How do I get my cat into the carrier without being ripped to shreds?

Probably the most daunting problem most cat owners face on a regular basis is the matter of transporting their cat or cats from home to the clinic or to anywhere else for that matter. The fact is that most cats are scared of the carrier and view it as we would view a prison cell. I see this as a major health problem as fear of the carrier is a deterrent to preventative health care and early detection of medical problems. Some cats are brought to the vet only when they are too sick to put up any resistance to being placed in the carrier. This situation is equivalent to us only going to the doctor when we need an ambulance to get to the emergency room.

To successfully address this problem, we need to understand these difficulties from the perspective of the average cat. As we all know, cats like to be at home and are content within their own territory. Cats are also frightened of restraint, such as being grabbed and stuffed into a carrier. Since your average adult cat associates the carrier with restraint and being taken out of their comfortable home, it is no surprise that they would rather go ten rounds their owner than be dragged into the dreaded carrier.

We can use this knowledge to our benefit and to improve our cats’ welfare.

The first order of business is to help our cats view the carrier as part of home and not as an extension of the vet hospital. To your cat, home is anything it can rub its face on. When a cat rubs its face on something, they are releasing a substance called ‘facial pheromone’. The presence of this pheromone tells a cat ‘this belongs to me’. Since the average cat carrier spends most of the time in the basement or garage, your cat thinks that it ‘definitely does not belong to me’. Keep your carrier in the house where your cat sees it every day and can mark it with facial pheromone. Keep the door open and put in a soft towel to make it an attractive spot to curl up in and nap. I keep mine in my home office under their favorite window, one that they like to hang out in. Since my cats see the carrier as part of their home, they have no fear of it. Consider feeding you cat in the carrier. This is also a great way to feed a highly food motivated cat if you need to keep it away from another cat’s food.

Facial pheromone is also commercially available under the trade name ‘Feliway’, manufactured by Ceva labs. Feliway is available in several forms, including spray and wipes. We carry Feliway here and it is available in pet stores too. It is a smart practice to spray or wipe down the inside of the carrier before a visit to the vet. This will definitely increase a cat’s comfort level with the carrier.

The second order of business is to not frighten or restrain your cat during the process of putting them in the carrier. This is actually easier than it sounds. Cats freak out when it is time to go because we inadvertently communicate our intentions to them. Remember, cats are experts at nonverbal communication. The only time most owners walk straight toward their cat, with full eye contact and grab them is to put them in the carrier. They are well aware of what you are up to! When it is time to go, approach your cat slowly and indirectly without making eye contact. Act naturally, not like you are up to something, and pick them up to gently hold and caress them before placing them in the carrier. If the top of your carrier comes off, take it apart first and put your cat in the bottom, then put the top and door on. Cover the carrier with a towel, to allow them to feel a bit more hidden, if necessary.

Using a pillowcase works well also. Use one off your bed that has your smell on it and give it a touch of Feliway too. Most cats will allow themselves to be covered and slipped into a pillowcase. Many cats actually feel particularly secure hidden in a pillowcase and can then be slid into a carrier with no resistance or can be transported in the pillowcase alone. Tie off the opening with some string and hold it from the bottom. In fact, some fearful cats are best examined while in the pillowcase, with the opening shifted around to expose whatever parts that we are interested in.

The third part of the equation is up to us, the veterinarian and our assistants. Our intention is to provide a quiet and relaxed hospital environment that puts our patients at ease. We strive to use methods of handling and examination that minimize the stress and anxiety that our patients feel. We prefer to be gently, restrain cats minimally and allow cats to stay in their carriers or hide under a towel if they are scared. If our patients are happy, we are happy too!

All cats should visit their doctors regularly. We cannot provide good care to patients that we don’t see. With a bit of advanced planning and proper handling techniques, almost all cats (and owners!) can experience a low stress veterinary visit.