

Ballston Spa Veterinary Clinic
365 Saratoga Avenue
Ballston Spa, NY 12020
518-885-5650
www.ballstonspavet.com

AIRLINE TRAVEL WITH YOUR CAT

Cats travel on planes every day. Although some unfortunate events may occur on rare occasions, these can be usually avoided if some simple precautions are followed. It is impossible to overemphasize the need to consult with the airline well in advance of your trip. This is essential if you hope to avoid last minute problems. Here are some basic tips for airline travel with your cat:

Determine whether the airline has requirements for “acclimation.” In the event that you are unable to secure a direct flight, the pet carrier may be left outside the plane for a period of time. To avoid liability on their part, some airlines require a letter from your veterinarian stating that the pet is acclimated to a minimum or maximum temperature. It is important to find out if the airline requires that the acclimation temperature be given precisely, such as 20°F (-7°C) for a defined period of time.

Consult with the airline regarding baggage liability. In some cases, this can include your pet. If you are sending a pet, you may need to consider additional liability insurance.

Have your cat examined by your veterinarian in advance of the trip, especially if it has been more than a few months since the last checkup. This is especially important for senior cats. Travel by plane can pose a risk for cats with pre-existing medical problems, such as heart or kidney disease. Also, some short-faced breeds of cats such as Himalayans, Persians and Exotic Shorthairs do not travel well in certain situations.



Be sure that you have written proof of current vaccinations and a valid health certificate. These cannot be obtained “after the fact.” You must be able to present them on demand. Most countries now require an international health certificate that may not be available from your veterinarian, or that may require a signature from a government official. Some countries have specific requirements for blood testing or antiparasitic treatment that must be performed within a certain time interval prior to the trip. The specific requirements can be obtained from the consulate’s office, or by searching government websites for the country of interest. The appropriate documentation may take several days to arrive.

You should also inquire about possible requirements to quarantine your cat should you be traveling to a foreign country.

Take direct flights if possible, and try to avoid connections and layovers. Sometimes, this is easier to achieve if the trip is planned during the week. The well-being of your cat could be a source of concern if the baggage connection between flights should be missed.

Some airlines will allow one pet in coach and one in first class, with some provisions. To find out whether there are limitations on the number of animals present in the cabin, you should advise the airline if you plan to travel with your cat in the cabin. Check on the cage dimensions and requirements so that there won't be a problem stowing the carrier beneath the seat. Some airlines require that the pet be able to stand upright in the carrier. A collapsible fabric carrier is suitable for this situation. Be sure to check out your airline's specific carrier requirements prior to travel.

Consider in advance all medications that you might need for your cat. These might include heartworm and flea preventative, or any regular prescription medications that your cat may require. If your cat is on a specific diet, especially a therapeutic diet, you need to ensure that it will be available at your destination, or else take along a sufficient supply.



You should outfit your cat with an identification tag attached to a collar or harness. The tag should contain contact information in case the cat escapes from its carrier. You should include a leash for secure restraint in case the cat needs to be taken out of the carrier.

Take a supply of fresh drinking water and water bowls to provide your cat with fresh water during layovers and waits. There are many collapsible water and food containers available that will often fit in your cat's carry-on carrier.

What should I do at the time of the flight?

Do not tranquilize or sedate your cat unless you have discussed this with your veterinarian. Cats do not tolerate some medicines well and giving over-the-counter or prescription pharmaceuticals can be dangerous or fatal.

Make sure that the carrier has permanent identification, including your name, phone number, flight schedule, destination, and a phone number at the point of destination.

Feed your cat before you leave home. Water should be available at all times, including inside the carrier. If you have a senior cat with marginal kidney function, it is important that it not be deprived of water, even for a few hours. Discuss this with your veterinarian. Try to secure a direct flight with no or minimal layovers. Your cat should have fresh water after arrival.

What should I look for in a travel cat carrier?

The carrier should provide sufficient room for the cat to stand up and turn around easily, but not so large that the cat can be tossed about inside during turbulence. Remember that airlines have special requirements for onboard carriers.

The walls of the carrier should be strong enough to prevent the sides from being crushed. Also, the flooring of the cage should not allow urine to leak through the bottom. An absorptive underpad designed for bedridden people with bladder control problems can be placed in the bottom. See your pharmacist for these.

The carrier should have good ventilation.

The carrier must have sturdy handles for baggage personnel to use.

The carrier should have a water tray which is accessible from the outside so that water can be added, if needed.

Pet stores, breeders, and kennels usually sell carriers that meet these requirements. Some airlines also sell carriers that they prefer to use. Check with the airline to see if they have other requirements.

Try to familiarize your cat with the travel carrier before you leave for your trip. Give your cat access to the carrier both with the door open and closed. This will help eliminate some of your cat's stress during the trip.

What arrangements should I make at the destination site?

Be sure that your hotel will allow cats. There are many internet sites and travel guidebooks with this type of information.

Provide a litter pan and food and water bowls for the hotel room.

Place a "Do Not Disturb" sign on your hotel door so that housekeeping will not inadvertently let the cat escape. Plan to have your room cleaned only when you are present and your cat is secured in its carrier.

It is probably best to leave the cat in the carrier or inside the bathroom whenever you plan to leave the room.

Should your cat get lost, contact the local animal control officer.

Advance planning is the key to a safe trip with your pet!

*This client information sheet is based on material written by Ernest Ward, DVM
© Copyright 2005 Lifelearn Inc. Used with permission under license. October 23, 2008*