

## *Teaching Your Cat to Ride in a Carrier*

A cat carrier is a vital tool to have for emergencies, for traveling with your cat or for transporting him to the veterinarian. However, if your cat isn't comfortable in his carrier, you'll find it difficult or impossible to get him into it, and he'll be stressed out when he's inside it. Considering the importance and usefulness of a cat carrier, it pays to work toward making a ride in one a pleasant experience for your cat.

### How to Teach Your Cat to Get into His Carrier and Relax

Teaching your cat to enter his carrier and be comfortable in it is a step-by-step process. If he hasn't had any experience with a carrier, you can complete many of these steps in just a single session. If your cat is already fearful of the carrier, this training may take several weeks. You'll know your cat is ready for the next step when he's calm and accepting of the step you're working on. Be patient, and be sure that you don't rush through the steps.

Many cats ride in their carriers only when leaving the comfort of home and going to the veterinarian's office. They quickly learn to associate bad experiences with the carrier, so they become agitated and fearful at the mere sight of it. Many cats even run and hide. To avoid this, teach your cat to be comfortable just being near his carrier before you try to train him to enter it.

To ensure the success of all your work during the following four training stages, it's important to keep one key rule in mind: Do your training in between vet visits and at a time when you don't need to transport or travel with your cat. Since you'll be gently and gradually teaching him to associate pleasant experiences with his carrier, it's crucial that he doesn't experience any fear or stress around or inside it during the training period. If he does, teaching him to like his carrier will be much more challenging, if not impossible.

### Stage One: Getting Used to the Carrier

- Place the carrier in an open space where you and your cat spend time together. A great location is the room where your cat eats his meals. Watch your cat closely to see if he seems curious or worried about the carrier. When he acts as if he doesn't care that it's there (or if he decides to sleep inside it on his own!), go to the next step of Stage One.
- Put your cat's bowls in front of the carrier and start feeding him there. He might not eat right after his food bowl is placed in this spot, particularly if he's been afraid of his carrier in the past. If he skips more than one meal, move the bowls a bit further away from the carrier until he starts eating. Then, over several meals, gradually move the bowls back toward the carrier. When your cat eats his food comfortably right in front of the carrier, proceed to the next step.
- Approach your cat while he's eating, and either stand or sit next to him. Some cats aren't afraid of the carrier by itself, but they connect the combination of the carrier plus you with being caught and carried, and they fear that. So don't be discouraged if your cat runs away when you walk up to him and the carrier. Just keep trying. If he has some favorite treats, like Kitty Kaviar® bonito tuna flakes (available at most pet stores), vacuum-sealed salmon, bits of stinky cheese or pieces of chicken liver, drop some of those into his bowl to encourage him to eat while you're near the carrier. When your cat will continue to eat while you're standing or sitting by him and the carrier, you're ready for the next step.

### Stage Two: Getting Used to Entering the Carrier

Now that your cat is comfortable with being right outside the carrier, you can begin to teach him that the inside of the carrier is a safe place to be, too. During this stage, only give your cat his food and special treats during training, when he's inside the carrier. Patience may be required as you progress through these next steps, but your hard work will pay off in the end.

- Stand or sit next to your cat while he's eating in front of his carrier. Take a small treat and place it on the door ledge of the carrier. When your cat willingly approaches the door ledge and eats the treat, you're ready to proceed to the next step.
- Place your cat's bowls just inside the carrier door. When he's brave enough to put his head into the carrier to eat from his food bowl, you're ready to go to the next step.
- Place the food bowls a little deeper into the carrier so that your cat must put his front feet inside to reach his food. At the same time, place a couple of small treats even deeper inside the carrier. When your cat is comfortable eating his regular food with his front feet inside the carrier and will walk deeper inside to eat the treats, you can move on to the next step.
- Put your cat's food into the back of the carrier so that he has to go completely inside the carrier to eat. When your cat willingly enters the carrier and eats, you can go to the next step.
- If your cat gets particularly excited at mealtimes—because you feed him a couple of times a day or you leave dry food down but give canned food only once or twice a day—you can take advantage of his excitement to introduce him to a short cue (command) for going into the carrier. This will prepare him for the more intensive training in Stage Three. With your cat watching or following you, walk over to his carrier. Say "Get in" or "Enter," and then put his meal inside.

## Stage Three: Entering the Carrier on Cue

Now you're ready for more intensive practice with your cue. You'll need very tasty treats for the steps in this stage.

- If your cat has set routines, practice this step just before his breakfast or dinner so that he's ready to eat. When you and your cat are both near the carrier, put a treat between your fingertips. Show it to your cat, give him your cue, "Get in," and place the treat about halfway into the carrier. When he willingly follows the treat into the carrier, you can proceed to the next step. Remember, using treats he truly loves is essential! If your cat won't enter his carrier for treats, go back to Stage Two for a few more sessions.
- At odd times throughout the day, when you and your cat are in the same room as the carrier, take a treat and assume your position in front of the carrier. Give your cat the verbal cue to enter the carrier, and place the treat at least halfway into it. When he willingly enters the carrier to get the treat, you're ready to proceed to Stage Four.

## Stage Four: Closing the Door and Getting Ready to Go

Now that your cat's willingly entering his carrier, you're ready to teach him to relax while the door is closed and the carrier is moved around. Being lifted off solid ground and carried around is usually the most frightening for cats, and it often temporarily increases their fear. Imagine how you'd feel, suddenly losing control, being suspended above ground, swaying and rocking, perhaps getting bumped into walls, and seeing things whiz quickly past you! It's not surprising that this stage of training often takes the longest. Go slowly, and don't be discouraged if you need to back up a step.

- Prepare four or five small, tasty treats. Give your cat the verbal cue to enter the carrier and toss the treat inside, just as you did in Stage Three. When your cat enters, place one hand on the door of the carrier, and start to close it while tossing in a few more treats. Keeping your hand on the door, close it all the way, but don't latch it. Wait a full second or two. Then toss in two more treats as you open the door. At this point, your cat should be free to leave the carrier through the open door. When he stays in the carrier to finish eating his last treats instead of scooting out as soon as you open the door, you're ready to proceed to the next step.
- Prepare four or five small treats. Give your cat the verbal cue, and place a treat inside the carrier. When your cat enters the carrier, place one hand on the door of the carrier, and move the door toward the closed position while tossing in a few more treats. Close the door without latching it, and keep your hand on it. Wait three or four seconds, and then toss in two more treats while you open the door. When your cat eats those last treats instead of just exiting the carrier when you open the door, you're ready to increase the time you keep the door closed. Continue repeating Step Two, slowly increasing the time that the door's closed, until you can keep it closed for 15 to 20 seconds. Again, you can proceed to the next step when your cat stays in the carrier to eat the treats you tossed in while opening the door to let him out.
- Repeat the cue for your cat to enter the carrier and toss in the treats, but this time close the latch on the carrier door and step back for a moment. After just a few seconds, kneel down and offer your cat a couple of treats through the closed door of the carrier. (If you don't have a carrier with a wire front, you can open the door just enough to toss the treats inside. For example, if you're using a bag with a zippered front, such as a soft-sided Sherpa® bag, just unzip it enough to make a small hole for the treats to pass through.) After giving your cat the treats, immediately undo the latch and open the door. When your cat chooses to eat the treats instead of scooting out of the carrier, you can proceed to the final step.
- Repeat the cue to enter the carrier and toss the treats. When your cat's inside, shut the door and lift the carrier off the ground a few inches. Then set it back down gently, toss in a couple of treats and open the door. When your cat chooses to eat the treats instead of scooting out of the carrier, you've successfully completed Stage Four.

## Introducing New Experiences in the Carrier

Many people train their cats only through Step Four. At this point, their cats are entering the carrier on cue and comfortably eating meals in the carrier. If you choose to stop at this point, you might need to do a little retraining of the enter cue after your next visit to the veterinarian's office.

If you have the time to do a bit more work with your cat, it's helpful to slowly accustom him to more experiences while he's in the carrier. For example, pick the carrier up and walk around your house. Then return the carrier to its original spot and toss in some treats as you open the door. (Remember to wait until your cat chooses to eat those treats instead of scooting out of the carrier when you open it before you try introducing him to another new experience.) You can take your cat for a car ride or two in the carrier—or even drive him to the veterinarian's office, walk into the lobby, and then turn around and go home. The more pleasant experiences your cat has in his carrier, the happier he'll be when you need to use it.