

## **15 Steps to Safe Air Travel**

After years of solo travel, you've decided to take kitty on your much needed vacation. Yes, she's stayed at boarding facilities and friends' houses in the past, but times are changing, and you think that she'll be happier accompanying you on your travels' and she will be – once you get there.

In general, air travel with cats is not the simplest of tasks. Airports are stressful environments for us, so there's no question that paying a visit to one will leave your cat in a tizzy. Nevertheless, it is possible to successfully hit the skies with your kitty by your side – as long as you follow airport regulations, know what you need to ensure success and, above all, start the planning process ASAP.

“For domestic flights, plan ahead and schedule early,” says Jen Redmond, owner of the Phoenix brand of petsfly.com. “Call the airline that you are planning to use, and get their rules and regulations for pets flying in the cabin. Each airline has different policies regarding taking pets in the cabin. They also only allow a certain number of pets to fly on each flight.”

With airport rules and regulations in tow, your next task is preparing everything you need to ensure safe travel that goes off without a hitch – and that's exactly where these 15 steps come on.

**1. Check Regulations.** Not all airlines allow cats to fly in the cabin, so check airline policies before buying your ticket to guarantee that yours will be with you on the flight, then confirm your booking with the airline multiple times before your travel day. While cargo holds are well-ventilated, such a location can leave your cat uncomfortable – in addition to the stress that she is already experiencing. “The ideal situation for the pet is to be in the cabin with the pet owner at all times,” says Bridget Monrad, owner and president of Happy Tails Travel Inc. in Tucson, Ariz.

**2. Use the Right Carriers.** Your cat is unable to leave her carrier while you are onboard the flight; therefore, it is essential that you select one that she will be comfortable in from takeoff to landing. “Too many times when checking pets in at the airport I have seen people who have tried ‘stuffing’ their cat into a travel kennel that is way too small,” Redmond says. “Kennels that are used for transport to and from the veterinarian and that are only about 12 inches tall, are too small for most adult cats to travel by air. There is a USDA regulation that states that animals must be able to stand up completely without touching the top of their head on the kennel and be able to turn around comfortably.” Also make sure the carrier is approved for in-cabin airline travel.

**3. Condition Your Cat to Her Carrier.** Carriers rarely hold pleasant memories for cats, but they are necessary for getting kitty safely from here to there. One of the top ways to keep your cat calm while in the air is to condition her to her carrier before you travel. This will make her accepting of the carrier and more likely to feel calm while inside. Place cat food or treats, or use a feline pheromone spray inside the carrier to help your cat become acclimated to it in the weeks before you take off.

**4. Get a Good Seat.** Cats are not big fans of loud noise; thus, if you are given a choice as to what type of seat you'd like while booking your flight, look for the quietest seat possible. "Ideally, not over the wings (loud engines) and a seat up front that allows for quicker exit and entry," says Jill Partlow, DVM, of Pet Car Veterinary Hospital in Virginia Beach, Va.

If you do not have a choice and wind up in a loud area on the plane, place a lightweight towel that allows ventilation over your cat's carrier to drown out loud sounds and bright lights that might make her nervous.

**5. Hold the Food.** "I generally recommend withholding food and water for 8 to 12 hours prior to air travel for short travel periods (travel time less than 8 hours) if a litterbox will not be provided to your companion," says Christopher Elder, DVM, owner of Shoal Creek Animal Clinic in Athens, Ga. "Withholding food and water for this period will also help ensure your companion does not suffer motion sickness. If your travel plans will exceed 8 hours of travel time, it is important to provide water at a minimum of every 12 hours and food at a minimum of every 24 hours for your companion."

**6. Include Kitty Essentials in Your Carry-On.** Most airlines allow two carry-ones, and your cat carrier counts as one, so you will need to combine your own in-flight essentials with the items your cat will need to stay calm and comfortable for the entirety of the flight. These items include:

- Training pads to absorb accidents in the carrier
- A small assortment of favorite toys
- Food and water packed in sealable containers in case of a flight delay
- A collapsible, disposable litterbox. "Sometimes a cat might use a disposable litterbox in a 'family' airport bathroom if one is available," says Debbie Singer, DVM, of Cats Preferred Veterinary Hospitable in Plymouth, Minn.
- A lightweight blanket

**7. Use a Harness.** "Have your cat wear a harness while in the carrier, and have a leash available in case you need to take her out of the carrier at the airport," Singer says. "They sometimes inspect the carrier through X-ray. If your cat has not worn a harness before, get her used to wearing it several weeks prior to travel starting with a few minutes at a time."

**8. Talk it Out.** While a lightweight blanket or towel over your cat's carrier will help calm her, your voice is reassuring to kitty and will help her stay calm. Simply talk to your cat throughout the flight.

**9. Get Health Documents.** "It is most important to obtain a United States Certificate of Health Examination (commonly referred to as a vet health certificate or APHIS Form 7001) prior to travel," Elder says. "This document is generally required for interstate or international travel for domestic animals. It must be completed within 10 days of travel by a veterinarian accredited by the United States Department of agriculture and requires a thorough physical examination. In addition, rabies vaccinations should be current for all animals traveling by air, if applicable."

**10. Check Sedatives.** Many airlines refuse to board an animal that has been sedated, so check your airline's policy beforehand. Cats have different reactions to sedatives. Most become disoriented and groggy, but some have the opposite reaction and actually become hyper and aggressive. Work with your veterinarian and test it at home a few days before the flight to determine whether your cat should be sedated and the most effective dosage. Keep a sedated cat warm and in her carrier, because sedatives cause a loss of balance and decreased body temperature.

**11. Use Anti-Nausea Medication.** "If your cat has motion sickness, you can administer anti-nausea medication from your veterinarian one to two hours prior to travel," says Colleen Fox, DVM, of Pet Care Veterinary Hospital in Virginia Beach, Va. "Remove food two to three hours before the flight, but continue to offer water to prevent dehydration."

**12. Use Herbal Helpers.** Sedatives might not be the right solution for keeping your cat calm during travel, but synthetic feline pheromone sprays and herbal supplements might help. They might not totally alleviate your cat's fears, but they have the potential to minimize them. Make sure to check with your veterinarian before using any herbal remedies, because they could interact with your cat's medications and cause over-dosing. Also, test them at home a few days prior to flying to confirm that the product and does are effective.

**13. Keep Track of Transportation Times.** "Keep an eye on the weather and try to transport your pet during the most moderate time of day," Redmond says. "If you're flying into Phoenix in the middle of the summer, arrive either early in the morning or late at night. If you're going to Minneapolis during the winter, arrive at the warmest part of the day."

**14. Get Your Cat Microchipped.** If your cat is not already microchipped, get this done before you travel. Whenever you leave the house with your cat, whether it's to go to the veterinarian or to the airport, there's a possibility that your cat could make a fast escape. With travel looming, microchipping your cat will make reuniting the two of you easier should the unthinkable occur.

**15. Remain Calm.** "Cats are very good at sensing our emotions," Singer says. "The calmer we are, the more likely they will be too!"

You know your cat better than anyone, so when it comes to travel, do what you believe will make her the most comfortable to ensure the two of you will enjoy your vacation from start to finish.

### **Traveling Internationally: What You Need to Know**

While traveling domestically by plane with your cat seems like a daunting, time-consuming endeavor, traveling internationally is even more so in that it requires between six months and a year of pre-planning to prepare all necessary documentation, book flights and get things in order before you leave.

"The requirements for domestic pets to enter a foreign country can differ for each country," says Debbie Singer, DVM, of Cats Preferred Veterinary hospital in Plymouth, Minn. "Some countries require a time of quarantine when entering the country – which can be months;

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others may also require rabies titers and preventive treatments, such as deworming. All require an international health certificate within a specific timeframe from when the animal was examined.”

Additionally, flight requirements and handling practices for international travel differ greatly from that of domestic flights. And, many times, cats on international flights are prohibited from travelling with you in the cabin.

“International travel preparations can be difficult and confusing for pet owners and are often quite complex,” says Christopher Elder, DVM, owner of Shoal Creek Animal Clinic in Athens, Ga. “Many countries will refuse entry if the proper procedure has not been followed. Discuss the needed care of procedures with your veterinarian prior to arranging for air travel.”

There is no question that international travel is quite challenging, so allow yourself plenty of time to fulfill mandatory requirements and complete paperwork to meet the challenge.