

Importance of routine health examinations for cats and cat-friendly practices*

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ABSTRACT

This review provides information on the importance of routine health examinations for cats and examines the role of cat-friendly clinic practices in reducing stress for feline patients during clinic visits. Cats instinctively hide their discomfort and illnesses, a behavior that aids survival in the wild. As such, preventive veterinary care is essential for their well-being. Educating cat owners about the importance of routine health examinations is crucial, as it leads to increased veterinary visits. Cats typically experience more stress than dogs during clinic visits, which can create challenging situations and potentially leave a negative impression on pet owners. Although the benefits of preventative health care for felines are well-established, barriers to veterinary care highlight the need for improvements in this area. The implementation of cat-friendly clinic practices and the expansion of accreditation programs in Turkey are expected to enhance the quality of veterinary care for feline patients by creating a more accommodating environment that meets their specific needs, thus reducing their stress and improving their experiences during routine health examinations and hospitalizations.

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Introduction

The bond between humans and their feline companions is a cherished one, marked by mutual affection and care. Yet, beneath the serene exterior of our cats lies a complex behavioral trait that can often mask their vulnerabilities—instinctively, cats conceal their discomfort and illnesses in ways that are closely linked to their personalities. For instance, a highly impulsive cat might react strongly to stressful stimuli in its environment, while a cat with low agreeableness might display irritability, which could be an indicator of underlying pain or illness (Litchfield et al., 2017). This characteristic poses a unique challenge for pet owners and veterinarians alike, as it can lead to delayed detection of health issues, underscoring the critical

importance of routine health examinations for early intervention and treatment.

Cats are considered self-sufficient (Quimby et al., 2021), which presents a significant obstacle for veterinarians who must emphasize the critical nature of early and preventative healthcare to cat owners. Beyond the challenge of increasing cat owner awareness, the physical act of bringing cats to the vet poses its own set of difficulties. A cat's emotional health and well-being are closely linked to the environment in which they live and the interactions they experience (Taylor et al., 2022). They feel most secure when they have control over their environment, so being removed from their territory to a

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veterinary clinic—a place filled with unfamiliar smells and stimuli—can be extremely distressing for them. Even the simple act of placing a cat into a carrier may be met with resistance, highlighting the complexities of managing feline stress in relation to veterinary care. In Turkey, the engagement of cat owners with veterinary care services is notably low, with only 17% taking their cats for regular health check-ups. This is compounded by the fact that a mere 24% of pet owners act swiftly when clinical symptoms arise. The stress associated with veterinary visits is a significant barrier, with 45% of cat owners identifying the anxiety experienced before, during, and after examinations as the most challenging aspect of the process. It's important for veterinary clinics to be aware of these statistics and work towards creating a more welcoming and less stressful environment for feline patients.

Routine health care for cats

Routine health care refers to the non-emergency, general care that is needed to the cat healthy throughout its life. This includes routine veterinary care for vaccinations, parasite control, and dental care; proper nutrition; grooming; and protection from household hazards (Bukowski and Aiello, 2011). The implementation of routine health examinations for cats that appear to be in good health is imperative, as it substantially contributes to the advancement of early disease detection and facilitates the initiation of timely therapeutic measures (Paepe et al., 2013).

Cats with no clinical evidence of gastrointestinal, ocular, respiratory, skin or urogenital tract disease that are being administered internal and external parasite control are unlikely to be a zoonotic risk to their owners (Lappin et al., 2019).

Several key factors affecting a cat's wellbeing in the clinical environment

Understanding the wellbeing of cats in a clinical setting is crucial for providing optimal care. Recognizing this, experts have identified several factors that are essential for maintaining the health and happiness of feline patients. There are several key factors that veterinarians consider important for cat wellbeing, which are grouped into themes (Dawson et al., 2016). Each theme plays a significant role in ensuring that cats receive the care they need while minimizing stress and promoting a positive veterinary care experience. There are seven themes: 1. Physical environment of the clinic: This includes the clinic's layout, cleanliness, and the presence of facilities that cater to the specific needs of cats. 2. Routine animal care provided by veterinary team members: The skills and practices of the staff in handling cats, as well as the standard of

care they provide. 3. Interactions between the patient, staff, and client: How the veterinary staff interact with both the cats and their owners can significantly affect the animal's stress levels and overall experience. 4. Clinic management: Effective management practices ensure that the clinic operates smoothly, which can reduce stress for both animals and humans. 5. Medical and surgical procedures: The competence with which procedures are carried out and the pain management protocols in place are crucial for animal wellbeing. 6. Staff attitudes and education: The knowledge and attitudes of the veterinary staff towards animal wellbeing can greatly influence their care for cats. 7. Communication between the veterinarian and client: Clear communication about the cat's health, treatment options, and wellbeing needs is essential.

Cat-friendly clinic practices

Numerous initiatives have been established by organizations to mitigate stress in companion animals. Launched in 2016, Fear Free offers training and certification for professionals in various pet-related fields, such as training, grooming, sitting, veterinary care, and shelters (Fear Free, 2022). In a more targeted effort, International Cat Care introduced the Cat Friendly Clinic (CFC) initiative in 2012, which sets forth guidelines specifically designed to alleviate stress in cats receiving veterinary care (CFC, 2023). Additionally, two new sets of Cat-Friendly Guidelines are focusing on veterinary interactions and the clinical environment were published in the Journal of Feline Medicine and Surgery in November 2022 (Taylor et al., 2022). The CFC initiative not only provides an accreditation program but also offers comprehensive recommendations for veterinary practices to adopt, aiming to lessen stress for cats at every stage of the veterinary visit, from travel to hospitalization (ISFM, 2020). Cat-friendly clinic practices and programs have become a certification program supported by associations globally (AAFP, 2022).

Cat friendly clinic accreditation program

The cat friendly clinic program has been developed by International Society of Feline Medicine (ISFM) as a global initiative and resource to help make veterinary clinics more welcoming to cats and their caregivers, to reduce the stress of veterinary visits for cats, and to make treating and interacting with cats easier for veterinary staff (CFC, 2023). Cat Friendly Clinic Program has different accreditation levels; Gold, Silver, Bronze. These accreditation levels are regulated according to the criterias of the in-clinic waiting room and/or reception area, examination and operation rooms, hospitalization and equipment are based on scientific principles aimed at reducing stress for cats in

veterinary clinics by the International Society of Feline Medicine (ISFM), the veterinary division of International Cat Care (Bessant et al., 2022).

In-clinic Waiting Room and/or Reception Area: Veterinary clinics must have a designated waiting area to minimize stress. Separators constructed from metal railings are permissible; however, it is crucial that the materials used are conducive to cleaning and disinfection to prevent both visual contact and the spread of infectious diseases. The dimensions of the hospitalization cage play a pivotal role in a cat's comfort and stress levels. A larger cage affords greater flexibility in layout, ensuring adequate separation between essential resources such as the bed, water bowl, food bowl, and litter box, thereby promoting freedom of movement and reducing stress during the cat's stay. For Silver level accreditation, the minimum cage size for day patients (up to 24 hours) is set at 2700 cm² in surface area (e.g., 45 x 60 cm) with a height of 39 cm. For cats hospitalized beyond 24 hours, the cage should have a minimum surface area of 3600 cm² (e.g., 60 x 60 cm) and a height of 55 cm. The Gold level standard necessitates physical separation between canine and feline hospitalization areas. The minimum cage size for Gold level day patients is 3600 cm² (e.g., 60 x 60 cm) with a height of 55 cm. For longer stays, the cage should measure at least 6300 cm² (e.g., 70 x 90 cm) with the same height. While the floor surface area is of utmost importance, the length of the cage is also a critical factor. It should accommodate additional structures like shelves, boxes, or carriers, providing the cat with alternative resting places apart from the cage floor. To ensure maximum comfort and stress reduction for hospitalized cats, it is essential to provide them with control over their environment. Both Silver and Gold level accreditations necessitate a soft and comfortable bed for the cat, distinct from disposable pads used on the hospitalization area's floor. The bed should occupy a significant portion of the floor space, offering a cozy resting surface. Food and water bowls must be positioned away from the resting area to maintain cleanliness and order. A secure hiding spot is crucial for the cat's sense of safety. Options such as a 'cat bed', 'igloo bed', or a sufficiently large cardboard box serve this purpose well. The ability to hide not only diminishes stress but also promotes the cat's overall well-being, a mandatory criterion for both Silver and Gold accredited clinics that provide overnight hospitalization. Furthermore, providing an elevated area for the cat to perch enhances its comfort. This could be a shelf within the cage, a dual-purpose box for hiding and sitting, or a cat carrier with one side open. Such arrangements cater to the cat's natural

preference for higher vantage points, contributing positively to its hospital stay experience.

Conclusion

In light of the growing number of pet clinics, which now surpasses 1700 (Balaban, 2021), and the singular achievement of only one hospital in Turkey attaining Cat-Friendly Accreditation, it is evident that there is a disparity between the availability of pet care services and their utilization by cat owners. Despite the advancements in education, lifestyle, and economic conditions that have led to increased pet ownership, there remains a reluctance among cat owners to engage in regular clinic visits. These visits are pivotal for the execution of preventive medicine practices, which are integral to the health and welfare of feline companions. To address this, a multifaceted approach is necessary. Firstly, veterinary faculties should incorporate cat welfare training into their curricula to ensure that future practitioners are well-versed in the nuances of feline care. Secondly, existing and newly established clinics should be informed and motivated to pursue the ISFM Accreditation program, which signifies a commitment to cat-friendly practices. This includes ensuring that all staff members, particularly veterinary technicians, are trained in animal welfare. Furthermore, to cultivate a culture of responsible pet ownership, media campaigns should be launched to educate the public. Veterinarians should also be provided with marketing training to promote the benefits of the accreditation program, thereby incentivizing clinics to participate. Ultimately, the goal is to foster an environment where routine health examinations are not only less stressful for cats but also recognized by owners as a non-negotiable aspect of responsible pet care. By doing so, we can improve the overall quality of life for our feline friends and ensure that their health needs are met promptly and effectively.

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