

Cat Hates Being Picked Up

CatChannel behavior expert Marilyn Krieger, CCBC, explains how to get a skittish cat into a carrier.

By Marilyn Krieger

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Q: My cat started her life as a feral. Six months ago, she became mostly an indoor cat. She is great inside – she will get into bed with me and let me scratch her head; she loves to play with toys and gets along very well with my other two indoor cats. The only issue is that she won't let me pick her up. It's not really a problem unless I have to get her to the veterinarian. I've tried giving her homeopathic anxiety drops for the past four days as directed, along with anti-anxiety spray on the places she likes to sleep with no success. Today I tried to pick her up and put her in a carrier, and I got some nasty scratches as a result.

Do you have any other ideas for how I can relax her to the point that I can get her in a carrier and to the veterinarian? I've had the carrier sitting out with catnip in it. My two other cats are enjoying it, but not this one. Are there any stronger sedatives I could give her that would have a fast-acting effect? It would have to be something I can put in her food or spray around her since it would be impossible to give her a pill.

A: Your cat can be acclimated to the carrier in a stress-free way, without the use of drugs or homeopathic remedies. All you need is a hard-sided cat carrier with a removable top, a towel or pillow and inspiring treats.

Start by making the carrier into a comfortable bed by taking it apart and placing a towel or pillow in the bottom half. The bottom half of the carrier should then be placed in an area that your kitty likes to hang out in. The carrier needs to become a semi-permanent fixture until your kitty loses her fear of it.

After making the bottom part into a very comfortable and cat-centric area, lure her into it with her favorite treat. Make a habit of encouraging positive experiences when she's around the carrier. If she likes to be groomed, groom her in the carrier. Feed her a favorite treat while she's hanging out in the carrier. Engage her in activities that rock her boat while she is in the carrier.

Take the carrier experience to the next level after she enjoys napping, noshing and hanging out in it on a regular basis. Put the top back on, without the door, and continue to feed her in the carrier. Also, encourage her to go into it by throwing her favorite toys in.

Wait until she's comfortable with going into the covered carrier and then put the door back on. Leave the door open so that she can enter and exit whenever she wants to. Again, toss delicious treats and favorite toys in for her.

When she's at home with the addition of the door, close it for a few seconds while she's inside, then open it up again. Gradually increase the time the door is closed to about 10 minutes. After she's OK with the door being closed, pick the carrier up and then put it down again. Open the door, allowing her to exit if she wants. If she shows any signs of being uncomfortable, you are progressing too fast, and you need to either slow the process down or back step to the level she was comfortable with. After your cat becomes accustomed to being moved in the carrier, take the carrier for trips to the next room, increasing the distance incrementally.

The length of time it takes desensitize a cat to a carrier depends on the cat. Some cats only take a couple of days, others a few weeks.