

# Teach Your Cat to Love the Carrier

Many people believe that their cats do not like – and will never like – their carrier. It doesn't have to be that way! Recent studies show that if you use positive reinforcement techniques to train your cat to enter their carrier willingly, they show less stress during car rides, vet trips become shorter, and they don't resist going into the carrier in the first place. This can be accomplished by making the carrier a positive part of their everyday life instead of an object that only appears when they are going to the vet.

Imagine growing up in a household that had two vans, a black one and a silver one. Your family used the black van most of the time and only used the silver one to go to the doctor to get shots. Naturally, you would never want to go into the silver van because you knew where you were going. This is the same concept for cats; if they associate the carrier with negative, scary, or stressful experiences, they will avoid the carrier at all costs.



Here are instructions for a simple, step-by-step process that will build positive associations for your cat, thus making the carrier a stress-free place. Read through all the steps below, then check out our video tutorial (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hVEtfsrNH5U&feature=youtu.be>) to see some of the steps in action!

## Step 1: Desensitize

- Leave the carrier around the house at all times. Make sure it is in a place where your cat already feels comfortable (ex. near the couch, your bed).
- Turn the carrier into a “den” with the following steps:
  - Remove the top and the door if possible
  - Place one of their favorite beds in the open carrier; you can also use a piece of your clothing that has your scent for added comfort
  - Place a few of their favorite toys in the “den”
- Allow your cat to ignore or investigate as she sees fit; never make a big deal out of their actions either way.
- After a few days (or possibly a few weeks), you should find that your cat is rather indifferent to the carrier, but they may have developed some level of interest.
- Don't rush to the next step. Make sure your cat is comfortable with the carrier in the room before moving on.

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## Step 2 – Positive association with food

- Once the previous step has been completed and any negative association has been lessened as much as possible, you can start to create a positive association using food.
- Start by putting some highly desirable food in the entrance of carrier, like chicken or tuna. If possible, try to make sure your cat is nearby and is aware that you are putting something in the carrier, but don't make a big deal out of it. If they ignore it, be patient and just keep trying.
- Once they've been eating the treats from the front of the carrier, gradually place the treats further inside until it is eventually at the back. This will require a bit of courage for them to go all the way inside if they want the treat; try to ensure the environment is quiet and calm so they aren't startled off by sudden noises or movement while they're inside the carrier. If you've already gotten your cat to eat inside the carrier, then make sure you always feed them in the carrier for a while.
- Provide a "Jackpot" Treat. This is a treat that they will never turn down and something they should only get when they go into the carrier on their own. This will begin to associate the carrier to their favorite treats. Jackpot treats can be lickable treats, their favorite canned food, etc.

## Step 3 – Replace the top of the carrier

- Once your cat is comfortable with their "den," put the top back on
- Make sure to do this when the cat is not around
- Continue to use food and jackpot treats as usual whenever they enter the carrier, as described in previous steps.

## Step 4 – Replace the door of the carrier

- Put the door back on the carrier. This step can be problematic, as the sound of the door opening or closing can trigger fear for many cats.
  - Try taping or tying the door open at first so it doesn't swing back and forth
  - Once your cat is comfortable eating inside the carrier, try gently pushing the door so it's mostly closed while they're eating. Do not lock it at this stage. If your cat becomes distressed or agitated, open the door immediately and allow them to exit the carrier; if they're reacting this way, you may want to slow down the process and revert back to the last step they seemed comfortable with.
  - When you are able to gently shut the door while the cat's inside without a negative reaction, you can begin to lock the door while they eat (or provide treats through the closed door or vent holes). Start with just a few seconds and if your cat becomes distressed, open the door immediately.
  - Eventually you will be able to leave the door closed for a few minutes after they've finished their food.

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## Step 5 – Moving the carrier

- Once you get to the point where your cat is comfortable locked inside the carrier, try picking it up, putting it back down, then opening the door so they can exit if they'd like.
- When your cat is comfortable being picked up and put back down while inside the carrier, the next step is to pick the cat up in the carrier and carry them into another room before putting the carrier down and opening the door.
  - This will begin to replicate conditions that your cat will experience when it's time to visit the vet. We are trying to teach them that they are not going to the vet every time they go into the carrier. If your cat's experience remains predictable 99 times out of 100, they will be better able to manage the times when they visit the vet.

## Step 6 – Getting the cat used to the car

- Once your cat is comfortable being inside the carrier for 7-10 minutes, you're ready to try taking them out for a drive.
- Line the bottom of the carrier with something absorbent like newspaper in case of an accident, then add a layer of something warm and soft on top, like a towel or small blanket.
- Encourage your cat into the carrier. If this is difficult, you will need to continue with the previous two steps for a while longer.
- In your vehicle, lay a folded blanket down over the car seat then place their carrier on top – this will help reduce vibration once you're driving. You may also want to place a sheet over the carrier to block any direct sunlight, but be sure you leave enough areas exposed to allow plenty of ventilation. Lastly, fasten the seatbelt around your carrier so it doesn't slide around en route.
- Go for a brief drive – it should be considerably shorter than the amount of time the cat was previously comfortable in the carrier. For example, if your cat will comfortably lounge in a locked carrier for 7 minutes, your drive should only last 3 or 4 minutes before they're back home and removed from the vehicle. Even driving 200 yards up and down the road will be fine for the first trip.
- Continue to take your cat out for incrementally longer and longer drives each day for the next week until they're at least comfortable for the duration of a trip to the vet and back. Continue regular car rides over time so they become part of the cat's routine; this will help them realize that most car rides are fun and only occasionally mean a trip to the vet!

Eventually, going out in the cat carrier will be no stress at all. Remember, if your cat ever becomes stressed, then go back a step or two before moving forward with the process.

***Continue building positive associations and before you know it, you will have actually trained your cat to love the carrier!***