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Tips for Preventing a "CAT"astrophe

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It may come as no surprise that veterinary visits for felines is slowly declining. Recent research has shown the reason may be due to clients undervaluing the importance of regular physical exams. Pet welfare is a collaborative effort between the client and veterinary team members. It is our job to reduce client stressors surrounding veterinary visits in order to increase compliance in all areas. There are steps we can take to educate owners on the importance of wellness visits rather than simply treating the sick patient. The goal of this presentation is to educate veterinary staff on integrating feline friendly techniques to increase feline well visits.

Recognizing anxious or fearful behavior in patients is one of the most important things to keep it from progressing to the next stage. When cats are scared, they make themselves small. Their bodies become crouched and head is lowered. As agitation escalates, ears move down and back. If unable to get away, they may freeze OR feel as if they are left to defend themselves. You might identify cats that are in “freeze” mode because they may not accept treats.

Another normal behavior for cats is seeking security. Cats can be found inside cardboard boxes, on top of tall pieces of furniture, under furniture or bedding among many other places. Routine could be viewed as the foundation for security and comfort. Keep any changes to a minimum. If possible, use their same litter and food when hospitalized even if only for the day. In the wild, their natural predators are dogs. Examine them in separate areas in treatment area. Cats can also become aggressive towards other cats, even from same household. Do not house cats from same household in one cage, even if owner insists they get along well.

No matter the size of the practice, many benefits can be gained from having a feline friendly attitude. A key point to include is decreased injuries to staff. The mean of 12,483 workers compensation claims filed between January 2007 and June 2011 was \$1629. In addition, anxiety levels for patients, clients and staff can be reduced. By demonstrating low-stress handling techniques you are increasing the client’s satisfaction and confidence in the practice as a whole. Owner compliance may also improve on many different levels. When appointments run smoothly, it can boost the positive relationships among the staff. This can give the entire team a sense of job satisfaction which leads to increased efficiency and productivity. With each successful visit, team members’ confidence in working with cats is enhanced. It is important to have more than one trained staff member who can handle cats well.

An important key to positive vet visits is acclimating the cat to going in the carrier on its own. Kittens should be trained to associate it with good experiences. In order to do this, it is suggested that owners leave the carrier out at home. With time, it is viewed as a normal part of the environment. Small steps can be taken, such as starting out with the carrier disassembled. Incorporate soft bedding sprayed with pheromones and toys. Eventually place food near carrier and then inside. Short trips in the car can be positively reinforced with treats, especially if food motivated.

Some things to consider to help keep cats happy include having cat only appointment days or times of the day and offering covers for cat carriers at check-in. During the visit use pheromone spray and diffuser and incorporate distractions such as food, laser pointer, ping pong ball or catnip. Throughout the physical, educate owner while examining each system. By doing this you add value to each visit. Finally, evaluate patient history of behavior to decide whether or not to use sedation prior to

or during visit. The American Association of Feline Practitioners (AAFP) Feline Friendly Handling Guidelines offers advice for appropriate use of sedation.

To help veterinary practices become better equipped “in both the physical environment of the practice and the way in which medical care is delivered” the AAFP has developed the Cat Friendly Practice (CFP) program. Their goal is to increase feline visits to “improve the health and quality of life of cats”. To achieve status, specific areas will be evaluated including: staff training and continuing education, client communications, veterinary practice premises, waiting room or reception area, feline handling & interaction with clients, examination room, clinical records, wards/facilities, pain management, operating room and anesthesia, surgical equipment, dentistry, diagnostic imaging, laboratory facilities, treatment, health and safety and feline preventive healthcare individualized by life stages. There are two practice levels of certificate, silver and gold. Currently, there are 8 CFP in Tennessee. Of those, one is in Knoxville.

A well-stocked practice ready to see feline patients might have these items on hand: medium thickness towels, pheromone spray, squeeze cheese, catnip, cat muzzles, laser pointer, ping pong ball and cat toys, to name a few. Before the patient arrives, spray the towel(s) with pheromone spray to allow the alcohol carrier to evaporate. When using towel wrap techniques always practice on a stuffed animal first. If a cat is still struggling during or after it has been wrapped, you may need to consider using a different wrap or technique all together. There are quite a few different wraps that can be used for gentle restraint.

One of the easiest and most effective is the neck wrap. With the neck wrap a towel is folded lengthwise to fit below the jaw to the base of the neck. Next, place around the cat’s head making sure that the head is straight. Avoid rolling the towel and pulling too tightly to prevent choking the patient. The towel is then held in place by one hand at the base of the skull. Refer to <http://www.veterinaryteambrief.com//article/how-restrain-pets-appropriately-front-clients>.

The scarf wrap is also quite valuable when done correctly. This technique allows for a comprehensive physical exam while ensuring the patient feels secure. Place the patient in the middle of a towel while keeping two fingers in the shape of a “V” around the back of the neck and your forearm along its back for security. Make sure the cat is far enough back on the table so that it is touching your body to prevent it from backing up. Use your free hand to grab the front edge of the towel closest to you, while still making sure to keep your forearm along the back. Bring the towel across the hand you are using to hold the cat, then around the cat’s neck. Avoid bringing your hand too close to the cat’s mouth. The towel should end where you have your fingers at the base of the skull. Keep the wrap in place by securing it with your thumb. Tidy and secure the towel. Switch hands by placing your free hand in the same position but on top of the towel along the cat’s back with your fingers in place around the base of the skull. Repeat the wrap process.

The half scarf wrap allows a cephalic vein to be used for blood draws. Complete instructions for these can be found on the DVD Towel Wrap Techniques for Handling Cats with Skill and Ease by Dr. Sophia Yin.

1. <http://catfriendlypractice.catvets.com/Research-and-Trends.aspx>

2. <http://www.veterinaryteambrief.com//article/how-restrain-pets-appropriately-front-clients>

3. www.brakkeconsulting.com/news_article/634
4. <http://www.vetstreet.com/our-pet-experts/towel-wrap-your-cat-in-5-scratch-free-steps>
5. <http://drsophiayin.com/dvds/lowstress-cat-toweling-techniques/contents>
6. <http://indoorpet.osu.edu/cats/felinelifestressors/vet/>
7. www.catalystcouncil.org