How cat considerate is your practice? Feline friendly tips and nurse's

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Cats have long been one of the most commonly owned pets in the UK. This enormous popularity means cats present to veterinary clinics all the time, yet this species can receive much less focus and veterinary attention than dogs.

Veterinary nurses play a crucial role in the health and welfare of cats seen in veterinary practice; good nursing care can improve the success of treatment and reduce stress for cats in your care.

This article introduces how to become more cat friendly with the International Cat Care Cat Friendly Clinic scheme.

About the scheme

The Cat Friendly Practice initiative was launched in the UK in 2006 and has since grown into the internationally recognised Cat Friendly Clinic standard scheme (sponsored in Europe by Purina), with more than 1,000 clinics in 22 countries receiving gold or silver awards.

This year the scheme will be updated and a bronze level award introduced, meaning there will now be no excuse not to be “cat friendly”.

Why become cat friendly?

Put yourself in the position of a cat entering your practice. After a car journey and in its (often unfamiliar) basket, it cannot run and hide as cats prefer to do and instead is presented with new and frightening sights, sounds and smells, including being in close proximity to dogs and other cats. This results in anxiety and hypervigilance.

If hospitalised, a cat faces more novel experiences, to which it may not adapt well. Sometimes, in fear, cats react aggressively if unable to run away and any resulting staff injury could be avoided with more careful care and handling to reduce fear and stress.

Becoming a Cat Friendly Clinic and “thinking cat” benefits the cats, but also the clients, who feel their pet is understood and handled kindly.

Principles of becoming cat friendly

Application for the scheme is online – visit www.catfriendlyclinic.org for more information and to decide what level of award your practice could qualify for.

The main points to consider include:

- **The building** – there may be limitations to space and budget, but being cat friendly doesn't mean having a total refit. Look at what you have and how it can be used to the cat's advantage.
- **The staff** – being cat friendly can require an attitude change, but all staff must be committed to the scheme and read and follow the necessary guidance.
- **Equipment** – a few important pieces of equipment can improve the cat's experience within the clinic (quiet clippers, for example).
- **Clients** – the clinic must understand its cat-owning clients and tell them what it does with provision of accessible client information and excellent communication.



Figure 1. Think around problems. No separate room for a cat only waiting room? Partitions will still reduce stress and exposing the cat to other animals.



Figure 2. Owners should have somewhere elevated to put their cat baskets on and cover them with towels. Receptionists should encourage this and provide towels if necessary.



Figure 3. Allow cats to leave the basket voluntarily or be examined in the basket.

Practical cat friendly principles

From leaving home, the cat's experience can be improved by ensuring basic steps are in place. Consider the following areas of the practice.

First impressions

The first person a client (and cat) encounters is usually the receptionist over the telephone or at the reception desk. Ensure reception staff understand and promote the scheme, and can offer advice (verbal, written and/or online) on basket choice, habituating the cat to the basket and how to bring the cat into the clinic to minimise stress.

Reception staff should be vigilant to ensure cats are not stressed while waiting (for example, ensuring they are seated in the cat waiting area and baskets are covered with towels).

Waiting room

The waiting room can set the scene for the cat's visit to the practice. Stress suffered here means they are unlikely to be relaxed on examination in the consultation room. Consider the following points.

- Can a separate cat waiting room be created? Remember, the benefits of carrying this out can be lost if cats have to be carried past barking dogs on the way to the consult room, or if their baskets are placed on the floor at the reception desk.

- No separate room? Consider physically separating areas with temporary barriers (**Figure 1**) and ask owners with barking dogs to wait outside or in the car, or consider cat-only consultation periods during quiet times of the day.
- Clinics should provide raised shelves, chairs or stools for baskets (waiting room and reception desk) as cats feel insecure at ground level.
- Visual contact with other cats (and dogs) should be minimised by covering baskets with a towel and/or providing partitions between seats where baskets are placed (**Figure 2**).

Consultation room



Figure 4. Have cat scales in all consult rooms to avoid moving cats in the practice and encourage weighing at every visit.

Continue the stress-free experience in the consultation room by examining cats gently and slowly (extended consulting times may be needed if normally short). Ideally, the cat leaves the basket voluntarily or the top is removed and the cat is examined in the basket (**Figure 3**).

Other tips include:

- Ensure there are no strong odours (for example, dog anal glands) and shed/clipped fur is removed between clients. Good ventilation and a quick mop over the floor can help.
- Cover table tops with a rubber mat and examine on familiar bedding from the basket.
- Cat scales should be available in the room so cats are not removed to be weighed on dog scales (**Figure 4**).
- Avoid loud noises and interruptions, lock the door and allow the cat to explore the room while a history is taken – examine on the windowsill if it prefers.

Cat ward

Having a dedicated cat ward is ideal; however, this is not always possible, but you can still become cat friendly. Remember to think about the cat's experience on the way to the ward and while waiting to be admitted – cover baskets, ensure it is not waiting at ground level or in view of other cats and avoid busy thoroughfares.



Figure 5. Cats in the ward must have a place to hide if they wish. Providing a perch can also reduce stress – this can be a shelf or simply a cardboard box to jump on top of.

The standards contain structural recommendations for the ward such as cage size, positions (not in view of other patients and not on ground level), and type (stainless steel can be noisy and reflective, for example).

But it is not just about the cage structure; consider the following when trying to improve the cat friendliness of your ward:

- Do you take a full history from every cat admitted, including food and litter preferences? A towel or blanket from home can also help make the cage smell more familiar.
- Does the ward have what it needs to avoid cats being moved? For example, cat scales to weigh patients daily.
- Are cats away from the sight, sound and smell of dogs? Ideally, they should be in their own ward, but if the two species must be housed together, can procedures be arranged on different days or large, noisy dogs housed elsewhere?
- Can inpatients be examined out of view of other patients (stressful for the cat examined and

the viewer)? As a minimum, cage fronts should be covered.
- Are procedures consistent – that is, are inpatients examined and fed at set times? Unpredictable handling can cause stress.
- Do all cats in your ward have somewhere to hide? Whether an igloo bed or a cardboard box, it is imperative inpatients can be partially hidden if they choose (**Figure 5**) and as cats like to be high up, a perch can be added – even to small cages.

Nurse’s role in a cat friendly clinic

Veterinary nurses are vital for the success of the Cat Friendly Clinic scheme. They are involved in every step – here are
some examples:

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Figure 6. Gentle restraint. Slow and quiet handling and using towels where necessary avoids defensive aggressive behaviour through fear.

Becoming “cat advocates” who are catalysts for educating the whole practice and encouraging enthusiasm for the scheme. A self-motivated, cat-loving veterinary nurse often becomes the focal point for discussion and implementation of cat friendly principles.

- Nurses are responsible for inpatients and can improve care of hospitalised cats, including assessment of pain, nausea and stress, implementation of fluid therapy and ensuring the ward is cat friendly.
- Nurses are frequently involved in handling and restraint. Adopting a “less is more” approach is critical to cat handling; cats generally respond well to minimal restraint. Using (familiar smelling) towels can help (**Figure 6**). Grabbing and immediately heavily restraining a cat can be highly intimidating and often provokes defensive aggression. Many cats are

frightened, but if they can be gently reassured rather than heavily restrained, this can avoid defensive aggression. The American Association of Feline Practitioners/International Society of Feline Medicine feline-friendly handling guidelines provide an excellent resource and clinics are encouraged to comply with these guidelines (see further reading).

- Understanding cat behaviour. Cats are generally sensitive to unfamiliar people and situations, and their body language may be misunderstood. Each cat should be treated as an individual and handled according to its behaviour and reactions (**Figure 7**).
- Communication. Nurses can disseminate information to clients on the scheme and other feline health topics. Running nursing clinics (obesity, geriatric, kitten) educates clients, helps cats and leaves owners feeling the practice really cares for their pet.

Conclusion



Figure 7. Staff must learn to assess cats as individuals – some like lots of human contact; others want to be left alone.

Nurses are vital proponents of the Cat Friendly Clinic scheme. Understanding cat behaviour and handling cats gently in a cat friendly environment truly benefits cats, staff and clients.

For more information on the Cat Friendly Clinic scheme, visit www.catfriendlyclinic.org

Further Reading

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