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# Helping cats cope with stress in veterinary practice

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**ABSTRACT:** We are all familiar, as are many cat owners, with the fact that cats generally don't like going to the vets! Many owners find the level of distress to their cat caused by the journey alone a reason not to attend the surgery on a regular basis. While a cat that is miaowing loudly in a distressed manner is recognised by most owners as a sign of stress, many other more subtle signs can easily go unnoticed or be open to misinterpretation.

Even experienced veterinary professionals under tight time constraints can sometimes miss signs of withdrawal or anthropomorphically mislabel a fearfully aggressive cat. It's all too easy to get caught up in the demands placed on staff in practice, and often there is a balance to be struck between the needs of the staff and the needs of the animal.

## What is stress?

Stress is a normal, adaptive response to stimuli in the environment. Acute stress can help prepare the individual's sympathetic nervous system for the 'flight or fight' response.

All cats will experience some degree of stress when entering the veterinary practice environment. This will vary between individuals and is influenced by genetic effects, experiences during their socialisation period, temperament, previous experience, and potential medical conditions.

The stress response only becomes a problem when the cat is unable to cope, control the situation or escape from the source of the threat. In these situations, the stress can become chronic, or prolonged, and can range in length from days to months. It can be argued that chronic stress is not helpful to the animal as it has a negative effect on both the emotional and physiological health of the individual cat.

## Signs of stress

Awareness of the possibility of stress is the first step towards its prevention and alleviation. Like pain, signs of stress in cats are notably subtle and, as with all behavioural signs, they cannot be viewed in isolation and need to be considered in context.

### Behavioural indicators of stress

- being withdrawn or hiding more than usual
- sleeping more than usual – some cats will feign sleep while trying to monitor their environment and can suffer from sleep deprivation as a result
- becoming less tolerant around people/ other animals or being less tolerant of being handled
- showing aggressive behaviour
- hesitating or becoming more reluctant to use important resources – only eating or using the litter tray at night
- crouching in a hunched up position with 'squinty' eyes – some cats may 'cringe away' as people approach
- reduction in play behaviour and interaction with people
- reduction in eating or drinking behaviour
- overeating
- increased anxiety or fear
- sleep disturbance
- pacing, circling or restlessness
- coat becoming scruffy or matted (undergrooming)
- house soiling
- overgrooming.

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## Stress in the veterinary environment

It is understandable that cats find the whole experience of attending a veterinary practice stressful.

They are generally in close proximity to dogs and other cats that are unfamiliar, unrelated and not in the same social group. For a species which is fundamentally territorial and solitary, this is especially stressful. Despite placing cats in separate kennels to those from different sources, they are still acutely aware of the sights, scents and sounds of those around them. As cats thrive on routine, the change of environment and routine can be very unsettling for them.

Scent is particularly important to cats to gain information about their surroundings and they rub their pheromones onto prominent objects to gain a sense of familiarity. Hospitalised cats may face unfamiliar smells and their own scent is often regularly removed as a result of the practice's cleaning regimen. Many of these stressors are parallel to those found in the rescue environment.

## Cats' coping mechanisms to stress

While 'flight, fight or freeze' is commonly understood, it is important to look at species-specific coping mechanisms to stress. For example, freezing is a common response to threat on the part of many prey species. A cat's natural response to real or perceived threats or conflict is to run away, hide and climb to elevated perches.

❑ **Figure 1.** The 'Feline Fort' is a three-piece unit designed to meet cats' needs to hide and have access to elevated perches



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“ Hospitalised cats may face unfamiliar smells and their own scent is often regularly removed as a result of the practice's cleaning regimen ”

To show aggressive behaviour is an absolute last resort for cats, and tends to be used when their preferred coping mechanisms are either not effective or not an option. However, over time, cats can learn to show aggressive behaviour if this has proved to be an effective strategy in the past.

## The importance of stress reduction

As veterinary professionals, our ultimate goal is to ensure the welfare of our patients. It is, therefore, of paramount importance to minimise the stress levels of hospitalised patients to enable normal maintenance behaviours, reduce anorexia and facilitate effective monitoring and handling, as well as limiting any effect on the cat's immune response.

It is of equal importance to minimise stress levels in day patients in order to reduce the risks associated with stress prior to anaesthesia and during recovery.

Furthermore, traumatic experiences can make subsequent trips to the vets that much more difficult for all concerned. Putting feline stress reduction measures in place will also decrease the risks of injury to staff and clients.

Clients like to feel that staff care for the well-being of their pet. By explaining to clients the steps taken to ensure minimal stress, they are more likely to bond to the practice.

## Enabling cats to cope

Enabling the cat to exhibit hiding behaviour can help to reduce stress by facilitating a normal feline coping mechanism. As is the case with all of us, cats need time to themselves to feel safe and secure, yet results from a recent questionnaire conducted on the Cats Protection stand at the annual British Small Animal Veterinary Association (BSAVA) Congress 2013, showed that over 60 per cent of veterinary practices do not currently provide a hiding place for the cats in their care.

The confined nature of the kennel environment presents a number of challenges, especially as a consequence of

the limited space available. Considering a cat's psychological – as well as physical – needs at the design stage of building new hospitalisation facilities can help reduce stress in the long run.

As cages are designed to prevent cats from escaping, this places further emphasis on the remaining coping strategies of hiding and reaching elevated vantage points. Cats can benefit from having a corner shelf where they can view their surroundings without something surprising them from behind.

Research by Kry and Casey (2007) found that providing an appropriate hiding place, such as a British Columbia Society for the Protection of Cruelty to Animals Hide and Perch Box (compared to a standard, open cat bed) improved the cats' welfare in the rescue environment by allowing them to show their natural behaviours and reducing their stress levels. Furthermore, cats provided with a hiding place were more likely to show affiliative behaviour.<sup>1</sup>

## Introducing the 'Feline Fort'

As a result of this research, Cats Protection, has developed the 'Feline Fort' – a three-piece unit designed to meet cats' needs to hide and have access to elevated perches (Figure 1). It consists of a table, step and hide.

❑ **Figure 2.** The Cat Hide is of particular use for the veterinary profession



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Of particular use for the veterinary profession is the Cat Hide (Figures 2 & 3).

Measuring 42cm by 31cm with a maximum height of 39cm, the Cat Hide element of the Feline Fort is a compact hiding place that fits into many veterinary kennels. If your practice is lucky enough to have much sought-after storage space, you may be interested to know that the Cat Hides are stackable.

To meet strict infectious disease control protocols, they have been designed to be easily disinfected and durable.

Some veterinary practices have already started using Cat Hides and have provided the following feedback.

*"We are really happy with the box. It fits well in our cattery cages alongside everything else that needs to be in there! It is easy to clean and the cats seem to appreciate it as something to hide in!"*

Laura Askew BVM&S MRCVS  
Ashlea Veterinary Centre, Carlisle

*"It's a fantastic product – our patients love their Feline Fort. It makes them feel more secure and is very easy to keep fresh and clean."*

Rachael Stooks, VN  
Cinque Ports Veterinary Group, Ashford

As time is often of the essence in practice, it's important to be able to have efficient practices in place. One of the fundamental features of the Cat Hide is that it doesn't have a base. This enables easy access and handling of the cats and is preferable for the cats as opposed to being tipped out of their hiding places.

Despite not having a base, the Cat Hide is strong enough to withstand the weight of a cat sitting on top of the hide, providing them with a choice and ultimately a degree of control over their environment.

Cats Protection uses Cat Hides in the veterinary clinic on site at the National Cat Adoption Centre in Sussex. One of the clinic's Registered Veterinary Nurses, Katie Smith, remarked: "We have seen a real difference in the behaviour of a cat that is provided with a hiding place and one that isn't. When using the Cat Hide we have a calmer, more relaxed cat."

Another consideration is how cats fare when catheterised and on IVFT. Vicky Placzek, RVN, from the National Cat



Figure 3. The Cat Hide is strong enough to withstand the weight of a cat sitting on top

Adoption Centre Veterinary Clinic commented: "When I have had cats on drips, I have placed the side entrance to the hide against the wall of the kennel so there is only one way in and out, preventing the cat getting tangled in its drip line and this works very well."

### Check list on how you can reduce feline stress

- Discuss with owners how to change their perception of the cat carrier to something more positive such as a safe den.
- Cover the cat carrier with a towel or blanket to restrict their view and have clean spares on the reception desk to lend to owners while in the waiting area.
- Manage the waiting area effectively so that well-intentioned but misguided dog owners do not allow their 'cat friendly' dog to approach cats in carriers.
- Place opaque screens throughout the waiting area to prevent visual contact with other animals, especially between dogs and cats.
- Promote a hiding place for cats, such as a cardboard box, half a cat carrier, igloo bed or Cat Hide – both in the

veterinary practice and in the home environment.

- Cover the kennel with a towel if necessary; however, this is not a substitute for provision of hiding places.
- Using synthetic pheromones such as Feliway (Ceva) has been shown to increase interest in food and the amount eaten in cats.<sup>2</sup>
- Promote consistent handling among all staff members especially understanding and responding appropriately to species-specific communication.

The Feline Fort or the Cat Hide part is available by calling the Cats Protection helpline on 03000 12 12 12.

For more information about the work of Cats Protection, or to make a donation, please visit the website at [www.cats.org.uk](http://www.cats.org.uk)

#### References

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