

Airline Travel with Your Cat

**I’m planning to travel and would like to take my cat with me. What are some of the factors I need to consider before taking him/her on an airplane?**

Having your cat along for the ride may add enjoyment to your trip, but it's important to keep your cat’s health and safety in mind, so be sure to call the airline well in advance. Familiarize yourself with the airline’s pet requirements so that you can avoid any 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, many airlines require a letter from your veterinarian stating that the pet is acclimated to a minimum or maximum temperature (must be given in precise degree, e.g., 20º F) for a defined period of time.
* Consult with the airline regarding baggage liability. In some cases, this can include your pet. If you are traveling with an economically valuable pet, you may need to consider additional liability insurance.
* Have your cat examined by your veterinarian before the trip, especially if it has been more than a few months since his/her last checkup. This is especially important for geriatric cats. Travel by plane can pose a risk for cats with a pre-existing medical problem, such as heart or kidney disease. Also, some short-faced breeds of cats (like Persians) may not travel well in some situations.
* Be sure that you have written proof of current vaccinations and, where required, a health certificate. These cannot be obtained after the fact—you must be able to present them on demand. Foreign countries usually require a special health certificate that may not be available from your veterinarian. These are usually obtained from the consulate’s office and 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 is missed.
* Many airlines will allow one pet in coach and one in first class, with some provisions. Some airlines limit the number of pets traveling within the cabin area, so be sure to notify the airline that your cat will be traveling with you. Check on cage dimensions and requirements to ensure there won’t be a problem stowing the carrier beneath the seat.
* Consider in advance all medications that you may need for your cat. These might include a heartworm preventive, flea control, heart or kidney medications. Also give thought to any special diets your cat may need and whether they can be obtained at your destination.
* If there is any chance that your cat will be out of the carrier, give thought to an appropriate collar or harness and keep a leash with you. If possible, the collar should include a small pet identification tag. Order forms for pet identification are available in most veterinary clinics.
* Do not tranquilize your cat unless you have discussed it with your veterinarian. Cats do not tolerate some medicines well and giving over-the-counter or prescription pharmaceuticals can be dangerous.
* Make sure that your cat's carrier has specific feeding and identification labels permanently attached.
* Feed your cat before you leave home. Water should be available at all times, including inside the carrier. If you have a geriatric cat with marginal kidney function, it is important that he/she not be deprived of water. Be sure to discuss this with your veterinarian. Try to secure a direct flight with no layovers. Your cat should have fresh water after arrival as well.

**What do I need to consider when buying a travel carrier?**

Your dog's travel carrier will be his/her "home" for much of your trip. It's important to choose the right one. Here are some helpful guidelines:

* The carrier should provide sufficient room for the cat to stand up and turn around easily, but it should not be so large that he/she can be tossed about inside during turbulence. Remember that special requirements may be in place if the carrier is to go inside the cabin.
* The walls of the carrier should be strong enough to prevent the sides from being crushed. Also, the flooring of the carrier should not allow urine to leak through the bottom. An absorbant covering or underpad is sufficient to prevent this. You can purchase these at many pharmacies.
* There must be adequate ventilation on at least three sides of the carrier.
* The carrier must have sturdy handles for baggage personnel to use.
* The carrier should have a water tray that 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 cage before you leave for your trip. Let your cat play inside with the door both open and closed. This will help eliminate some of your cat's stress during the trip.

**Is there any other advice that might be useful as I prepare for my trip?**

By applying a few common sense rules, you can keep your traveling cat safe and sound.

* Make sure that your hotel will allow cats. Many bookstores carry travel guidebooks with this type of information.
* Give thought to litter pan provisions 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.
* It is 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.

Remember, advance planning is vital to making the trip an enjoyable experience for both you and your cat.