

Make Feline Visits Roar!

How to reverse the trend of declining feline patient visits and overcome obstacles that harm compliance

By Wendy S. Myers



Imagine you're Ollie, my 20-year-old cat. An indoor exclusive cat, the only reason you leave the house is to go to the veterinarian. You see the cat carrier by the front door, and panic sets in as you imagine the terror that awaits you.

After an exhausting 30-minute chase, I wrestle you into the cat carrier. We speed through the neighborhood because we're now late for your appointment, and the jerky car ride has your tummy doing flip flops. You hiss and slap at the technician when she dumps you out of your carrier and onto the cold exam table. Is it any wonder that feline visits are declining?

The average number of veterinary visits for cats over a 12-month period is 1.5, compared with 2.5 for dogs, according to The Feline Study conducted in 2005 by BNRResearch on behalf of Banfield, the Pet Hospital. Only 31 percent of cats and 58 percent of dogs visit two or more times per year.

Worse yet, cats aren't receiving regular wellness exams. Just 36 percent of cats get an annual wellness exam, according to data from 250 practices compiled by Veterinary Metrics Inc. in Atlanta.

Extended vaccination protocols, difficult trips to the clinic and cats' cleverness at masking signs of illness are possible causes of declining feline patient visits. Now the American Association of Feline Practitioners (AAFP) is rallying more than 40 practitioners who will meet this winter to explore how to reverse the dangerous trend while cat ownership continues to climb. While these leaders develop tactics to share with our profession, get started today on making feline visits roar. Here's advice on showing cat owners the value of frequent veterinary visits and ways to increase compliance:



Take a great history. A technician or assistant should get the patient's vital signs and a brief history before the doctor enters the exam room. This helps you organize the visit, identifying priorities and services needed. The technician confirms the reason for today's visit, saying, "Wendy, you're here for Ollie wellness exam and vaccinations today. We'll also do an intestinal parasite screen and senior blood work. Is there anything else you want to be sure to talk with the doctor about today?"

If the client expresses concern about the cat not using the litter box, the technician would reply, "When cats have changes in their elimination habits, we need to determine whether it's a medical or behavioral problem. Urinalysis will help the doctor identify what's causing Ollie to go outside the box. I will take Ollie to the treatment area now to collect a urine sample and begin the test so you can have answers from the doctor before you leave today." Delivering solutions, especially since elimination disorders and urinary tract disease are common among cats, can cement client relationships and show the value of regular checkups.

While taking a history, the technician should ask about diet, lifestyle, elimination habits, activity level, home dental care, behavior concerns and the use of flea, tick and heartworm preventatives. Checking year-round compliance for preventatives—even on indoor cats—helps protect the family because 69 percent of cat owners let their feline friend sleep in bed with them, according to a 2007 Merial/Harris Interactive poll.

How you phrase questions can teach clients about the importance of preventive care. For example, the technician would ask, "What dental care do you provide for Ollie at home?" If the client doesn't do anything, start a conversation about brushing teeth, oral rinses, gels, chews, drinking water additives and other home-care products. Using the phrase "What do you do?" emphasizes she should be providing oral care at home, compared with "Do you brush your cat's teeth?" which is a yes-or-no answer and sounds optional.

For a behavior questionnaire for older cats and dogs from board-certified behaviorist Dr. Karen Overall's upcoming 2008 book, *Manual of Clinical Behavioral Medicine for Small Animals*, visit <http://www.vetecon.com/vetec/data/articlestandard//vetec/232007/432062/article.pdf>.

Don't overlook opportunities for wellness diagnostics for adults and seniors. Have doctors set protocols for blood tests, urinalysis, blood pressure checks, baseline x-rays and EKGs, and the frequency of wellness exams. For seniors as well as adult cats, twice-yearly exams can increase patient care and client compliance. Visit the National Pet Wellness Month website at www.npwm.com for tips and clinic kits.

Create checklists for wellness exams. As a veterinary consultant, I shadow doctors and staff during exams to learn how and what recommendations are made and to identify compliance gaps. During a kitten visit, a technician overwhelmed the client with 45 minutes of information. The starry-eyed client left confused and weighed down with a pound of brochures.

To provide consistent and focused client education, develop checklists for kitten, adult and senior cat wellness exams. If you see kittens at 8, 12 and 16 weeks of age, divide which topics you'll review each session. Cover basics of nutrition, parasite control, vaccines, litter box education, socialization and kitten-proofing the home on the first visit. At the next 12-week visit, add topics such as brushing teeth, nail trimming, grooming, pet insurance and revisit socialization. During the 16-week exam, review when to spay/neuter, microchipping and when and how to switch to adult cat food. Exam report cards with discussion topics for all life stages are featured in *The Veterinary Practice Management Resource Book & CD*, 720-344-2347, www.csvets.com.

Make getting cats to your clinic easier. Download the AAFP Feline Behavior Guidelines



from www.aafponline.org. You'll find tips on preventive behavioral medicine, elimination, aging, medication administration and client handouts. "How to Help Your Cat Have Pleasant Veterinary Visits" offers advice on getting cats into carriers, adjusting to car rides and experiencing less stressful exams.



Ask risk-assessment questions. Because disease risks vary by region and individual animal, pose questions that help you choose what vaccines and testing the cat needs. Download a feline disease-risk assessment form from www.npwm.com. Clients' answers will guide doctors in determining which non-core vaccines such as feline leukemia and Calicivirus might be indicated. Find out cat owners' answers to:

- Does your cat go outdoors unsupervised?
- Do you have multiple pets?
- Does your cat come into contact with other people's pets?
- Is there wildlife in your area, including deer, mice, squirrels, birds, opossums, raccoons, rats or skunks?

Passionately state your recommendations. Don't say, "We need to clean your cat's teeth soon." If you spot dental disease, say, "We need to clean your cat's teeth now to remove the tartar and treat the infection, slowing the progression of his dental disease. We will schedule an appointment for a professional dental cleaning before you leave today and give you a treatment plan that explains the professional care and fees."

If the client agrees, consider whether you want to perform the preanesthetic test the morning of the procedure or when the client accepts your recommendation. If the client will schedule Ollie's professional dental cleaning this week, draw blood for the preanesthetic test now. Because the client pays for the blood test as part of today's services, you can choose whether to perform the test in-house or through your reference lab. Prepaid blood work also guarantees the client will show up for the procedure and reduces the client's perception of the cost of the professional dental cleaning because part of the services has already been paid.

Don't say, "Please drop off a stool sample at your convenience so we can test for intestinal parasites." Most cat owners will have forgotten your recommendation by the time they check out at the reception desk. Instead say, "The technician will take Ollie to the treatment area to collect a stool sample so we can test for intestinal parasites today." Using a fecal loop and running the test now will ensure compliance and let you prescribe medication if the cat has parasites.

When your team shows cat owners the value of regular veterinary visits and makes the experience pleasant for feline friends, you'll find a reception area filled with smiling clients and purring patients.

Top 10 Reasons Cat Owners Visit the Veterinarian

After reviewing medical claims received in 2006, Veterinary Pet Insurance identified the top causes that send Fluffy rushing to your practice:

1. Urinary tract infections
2. Upset stomach
3. Kidney failure
4. Skin allergies
5. Diabetes
6. Pyoderma
7. Ear infections
8. Tooth extractions
9. Colitis
10. Hyperthyroidism

About the Author:



Wendy S. Myers owns Communication Solutions for Veterinarians in Denver. Her consulting firm helps teams improve compliance, client service and practice management. Communication Solutions for Veterinarians has provided mystery phone shopper training to more than 2,600 receptionists nationwide. Wendy is a partner in Animal Hospital Specialty Center, a 13-doctor AAHA-accredited referral practice offering internal medicine, surgery, neurology, oncology, specialty dentistry, and emergency care in Highlands Ranch, Colorado. She is the author of four books and five videos. Subscribe to Communication Solutions for Veterinarians' e-newsletter on our website at: www.csvets.com. E-mail Wendy at: wmyers@csvets.com.