

## How Veterinarian Practices Are Becoming More Cat-Friendly

Many cats in the US haven't visited a veterinarian in the past year, and it may be because 58% of cat owners say their pets hate going to the vet. As of December 2022, 862 clinics were designated cat-friendly. What secrets are they using to help make even the most hesitant of kitties comfortable?

**Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker**

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### STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- More than half (58%) of cat owners say their cats hate going to the vet; choosing a cat-friendly practice may help
- The Cat Friendly Practice (CFP) Program was established by the American Association of Feline Practitioners (AAFP) in 2012 to provide elevated care for cats and reduce their stress
- In November 2022, a decade after the program's start, the AAFP and the International Society of Feline Medicine released updated cat-friendly guidelines
- About 862 practices were designated cat-friendly as of December 29, 2022, with another 339 in the process of earning the designation
- Key areas include using cat-friendly interactions and minimal handling, which allows the cat to have a sense of control and choice
- Creating an experience that considers the cat's natural behaviors and an environment that reduces fear and anxiety is also important

More than half (58%) of cat owners say their cats hate going to the vet.<sup>1</sup> This is one reason why many U.S. cats have not been to a veterinarian in the last year.<sup>2</sup> In addition to reluctance to get into a cat carrier and be transported by car, cats are often stressed by the veterinarian visit itself, which historically may have involved being forcefully restrained for exams or even simple procedures like nail trims.<sup>3</sup>

Fortunately, things are changing, with more veterinary practices adopting cat-friendly practice guidelines meant to keep kitties as calm as possible. Not only is this better for the cat — allowing veterinarians to get a more accurate picture of their health — but it's less stressful for owners, too, who may be more likely to keep up with yearly, or twice yearly, wellness visits.

### Updated Cat-Friendly Guidelines Released

The Cat Friendly Practice (CFP) Program was established by the American Association of Feline Practitioners (AAFP) in 2012 "to elevate care for cats by enhancing the environment and experience, as well as reducing stress for the cat, caregiver, and also the entire veterinary team."<sup>4</sup>

In November 2022, a decade after the program's start, the AAFP and the International Society of Feline Medicine released updated cat-friendly guidelines, endorsed by the American Veterinary Medical Association.<sup>5</sup> Dr. Michelle Meyer, AAFP's 2021-2022 president, explained:<sup>6</sup>

*"These guidelines are pivotal. They are not only essential for anyone who works with cats, but they also provide every veterinary professional with a foundation to really understand who cats are and other reasons why they behave and react like they do in the veterinary setting."*

About 862 practices were designated cat-friendly as of December 29, 2022, with another 339 in the process of earning the designation through the Cat Friendly Practice Program.<sup>7</sup> Updates were made to approach and handling techniques as well as environment guidelines, covering the following key areas, among others:<sup>8</sup>

- Using cat-friendly interactions and minimal handling, which allows the cat to have a sense of control and choice
- Creating an experience that considers the cat's natural behaviors and altering the approach to suit each individual cat
- Ensuring the entire veterinary team understands species-specific behavior and individual differences
- Educating cat guardians about how to reduce distress during travel to the veterinary practice, including cat carrier training
- Creating an environment that reduces fear and anxiety and promotes emotions and behaviors that cats find comforting
- Understanding how to identify the cat's emotional state and related behavioral response, and what to do in each situation

## **Why Cat-Friendly Guidelines Matter**

A trip to the veterinarian should not be traumatizing to your pet. Making simple changes, such as performing exams while your cat is under a blanket, if that's what she prefers, can significantly reduce anxiety and fear. As for why veterinary practices should incorporate cat-friendly guidelines into their practice, Dr. Ilona Rodan, cochair of the task force that created the cat-friendly interaction guidelines, explained:<sup>9</sup>

*"The No. 1 reason to do so is the welfare of the cat. We are responsible for the welfare of our patients, as veterinarians, as veterinary technicians, or whatever your position in the practice, and what that means is we're taking care of not only the physical but also the mental health of the cat, which is equally important to physical health."*

Top benefits of the Cat Friendly Practice Program, according to a 2022 survey by the AAFP, include:<sup>10</sup>

- Less stress on feline patients
- Higher satisfaction among current cat caregivers
- Demonstrates how much practitioners care about patients
- More frequent visits from cat guardians

## Your Cat Will Feel Safer and Less Stressed

Cat-friendly practices use techniques such as separate waiting areas for dogs and cats, free from excessive noise — or immediately bringing cats back to a private exam room — to reduce anxiety in their feline patients.

At one cat-friendly practice in Colorado, they created a “kitty parking area,” where cat owners can place their kitty carriers to keep them elevated and above most dogs’ line of sight. They then help themselves to a clean towel to place over the carrier, to help their cat feel safe and protected.<sup>11</sup>

In the exam room, efforts are made to provide a comfortable, calming experience. Yoga mats may be placed on tables to make them more inviting, while warm towels and fluffy blankets may be provided during exams. Exams should also be done where your pet prefers, such as on your lap, on the floor or in a carrier, if possible.

Cat-friendly practices also provide safe havens to animals that must be hospitalized, and encourage guardians to leave a blanket or bed from home to help their cat feel more secure.

Video monitors may also be used to help keep the door to the cat ward closed as much as possible, keeping out unnecessary noise, odors and visitors.<sup>12</sup> Special attention is also paid to assess cats’ pain levels and provide individualized care based on life stage and health concerns.<sup>13</sup>

## The Ultimate Low-Stress Visit May Be at Home

Fortunately, an increasing number of veterinarians are committing to creating low-stress and “fear-free” visits for their patients. You can also help calm your cat’s nerves using these 10 tips to a fear-free vet visit. If your pet is very anxious, calming nutraceuticals and herbs such as holy basil (Tulsi), valerian, L-theanine, rhodiola, ashwagandha or chamomile can be administered a few hours before the visit. You can also use stress-reducing pheromone sprays.

Your veterinarian should make the effort to avoid using excessive restraint or exposing your cat to loud noises, dogs and other fear-inducing situations. However, if your cat is very fearful, in-home veterinary care is another alternative, which may provide the lowest stress option of all, since your cat doesn’t have to leave home.

### Sources and References

<sup>1,2</sup> [Veterinary Practice News July 29, 2013](#)

<sup>3</sup> [PetMD June 27, 2018](#)

<sup>4</sup> [American Association of Feline Practitioners, The Cat Friendly Practice Program](#)

<sup>5,6,8,9</sup> [American Veterinary Medical Association November 15, 2022](#)

<sup>7,10</sup> [AAFP 2022 CFP Survey Results](#)

<sup>11</sup> [Cat Friendly Practice Case Study, Care Animal Hospital, Arvada, CO](#)

<sup>12</sup> [AAFP, CFP Solutions](#)

<sup>13</sup> [Cat Friendly Practice](#)

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