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Traveling With Your Cat

You should consider several factors before traveling by plane with your cat:

It is impossible to overemphasize the need to consult with the airline well in advance of your trip. This is essential if you hope to avoid last minute problems. Here are some basic tips for airline travel with your cat:

1. 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., 20 F) for a defined period of time.
2. Consult with the airline regarding baggage liability. In some cases, this can include your pet. If you are sending an economically valuable pet, you may need to consider additional liability insurance.
3. Have your cat examined by your veterinarian in advance of the trip, especially if it has been more than a few months since the last checkup. This is especially important for geriatric cats. Travel by plane can pose a risk for cats with pre-existing medical problems, such as heart or kidney disease. Also, some short-faced breeds of cats (Persians, Exotic Shorthairs) do not travel well in some situations.
4. 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.
5. You should also inquire about possible requirements to quarantine your cat should you be traveling outside the continental United States or to a foreign country.
6. Take direct flights 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 should be missed.
7. Some airlines will allow one pet in coach and one in first class, with some provisions. To find out whether there are limitations on the number of animals present in the cabin, you should advise the airline if you plan to travel with your cat in the cabin. Check on the cage dimensions so that there won’t be a problem stowing the carrier beneath the seat.
8. Consider in advance all medications that you might need for your cat. These might include heartworm preventive (a new product for cats), flea preventive, and heart or kidney medications. Also, give thought to any special diets that your cat may need and whether they can be obtained at your destination.
9. 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 have a small pet identification tag. Order forms are available in most veterinary clinics.

At the time of your flight:

1. Do not tranquilize the cat unless you have discussed this with your veterinarian. As a rule, cats don't tolerate medicines well and giving over-the-counter or prescription pharmaceuticals can be dangerous.
2. Make sure that the carrier has permanent identification, including your name, phone number, flight schedule, destination, and phone number at the point of destination.
3. Feed the 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 the cat not be deprived of water. Discuss this with your veterinarian. Try to secure a direct flight with no layovers. The cat should have fresh water after arrival.

Consider the following when purchasing a carrier for the airline flight:

1. The cage should provide sufficient room for the cat to stand up and turn around easily, but not so large that it can be tossed about inside during turbulence. Remember size constraints if the carrier is to go on board.
2. The walls of the carrier should be strong enough to prevent the sides from being crushed. Also, the flooring of the cage should not allow urine to leak through the bottom. An absorptive underpad (designed for bedridden people with bladder control problems) can be placed in the bottom. See your pharmacist for these.
3. The cage should have sufficient openings for good ventilation.
4. The cage must have sturdy handles for baggage personnel to use.
5. The cage 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 cages that meet these requirements. Some airlines also sell cages 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.

Some considerations for your point of destination include:

1. Be sure that your hotel will allow cats. Many bookstores carry travel guidebooks with this type of information.
2. Give thought to litter pan provisions and food bowls for the hotel room.
3. 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.
4. It is probably best to leave the cat in the carrier or inside the bathroom whenever you plan to leave the room.
5. Should your cat get lost, contact the local animal control officer.

Advance planning is the key to a safe trip with your pet!