

## FELINE - TRAVEL RELATED PROBLEMS

### *Why are cats so reluctant to travel?*

Cats are highly attached to territory, and movement away from that secure base is not something that is undertaken lightly! Travelling in cars, planes and other forms of human transport can be a very stressful experience for all concerned, in part, because the cat is no longer in control of its own experience. For some cats, being confined in a travel container adds insult to injury and the cat's fear of leaving its familiar surroundings is compounded by its fear of being enclosed.

### *My cat seems to get worse with every journey – why doesn't he get used to it?*

For most cats travel is a relatively uncommon experience and there is simply not enough opportunity for any significant level of habituation to be achieved. Unlike dogs, who come to see the car as a chance to accompany their owners on what might be a fun and adventurous outing, most cats see travel as an entirely negative experience and the likely destinations of feline transport confirm this. Visiting destinations such as veterinary clinics, boarding kennels, and unfamiliar or new homes are probably the most common destinations for a travelling cat and none of these give much scope for teaching cats that transport is fun!



### *I want my cat to travel happily in the car – can I teach it?*

Cats can certainly learn to enjoy car travel and there are cats that actively seek the inside of the family car and sit purring on the parcel shelf for the entire journey. In most cases these cats have been taught to travel and the best time to teach them is when they are very young. There is a period in the kitten's life when it is most open to new ideas and when it can come to accept just about anything as being normal, provided that it is fun! Unfortunately this

period is very early in kittens and therefore the responsibility for introducing kittens to car travel would need to be undertaken by breeders, but few breeders have the time to ensure that all of their charges are taken for daily trips in the car. Realistically it will be the new owners who need to start the introduction process and, even when the primary period of sensitivity to habituation has passed, short frequent car trips that are pure pleasure will still be very valuable. Taking along a few treats or play toys and insuring that the first few trips are to pleasant destinations can help to insure only positive experiences. Although cats perching in the back window of a car may look cute it is important to ensure that your cat is under control during a journey and in most cases this will mean confining the cat to a carrier of some sort while it is in the car.

### ***My cat reacts badly to the carrier– what can I do?***

One of the major sources of stress for cats during travel is confinement within a cat carrier and the fact that the carriers are only used when the cat needs to go somewhere is highly significant. For many cats the destination is not particularly pleasant and very rapidly the cat will develop a strong negative association with the carrier, seeing it as a signal of the impending veterinary clinic or cattery. Training kittens to enjoy being in their carrying boxes can make these outings far less traumatic for all involved, but even when cats are older it is possible to break down the negative image of the carrier and work to make it a safe haven rather than a prison cell. The first step is to select the right sort of carrier for your cat and there are a number of things to consider. The ease of cleaning and the way in which you put the cat into, and take it out of, the carrier are factors that are likely to be determined by your own preferences, but the level of security that the carrier will offer to your pet will depend on the cat's personality. Some cats are far more relaxed when they can see what is going on around them and the wire basket is better for them, but others feel more secure when they are totally hidden from view and a solid cat carrier will be a better choice for these individuals. Whichever type of cat carrier you purchase the most important step in introducing it to your cat is keeping it on permanent display. If it is hidden away between uses there will be no opportunity for your cat to learn to like it, but if you keep it easily accessible you can increase its positive image by lining it with a warm blanket and putting cat treats inside for your cat to find. The idea is to let the cat explore the carrier without any interference from you so that he learns that being in it is fun.

### ***I do not have time to introduce my cat to its carrier in this controlled way – what can I do to make the car trip next week more bearable?***

If you have not had time to introduce your cat to its carrier it is important to take steps to make the confinement as stress free as possible. Putting familiar bedding inside the carrier, together with a favorite toy, can be useful. The idea is to make the carrier smell familiar and therefore reassure the cat that it is safe. Another possible way in which to increase the familiarity of the carrier is to apply a synthetic feline facial scent. This scent is believed to help the cat to relax during the journey and, in trials, it has been shown to significantly decrease the signs of stress in cats during car travel. In order to be most effective it must be applied to the interior of the carrier 30 minutes before you need to put your cat inside. (This is important since the smell of the carrier for the product can disturb some cats and you need to leave time for this to evaporate.)



### ***I am going to have to take my cat by airplane – should I use a sedative?***

Sedating cats for travel is certainly an option, but cats can react very differently to sedative medication and selecting the right tablets for any individual is not always easy. You also need to be aware that sedation may not last for the entire duration of your plane trip and therefore medication should not be used as an alternative to the behavior therapy approaches discussed above. Your cat will still need to be prepared for its travel by being introduced carefully to the carrier and the feline facial scent should also be used within the carrier to make the journey less stressful. This applies to long car journeys as well as for plane travel. If you feel that medication is necessary, because of the severity of your cat's reaction to travel, you will need to discuss this in detail with your veterinarian. It may be useful to use a trial dose of the sedative prior to travelling to determine the effects that it has on your cat and the optimum dose. Anti-

anxiety drugs are another option you might discuss with your veterinarian. They are a better choice for reducing anxiety but some cats will travel better with a more sedating drug.