

Pet Health Articles



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Medication to Reduce the Stress of Veterinary Visits for Cats

Why is my cat so stressed when I take her to the veterinary clinic?



For most cats, a visit to the veterinarian is an overwhelming experience. The cat is taken out of its familiar home environment, usually roughly pushed into a carrier, put into a noisy car, driven to the veterinary clinic, and taken into the reception area where there are intense smells from many other pets and people.

Then they are taken into an examination room where an unfamiliar person examines them and administers various treatments. Any one of these things can be stressful, and when they are all combined, it is not surprising that your cat is so frightened or stressed.

Can I give my cat a sedative or antianxiety medication to decrease this stress?

Sedatives are prescription medications that should only be administered to healthy animals. If your cat's veterinary appointment is for a routine wellness examination, your veterinarian may prescribe a sedative or antianxiety medication if your cat's stress is severe.

Since these drugs may have side effects, **never administer a sedative if you have any concerns about the cat's current state of health** – even if your veterinarian has provided you with a sedative for routine wellness visits in the past.

Medications used to reduce the anxiety associated with car travel or veterinary visits include:

- Buprenorphine (brand names Buprenex®, Simbadol®, Belbuca®, Vetergesic®, Buprenodale®, Sublocade®, Suboxone®, Subutex®, Temgesic®)
- Gabapentin (brand names: Neurontin®, Aclonium®, Equipax®, Gantin®, Gabarone®, Gralise®, Neurostil®, Progresse®)
- Trazadone (Desyrel®, Oleptro®)
- Alprazolam (brand names: Xanax®, Niravam®, Alprazolam Intenso®)

If one of these medications is appropriate for your cat's situation, your veterinarian will prescribe it.

What about natural medicine?

Natural medicines, also known as complementary therapies, cover a wide range of products, including herbs, nutraceuticals, supplements, and homeopathic remedies. Although the marketplace is full of products that claim to treat anxiety, these claims are largely anecdotal and there are few controlled studies that support their effectiveness in either humans or pets.

One of the biggest concerns that many veterinarians have with complementary medicines is that there can be variability in their purity, quality, level of contaminants, and effectiveness from batch to batch. Natural products are not always benign, particularly for cats, who have different

metabolic processes than humans.

There are veterinary products available that claim to treat anxiety disorders or have generalized calming effects. These products generally meet a level of quality control and standardization that is similar to pharmaceuticals, but studies on the effectiveness of these products are generally lacking. Most of these products are intended for treating behavioral problems and take several weeks to become effective. Pheromones, such as Feliway®, are natural alternatives that provide some sound scientific evidence of effectiveness and can have rapid action.

What are pheromones?

Pheromones are naturally-occurring, odorless substances that are emitted by animals and humans and trigger an emotional response in members of the same species. Pheromones work by stimulating the vomeronasal organ (also called Jacobson's organ) and affect areas of the brain that lead to emotional responses. They are species-specific: the pheromones of one species only affects other members of that species.

“By mimicking the cat's natural facial pheromones, Feliway® creates a state of familiarity and security in the cat's local environment.”

Feliway® is a synthetic pheromone that has been specifically developed for use in cats. The pheromone in Feliway® is a synthetic copy of the feline facial pheromone used by cats to mark their territory as safe and secure. By mimicking the cat's natural facial pheromones, Feliway® creates a state of familiarity and security in the cat's local environment. As a result, it can help comfort and reassure cats while they cope with a challenging situation and help prevent or reduce the stress caused by a change in their environment.

Other forms of Feliway® are also available (Optimum®, MultiCat®) and your veterinarian may recommend these products instead. These products also work by providing a soothing pheromone to calm your cat in stressful situations.

Feliway® products are also available as a spray for intermittent use in areas such as the car, the cat's crate, or the veterinary examination room, and as a plug-in diffuser to aerosolize the pheromone in a specific area for up to a month.

How can I use Feliway® to reduce the stress of my cat's veterinary visit?

Spray a towel or blanket, then put it into your cat's carrier and allow it to dry. Additionally, spray your car before putting the cat into it. When you get into the examination room, you can put the towel on the examination table to provide further reassurance for your cat.

What about Rescue Remedy®?

Rescue Remedy® is a Bach Flower Remedy that contains five flower essences intended to relieve panic following emotional or physical stress. Similar products are manufactured by other companies under different names. Although there are no controlled studies to support their effectiveness, anecdotal evidence suggests that these products may help calm some cats during veterinary visits. Because of the extreme dilution of these essences, they are unlikely to harm your cat.

How else can I reduce my cat's stress during a veterinary visit?

An important way to decrease your cat's anxiety is to remain calm and relaxed during the visit. Speak to your cat in a calm and soothing voice and reassure her by petting her on her head or stroking her in her favorite spot.

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