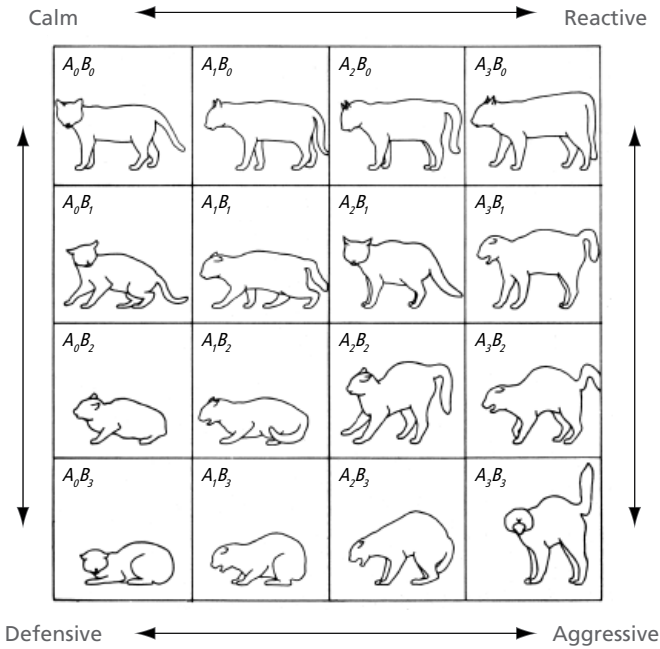
A_0B_0 to A_0B_2 = cat becoming fearful and resistant

A_0B_0 to A_2B_2 = cat becoming both assertive and aggressive



§ Adapted from **Feline Behavior Guidelines**, The American Association of Feline Practitioners, 2004.
Free download at catvets.com.

Leyhausen body posture scale**†



Series examples:

A_0B_0 to A_3B_0 = cat becoming aggressive

A_0B_0 to A_0B_3 = cat becoming defensive

A_0B_0 to A_3B_3 = cat becoming both defensive and aggressive

* Read across, down, or diagonally.

† After P. Leyhausen. In Cat Behavior: The Predatory and Social Behavior of Domestic and Wild Cats. New York: Garland STPM Press, 1979. Reprinted from Overall KL, Clinical Behavioral Medicine for Small Animals, Mosby, St. Louis. 1997.



Hospital Tips

A CALM RECEPTION AREA

- Set the tone with team members by moving deliberately and speaking in soft voices.
- Schedule appointments to limit traffic flow.
- Employ classical or spa music, offer current, interesting magazines, and a coffee or cider station (clients like TLC, too).
- If possible, answer telephones away from the front desk to reduce noise.
- Consider a fish tank as these are calming for clients and distracting/entertaining for cats.
- Offer specific cats-only appointment times to eliminate the barking and excessive activity that are the norm with canine visits.
- Consider a separate cat waiting room if facilities permit.
- Take the cat directly to an examination room instead of keeping the cat in a busy reception area.
- Be aware that feline patients may be frightened of other cats as well as unfamiliar places and people.

IN THE EXAM ROOM

- Gather history, signs, and background from the client while the carrier door is opened and/or the top of the carrier is removed. This gives the cat an opportunity to adjust to the new environment, explore, and approach the examiner if desired, allowing the cat more control over its environment.
- Never dump the cat out of the carrier. Allow the cat to remain in the bottom half of the carrier during the exam if possible. The best place to examine the cat is where the cat wants to be—the carrier, cat perches, shelves, near a window, on a bench, or on a small pet scale are good options for the exam. Some cats prefer the floor or their owner's lap. Try to accommodate their preference.



- If you need to examine the cat on an exam table, cover the hard surface with fleece or a towel—the padding from the carrier is ideal because it is both familiar and has the cat’s own scent.
- Use Feliway®* (a synthetic feline pheromone that has been found to calm cats in stressful environments) diffusers in the exam room.
- Many cats prefer to “hide”—slowly covering and wrapping them with a towel can help manage them comfortably and safely.

IN THE WARD

- It is ideal to have dedicated waiting rooms, exam rooms, hospitalization, and boarding areas for cats within the hospital.
- Deploy Feliway® diffusers in each ward and use Feliway® spray on towels, cages, and boarding suites (spray cages 30 minutes before use).
- Separate cat wards from dog wards.
- Cat cages should not face each other—cats get upset when they see strange cats.
- Create isolation areas for cats with potentially contagious diseases.
- When not filled with sick or contagious cats, isolation wards can be used for cats that are particularly sensitive, such as:
 - Cats that cry, scream, or hiss
 - Cats that reach over into another cat’s space and upset them
- Condominium suites are ideal for boarding cats.
- Provide comfortable bedding and hiding places in each cat cage/suite. If possible, the hiding place should have a perch above. Examples are sturdy cardboard or other boxes, or homemade perches with a hiding place below, such as a bag, box, or blanket to hide under or inside.
- Feed cats and clean cages on a regular schedule so that they can anticipate these activities.



* Feliway® pheromone diffuser and spray are marketed by Farnum Pet Products in the U.S. and are available from many pet product outlets and on the Internet. Feliway® is a registered trademark of CEVA Santé Animale, Libourne, France.

Client education

Client education starts with the first phone call, continues with the visit, examination, and treatment plan, and wraps up with patient discharge and follow-up. Realistically, treatment success, stress-free visits, and satisfied and returning clients are all dependent on whether the client understands the benefits of routine veterinary visits for cats. All staff members, regardless of title/responsibility, should help clients make their cat's veterinary visit as pleasant as possible and help reinforce the importance of regular care.

- Give specific instructions on how the pet owner should prepare for the cat's veterinary visit (see **Client Tips** on opposite page). This will reap great dividends in client satisfaction and hospital team success.
- Give opportunities for pet owners to ask questions during the visit and to learn about optimal health and wellness care.
- Provide clients with high-quality written materials collected from reputable sources or developed by your hospital that give additional detail and reinforce your recommendations.
- Improve patient health care while increasing client appreciation for your team's commitment to the pet by providing exam forms or report cards, topical brochures, and individualized recommendations and follow-up in writing.
- Volunteer information about the care your practice provides from kittenhood to adulthood and beyond. Today's clients seek pet adoption information as well as information for all stages of life, including humane euthanasia and support during difficult times.
- Proactively recommend websites you know to be useful and accurate.*



* See websites listed on the back page of this brochure.

Client Tips*

THE CAT CARRIER

- Always transport the cat in a carrier or other safe container.
- Train cats to view the carrier as a safe haven and “home away from home.” Keep the carrier out in the home. Put treats, favorite toys, or blankets inside to entice the cat into the carrier.
- Carriers with both top and front openings are recommended. Top-loading carriers allow for stress-free placement and removal of the cat and enable them to be examined while remaining in the bottom half of the carrier.
- Bring the cat’s favorite treats, toys, and blanket. If the cat likes to be groomed, bring its favorite grooming equipment.
- If the cat has previously had negative experiences at a veterinary hospital, the veterinarian may prescribe a short-duration antianxiety medication that should be given approximately one hour prior to the visit.

THE CAR RIDE

- Take the cat for regular rides in the carrier, starting with very short ones, to places other than the veterinary hospital.
- Because cats may get carsick, do not feed the cat for at least an hour prior to travel.

AT THE HOSPITAL

- Reward desired behaviors, even small ones, with treats, verbal praise, and other things the cat likes (e.g., brushing, massaging, playing).
- Remain calm and speak in a soft voice to help the cat remain calm. If a situation is upsetting for the client, the cat may do better if the client leaves the room.
- Always allow a trained veterinary team member to handle the cat. Even the sweetest and most laid-back cat can become aroused and fearful in a strange environment. Anxiety may cause the cat to act out of character and bite or scratch.
- Discuss techniques that might make future visits more relaxing for the client and the cat.



* Handout downloadable at HillsPet.com/CatVetTrips



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Resources

- American Association of Feline Practitioners (AAFP) provides continuing education, a website, and guidelines, including the AAFP Feline Behavior Guidelines and the AAHA/AAFP Pain Management Guidelines.
- CATalyst Council (CATalystcouncil.org)
- Cornell Feline Health Center (vet.cornell.edu/fhc)
- Healthy Cats for Life website (healthycatsforlife.com)
- Hill's Pet Nutrition (HillsVet.com) provides many client information tools, including the Kitten Handbook that is part of the Kitten/Puppy sampling program. Contact your Hill's representative or call Hill's Veterinary Consultation Service 800-548-VETS (8387).



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