



Restrictions related to the Covid-19 pandemic have meant that many cat caregivers and families are home-based. Routines for cats may be altered and households may be more active and noisy. These changes may give rise to acute or chronic stress, with potential health implications. If cats are presented to Veterinary Surgeons in this time, their threshold for coping with additional stressors such as examinations or treatment may be reduced. This is likely to be exacerbated by the need for veterinary staff to take the cat from its caregiver in the carpark so that social distancing can be maintained. However, stress associated with vet visits can be limited through prior planning, stress recognition and environmental modification.

Physiological and behavioural signs of acute stress in cats

Most veterinary staff will be familiar with outward signs of stress (anxiety, fear or frustration) in cats. These include increased heart, respiratory rate or blood pressure, panting, salivation, stimulation of foot pad sweat glands, trembling, loss of bladder or bowel control, urine-spraying, vocalisations, increased vigilance, hiding or withdrawal, ears flattened, pupils dilated or a low body posture. Caregivers may report that, at home, their cat is less inclined to interact or play with them; there may be changes in appetite, conflict between household cats or an increase or decrease in grooming behaviour.

Taking cats from caregiver's cars into the practice

Under normal conditions cats often enter the practice via a waiting area, and they have their caregiver present throughout much of the visit. They may depend on the latter for a sense of security. The experience of being collected from their caregiver in the carpark will be unfamiliar, and the approach of veterinary staff may be perceived as threatening. It can be an extra stressor for the cat if staff need to wear personal protective equipment or if they carry the scent of other animals, hand sanitisers or disinfectant.

To reduce associated stress in cats, the pet carrier should be robust and it should be partly-covered so that the cat feels less exposed. Caregivers can be asked to place bedding inside this which carries familiar smells, including that of caregivers (bedding can be placed amongst unwashed laundry for scent transferral). Ideally the cat will have formed positive associations with its pet carrier; achieved by this being made widely available at home, including for 'feel good' activities such as resting and reward-based training. When taking the pet carrier, vet staff should avoid direct eye contact with the cat and they should reach over the pet carrier to take the handle in a gentle and predictable manner.

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Examinations and treatment

Veterinary examinations and treatment should occur in the quietest room available - ideally well away from the sight, sound and scent of dogs. Staff trained in low-stress handling should assist if possible, and handling should be gentle and predictable for the cat. Cats can significantly benefit from being allowed an element of choice where practical; including in relation to investigation of the environment and equipment, and having de-stress opportunity if displaying signs of stress. Where appropriate, food can be offered as a distraction from anxiety and to promote good associations with stimuli and handling.

Once examinations and treatment are complete, the cat should have access to their familiar pet carrier or, if needing to be admitted, they should be placed in a quiet kennel away from dogs (and other animals where space permits). Their exposure to stressors should be limited in terms of the sight, sound and scent of them. Cats can benefit hugely from having access to hiding areas. Their kennel could be partly covered and they should have environmental control such as the ability to access high areas. A cardboard box can provide opportunity for the cat to hide behind this or perch on the top. Subject to pandemic restrictions, the cat may also benefit from having access to their own bedding containing familiar scents including that of caregivers. Caregivers can be asked about their cats preferences for food, litter-tray design and litter substrate, so that this can be replicated if possible. When cleaning litter-trays, a small amount of soiled litter should be transferred to the clean tray for familiarity. There should ideally be distance between the cats' food, water and toileting provisions. The use of synthetic pheromone products close to the kennel may help in reducing stress.

Stress within the home

If caregivers report changes in their cats' behaviour at home, possibly due to environmental or routine changes related to the pandemic, they can be advised to ensure that resources are optimal so that their cat feels more secure and has outlets for intrinsic behaviour. As a general rule there should be at least one litter-tray per cat, plus one extra. These should be located in quiet secluded areas away from stressors. Many cats prefer uncovered trays which are at least 1.5 times their body length excluding their tail. A fine, granular, non-scented substrate is often preferable. Litter-tray hygiene should be good, and there should



be distance between litter-trays, food and water resources. Cats should have access to high areas, as well as to behind furniture; so that they have environmental choices. Vertical and horizontal sturdy scratching resources should be available.

To establish outlets for intrinsic behaviour indoors, toys can be rotated to maintain their novelty value. These can include paper bags, wand toys such as a stick with string or ribbon attached, and 'bat and chase' toys such as a table tennis ball, cotton reel, scrunched up ball of paper,

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wine cork or piece of dried pasta. Cats can use cardboard boxes (with two entrance/exit areas cut out) as enrichment, a tunnel or a sanctuary area. Food foraging can be encouraged by scattering dried food indoors or amongst scrunched up balls of paper. Puzzle feeders can be easily made using toilet or kitchen roll tubes with pierced holes in the side (and balls of paper plugging the ends), or as toilet roll tubes are stuck upright on a base. Dried food can then be placed inside these.

If caregivers experience behavioural issues with their cat, they can visit the following websites to locate a Clinical Animal Behaviourist:

- Fellowship of Animal Behaviour Clinicians (FABC) <https://fabclinicians.org/>
- Animal Behaviour and Training Council (ABTC) <http://www.abtcouncil.org.uk/> (see the 'Clinical Animal Behaviourist' register).