

My Maine Coon Hates Her Carrier

CatChannel behavior expert Marilyn Krieger, CCBC, gives step-by-step tips for getting cats accustomed to carriers.

By Marilyn Krieger

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Q: I have a 25-pound Maine Coon who hates to go in her carrier and in the car. She not only meows loudly, but foams at the mouth and gets sick. I don't take her often, but I moved and her vet is 30 minutes away now.

A: This is a common challenge that can cause extreme stress for cats and often results in frustrated and occasionally lacerated cat parents. Transporting the cat to the vet doesn't have to be a traumatic event that sends you to the hospital with war wounds and leaves the cat shivering in the corner of her carrier.

A week or two before the dreaded vet appointment, start changing your cat's negative associations with the carrier to positive ones. The best carriers are hard carriers since they can easily be taken apart. The carrier should be large enough that your cat can easily stand up and turn around in it. Unlatch the carrier and take the top and door off. Place the bottom of the carrier on the floor in an area that your cat likes to hang out in. Put something comfortable for your cat to sit on in the carrier bottom and then gently pet her with a soft towel. Place the towel in the carrier so that it smells familiar to her. Find delicious treats and toss them in the carrier so that she has to go into the carrier to eat them. If she loves to play with toys, incorporate the carrier into the play, by tossing the toys in the carrier bottom or dragging them in and out for her to chase.

After your cat is content with going in the carrier on her own, reassemble it, without the door. The two pieces should be securely latched together to keep the carrier from accidentally separating and startling your cat. Continue to give her treats and play with her in the reassembled carrier. Install the door on the carrier only after she is comfortable with the addition of the top. Leave the door open so that she can enter and exit whenever she wants to. Toss delicious treats and favorite toys inside the carrier for her.

Up the criteria by closing the door while she's inside for about one second and then opening it again. Gradually increase the time the door is closed to about 10 minutes. Be patient; you don't want her to become anxious and have negative associations with the carrier again. After she's used to being inside with the door closed, pick the carrier up and then immediately put it down again and open the door for her so that she can leave the carrier if she chooses to. Next, take her for short trips to the next room and then gradually increase both the carrier time and the distance she's carried. Soon she will be ready for short stress-free trips in the car.

This whole process can take a week or longer, depending on the cat's anxiety level.