

## How to train your cat to use a cat carrier

Many cats disappear at the sight of their cat carrier and even if their owner is able to get them into it, their cat often makes it quite clear it is not finding the experience pleasant. Difficulties getting cats into their carriers can result in owner reluctance to visit the vets which can consequently lead to reduced preventative healthcare, delayed diagnosis of disease, and ultimately reduced quality of life. In addition, if a cat is physically forced into its carrier, there is the potential for it to start to view its owner negatively which can damage the cat-owner bond.

The best way to get around these problems is to teach a cat to enter its carrier voluntarily. This is done by associating the carrier with positive experiences. Cat carrier training can easily become a weekly part of life for a cat – little and often is the best way for cats to learn and a couple of minutes training every other day or so will not only be easy for you to achieve but also will help the cat to learn most effectively.

If you have a fast approaching trip or an emergency where you need to get your cat into the carrier and have not had time to teach it to go in voluntarily, here some tips on how to lift it in with minimal distress or struggle.

- If you have a carrier that opens from the top, wrap your cat in a blanket and gently lower it into the carrier.
- If your carrier only opens from the front, wrap your cat in a blanket and gently lift it and position it so it is facing away from the open door. In this position, you can gently lift your cat into the carrier tail first. You may need someone to help hold the carrier still on a stable surface.

### How to start training your cat to use the cat carrier

Before starting to teach your cat that going into the carrier is a positive experience, it is important that you have the right kind of cat carrier (see '[How to choose the right carrier](#)').

The following training steps should be progressed through slowly, only moving onto the next stage once the cat is comfortable and mastered the current training stage.

#### Stage 1

Place some bedding such as a blanket that your cat is comfortable with (ideally that it already sleeps on, or is fed treats on) near the cat carrier. If your cat is very worried by the carrier, start with the placement of the blanket a greater distance away from the carrier (but still in the same room). Reward, using your cats preferred rewards, for calm or relaxed behaviour on the blanket. Your cat will soon learn that it is their calm and relaxed behaviour on the blanket that controls the provision of a reward. By learning this, the cat develops a positive association in its mind between the blanket and the reward (and you since you are giving the reward!).

Most plastic cat carriers have a bottom part and a top part; start the training with the top part of the carrier removed. This makes the carrier appear less enclosed and potentially less threatening. The initial distance between the blanket and the carrier will very much depend on your cat's current perception of the carrier. If it is very negative, make sure you have a greater distance. Watch the following video to see some cat carrier training in action:

#### Stage 2

Gradually, over a number of sessions move the blanket closer towards the carrier. Never move the blanket while your cat is on it. Allow it to choose when to get off the blanket. Since your cat should now be offering relaxed behaviour on the blanket, such behaviour can be marked with a particular word that you have previously associated with a reward, and then followed by the offering of the chosen reward (toy, food treat, fuss) away from the blanket. This will allow the blanket to be moved while your cat is engaged in its reward. In order for this to work, the cat needs to have been previously taught that the chosen word means a reward is on its way — otherwise the word is meaningless. In the following video, the word 'good' is used. To teach this predictive

relationship, simply say the word and immediately afterwards give your cat its desired reward and repeat the pairing of 'good-reward' several times. You will know when your cat has learnt that the word is predictive of a reward when it starts to anticipate the reward after hearing the specific word, e.g., orientating itself towards you and looking at you. The benefit of using a marker word is that if the reward was only ever offered once your cat was off the blanket (in order to be able to move the blanket), the behaviour of getting off the blanket would be associated with the reward, not the behaviour of relaxing on the blanket. The marker word therefore allows pinpointing or marking of the exact behaviour intended to be rewarded. Remember to go at a pace your cat is comfortable with, tailoring the length of session to your cat's engagement and always ending on a positive note. Short and frequent sessions are generally most successful. Over a number of sessions, gradually move the blanket into the cat carrier. Aim to get to the stage where your cat will relax on its blanket in the carrier with the top of the cat carrier removed. For nervous cats, it is best to work with the roof of the cat carrier completely out of view and work gradually towards having it laid beside the cat carrier base.

Only once at this stage, should the top part of the carrier be attached. Do this when the cat is not in the base of the carrier. To watch this section of cat carrier training in action, see the video:

If your cat is not keen to enter into the carrier with the top on, go back a few training steps to the point where the blanket was not in the carrier and gradually move it into the carrier. Remember to do this gradually and reward each gradual movement towards entering the cat carrier fully. For example, your cat may only place its head in the carrier initially. Reward this behaviour and gradually build to head and one paw in the carrier, to head and two paws in the carrier to head, front paws and half of body in the carrier and so forth. The final goal here is to have the cat's whole body in the carrier while remaining relaxed. At no stage has there been any need to touch the cat to get it to enter the cat carrier (unless stroking is being used as a reward!).

### Stage 3

Once the cat is comfortable and is spending 3-5 minutes in the carrier it is time to start teaching it that the door closing is nothing to panic about. To watch this in action, see the video:

Once your cat is in the carrier, reward and then close the door a very small distance, then open and reward again. Shut the door further and further each time, being sure to open it straight away until it is able to be fully closed.

Always open it right away if the cat moves towards the door at any point in a manner that suggests it wants out, thereby teaching it that it can control the door opening just by moving towards it. This will hopefully build your cat's confidence while eliminating any reason to panic.

Again, build this up so that your cat is comfortable being in the carrier for around 3 minutes with the door closed (initially unlocked and then moving to locked) before moving to the next stage. However, it is important to ensure your cat can cope with being in the carrier in a relaxed manner for the length of time its longest journey in the carrier will be. For example, if the vet trip is usually half an hour, train the cat to remain relaxed in the carrier of its own accord in the home for this length of time (door open) and build up to similar lengths of time with the door shut. Using this training method, it is very common to find cats choosing to use their cat carriers as a nice place to sleep, even selecting it over other available beds.

### Stage 4

Now you are ready to start training the cat to accept the carrier being lifted and moved. This can be difficult for cats who like to keep their paws firmly on the ground so work in small and incremental steps towards the final goal of lifting and walking with the carrier with the cat relaxed inside. Once the door is closed, start practice moving the carrier along the floor slowly without lifting it. All the time, remember to reward the cat for staying in the carrier with rewards such as food treats placed in through the side or door of the carrier and soothing words. If the cat asks to leave the cat carrier at any time by miaowing or pawing the door, then immediately stop any movement, open the door and allow the cat to exit. If this does occur, the training steps are probably too big. Once the carrier can be gently moved around the floor, touch the carrier handle, let go straight away then reward the cat. Repeat this but this time apply a little upwards lift as one would when going to pick up the carrier, then stop and reward the cat. Progress to being able to

lift up the carrier and gently put it back down, to them being able to walk a few steps with the carrier to being able to go outdoors with the carrier and eventually to being placed in the car. Work in small steps all the time. Make sure both the lifting and setting down of the carrier is slow and steady. Many carriers have handles which when lifted make the carrier quite wobbly and unsteady for the cat inside. Where possible, try to carry the carrier with both hands to stabilise it as much as possible.

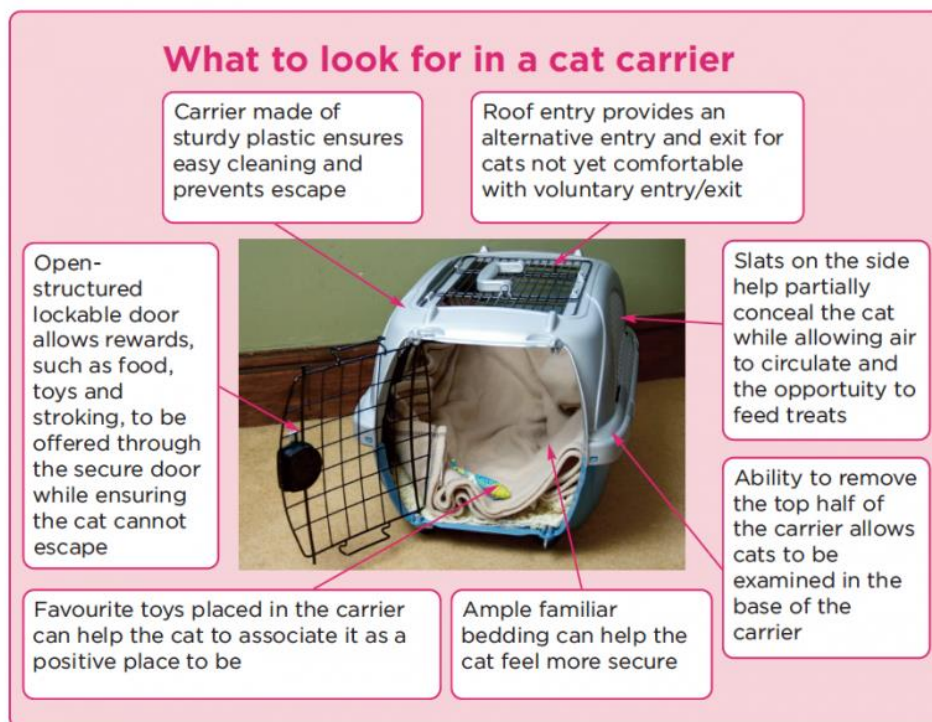
## When not training...

Out of structured training sessions, it is a good idea to always have the cat carrier out, open (with the door off) and accessible in the home. Positioning the carrier in a cosy comfortable place that is safe and secure will help make the carrier inviting. A blanket placed over the carrier can make it warm and appealing. Choose a room that the cat commonly spends time in and ideally not the room or place it has previously been situated if it has been a battle to get the cat in it in the past. Placing toys and treats in the carrier regularly will also encourage your cat to explore its carrier and view it positively.

## How to choose the right cat carrier

Cat carriers come in all shapes and sizes and it can be difficult to know what is the best type for your cat. A cat carrier should be:

- **large enough** so that your cat can stand up and turn around, as well as sit or lie comfortably.
- **easy to clean.** Wicker, fabric and cardboard can be difficult to clean.
- **secure** so the cat cannot escape. Carriers that fasten shut with zips or cardboard fastenings are not secure.
- **lightweight.** Some carriers can become extremely heavy once your cat is inside.
- used by only **one cat.** If you own more than one cat, each cat should have its own carriers.
- **easy to enter and exit.** A door that opens at the front can allow your cat to voluntarily enter and exit the carrier (see 'How to train your cat to use a cat carrier') and a lid that opens can allow careful placing in and lifting out of cats not comfortable with voluntarily entering and exiting the carrier.



A new cat carriers will appear unfamiliar to your cat which can make your cat wary of it. There are a few things you can do to help your cat feel that the carrier is a safe, familiar and positive place.

- Place **familiar bedding** that your cat regularly sleeps on in the cat carrier (do not wash the bedding first). Not only will this entice the cat to use the carrier as a resting place regularly, it will make the carrier smell of your cat which your cat will find reassuring.
- Position the cat carrier (with the door open or removed) in a **quiet and accessible part of your home** so your cat can visit it whenever it likes
- Leave **toys and treats** in the carrier regularly. This will help your cat to view the carrier as a nice place to be.
- You can spray the synthetic pheromone [Feliway®](#) on and in the carrier. Feliway is a synthetic analogue of the naturally occurring cat pheromones secreted from the glands in the cheeks and face that provide messages of security and familiarity.