



Why become a Cat Friendly Clinic?



Official partners of the ISFM Cat Friendly Clinic Programme



Cat Friendly Clinic is a programme that was conceived and developed by the International Society of Feline Medicine (ISFM) and is run by ISFM with generous support from our commercial partners – Boehringer Ingelheim, Ceva, Idexx, Royal Canin and Zoetis.

What is ISFM?

The International Society of Feline Medicine (ISFM) is the veterinary division of International Cat Care, a not-for-profit international organisation for veterinary professionals with an interest in feline health and welfare.

ISFM is for every veterinary professional who works with cats and is focused on providing practical information, help and support.



Veterinary members of ISFM currently receive:

- Access to Clinical Club, a monthly social Zoom meeting that provides the opportunity to discuss practical clinical issues and cases with other practitioners in an informal setting.
- Research Roundup – monthly summaries of some of the latest clinically relevant science from our world-renowned journal, the *Journal of Feline Medicine and Surgery (JFMS)*, including the monthly 'Clinical Spotlight' article, and other scientific publications.
- A community forum to discuss advances in feline medicine and challenging cases with world-leading feline specialists and other practitioners in a supportive environment.
- Exclusive access to full-length episodes of our podcast 'Chattering With ISFM', featuring interviews with *JFMS* 'Clinical Spotlight' authors and other well-known members of the veterinary profession. Providing engaging feline-focused CPD on the go!
- CPD at your convenience with a programme of high-quality, member exclusive monthly webinars.
- Discounts to attend our worldwide events and conferences, renowned for world-class CPD from leading feline experts and a great social atmosphere to network with likeminded international professionals.

- A regular newsletter that brings you the latest in feline medicine and surgery, plus updates on charity activities in an easy-to-digest format.
- Virtual on-demand access to recordings of ISFM's annual feline congress.
- A comprehensive resource library, including clinical protocols, congress proceedings and recordings, plus previous webinars and CPD, as well as easy access to *JFMS* and *JFMS Open Reports*.

ISFM has a membership category for veterinary nurses and technicians, which is provided free of charge. Veterinary nurses and technicians receive a dedicated monthly online journal, *Feline Focus*.

For full details see: icatcare.org/veterinary/isfm/membership/

Who are International Cat Care?

International Cat Care is a charity dedicated to creating a cat friendly world where each cat, owned and unowned, is treated with respect, compassion and understanding.



At International Cat Care we believe in a world in which each cat's life experience will be as good as it can be. We do this by providing cat caregivers, veterinary professionals and those that live and work with cats with the resources, support and advice they need to care better for their cats.

Our vision is for a cat friendly world. We strive to create knowledge and engaging learning experiences to motivate change and inspire more people to understand and care for cats. Our activities are grounded in evidence and experience – balancing the tried and tested with the latest scientific research, and challenging ignorance and misconceptions. Like cats, we remain ever-curious.

Our mission is to enable more people to act in a cat friendly way to improve cat welfare.

For more information about International Cat Care, please visit icatcare.org

Introduction

A tick in everyone's box!

Within the veterinary profession, cats are assuming an ever-greater importance. Ownership of cats has been growing in most countries for many years, and in many countries it now far exceeds the pet dog population.

Despite this growth in popularity, cats remain significantly under-represented as patients in most small animal veterinary clinics. The reasons behind this are complex, will vary between different situations, and there are aspects that remain poorly understood. However, a common and recurring theme that helps explain why many cats receive less veterinary attention than dogs is the stress experienced by both cats and their caregivers when visiting a veterinary clinic.



If you stop and consider it from a caregivers perspective this is often a very challenging experience. First you have to get the cat in the carrier and transport it to the clinic, which in itself is no small task for most caregivers. But then when the cat arrives at the veterinary clinic:

- How are the cat and caregiver treated?
- Does the clinic demonstrate that it understands the unique needs of cats and their caregivers?
- Does it make provision to have a separate waiting area for cats or separate appointment times?
- Is the cat handled in a gentle and respectful way that demonstrates to the caregiver that the staff understand and are empathetic with cats?
- Are procedures put in place that really help to reassure the cat and reduce stress levels?

There is no doubt from collected evidence and published data that the stress felt by the caregiver and cat are major reasons for caregivers not seeking further veterinary attention for their cat, especially for preventive healthcare such as health checks, or when early signs of disease arise.

What can we do to improve this?

Welcome to the ISFM Cat Friendly Clinic accreditation programme.

This is an international programme available to veterinary clinics everywhere (apart from the Americas where the programme is run by the American Association of Feline Practitioners as the **Cat Friendly Practice programme**) that provides a new and unique opportunity for them to think differently – to ‘think cat’ and make changes to their ethos, procedures, equipment and buildings where necessary, to enable the clinic to clearly demonstrate its cat friendly credentials to current and new clients. This programme has the ability to help you transform the way your clinic approaches the management of cats and their caregivers. How rewarding would it be if your cat clients went away thinking how positive the experience had been and how understanding the staff had been, rather than dreading the next visit?

This programme encourages your clinic to be cat friendly, it shows you how to achieve this, explains the clinical and commercial benefits of being cat friendly and provides clear, understandable and easy to adopt recommendations for clinics. The ISFM Cat Friendly Clinic (CFC) programme has been designed at different levels making accreditation achievable for most small animal clinics, if the motivation and desire is there to make appropriate changes.

Welcome to a more cat friendly world.



Image courtesy of Haemaru Veterinary Referral Hospital

Why become a Cat Friendly Clinic?

We all know that cats are different from dogs but we sometimes forget that the whole process of domestication of the cat has evolved far more slowly and has been based largely on a shared but independent association between the two species. No wonder that cats are seen as being more self-sufficient than dogs, and that they choose when to associate with humans and when to maintain their distance.

In general, cats try to hide any form of weakness or pain. As a result, we are more dependent, in veterinary clinics, on the observations and feedback of the cat caregiver in building up a picture of what is going on with a feline patient. Caregivers are often aware of subtle changes in their cats' behaviour and, in most cases, asking caregivers to share in the management of their pet's health or sickness is well received. The strength of the bond that exists between the cat and their caregiver is as strong as that seen in other pets.

Indeed many people would rather spend time with their cat than with anyone else, and many acquire their cat expressly for companionship.

Differing levels of cat care

Anecdotally, most caregivers would see themselves as committed to their cats, but may still need prompting to visit the veterinarian, especially to undertake preventive care. They largely understand what is needed and why, but require further motivation to overcome inertia, the interruptions of daily life, or the anticipated stress and difficulty of a veterinary visit. We all recognise – perhaps even in ourselves – the well meaning, but distracted, cat caregiver who fully intends to do everything properly but, somehow, life gets in the way. Making the clinic visit a less stressful and more positive experience will greatly help to overcome barriers and resistance.

Many cats may never see a veterinarian. Many kitten caregivers attend the clinic for initial vaccinations, neutering, but then drift away, never to be seen again unless the cat falls seriously ill. In some cases this may be due to ignorance of what responsible pet ownership entails and for others it is simply lack of commitment. For others though, the difficulty (or anticipated difficulty) of getting their cat to the clinic, perhaps the fear of having to hold it for an examination, and being confronted with a hostile environment for the cat, puts them off.



Image courtesy of Sydney Animal Hospitals

Cats mean business

The importance of cats to every small animal clinic cannot be ignored – there are lots of cats out there! While many cats are not pedigree animals, when approached properly, most cat caregivers are prepared to spend just as much on their cats as dog caregivers are on their canine friends. The majority of cat caregivers though have strong views on what they expect from their clinic, and every client will be profoundly influenced by the experience they have during a clinic visit.

Annual feline spending and average transactional values have both continued to rise by similar values over several years in many countries, but many veterinarians still seem to regard dogs as the preferred growth area. However, the reality is, that in many countries there is a stable or shrinking canine pet population suggesting that the dominant position dogs have previously held in the generation of clinic turnover cannot last. Data from a number of countries also show an increasing willingness of cat caregivers to attend the clinic and a willingness to spend on healthcare for their pets. For example, in the UK, data shows that cat caregivers are more likely than dogs caregivers to purchase and use a lifestage diet and are more likely to purchase and use some preventive healthcare products such as flea treatments and wormers.



Image courtesy of MyVet Maynooth

As with humans, the feline population is an ageing one, and almost half the cats in much of Europe and America are aged 8 years and over, with many cats surviving well beyond the average of 14 years. This provides important opportunities for veterinarians to become actively involved in managing the health of these patients and, in those countries where veterinary nurses are recognised, these trained staff members have a vital role to play in providing education and practical advice, as well as promoting the many services their clinic can offer cat caregivers.

Managing and maintaining the health of feline patients is a far better approach to building productive long-term relationships with caregivers, than simply providing the limited fire-brigade style of treatment when the cat becomes sick. It will not only provide for the lifelong healthcare of the cat, but will also prove to be a far better way of maximising the clinic's business potential with these clients.

Not every caregiver will grasp every opportunity to follow a recommended healthcare plan. While some caregivers will do absolutely everything they are asked, others may do so sporadically or reluctantly. However, when the clinic demonstrates, and caregivers understand, that they can genuinely work together to help maintain the health, welfare and longevity of their pets, most caregivers are willing to commit to such a proposition and to discuss how this can be achieved.

Getting cat clients to visit and return

How can cat caregivers be encouraged to ‘do the right thing’? How can veterinarians ensure that the cats under their care receive the best possible healthcare throughout their lives? What is needed is a clear partnership of care between the vet and the cat’s caregiver – making the cat welcome in the clinic and engaging in an effective healthcare plan. Such a partnership aims to provide a clear platform for vets and caregivers alike to ensure that cats can enjoy long, happy, healthy lives, and not just attending to sickness and emergencies.

Helping cat caregivers with all aspects of the clinic visit, and engaging them more effectively can make a huge difference to what they are prepared to do with preventive care. When ISFM ran it’s Cat Friendly Clinic 10 year anniversary competition in 2022, the entries demonstrated that increased knowledge and understanding of cats pays real dividends, as illustrated by these quotations from participating clinics:

“Since we have implemented Cat Friendly changes the (previously protective) cats are letting us examine them.. those practices thinking about becoming Cat Friendly but (think) it’s a lot of effort, no, it is so worth it!”

“We have introduced different types and styles of beds for cats, chosen according to the cat’s temperament. This means cats can chose to hide which helps reduce stress – our nurses make a judgment call based on each individual cat behaviour and information from their caregivers on bed preference.”



Image courtesy of Dierenkliniek Vianen



Image courtesy of Acorn Veterinary Centre

Making clinics more 'cat friendly' is the first, but critical, step in the provision of wider healthcare for cats hence the development of the Cat Friendly Clinic programme.

Part 2 of this guide looks at cats as a species including behaviour and species-specific needs, whilst part 3 gives practical information on how to make your clinic cat friendly as well as how to apply to become an accredited ISFM Cat Friendly Clinic.



Image courtesy of Clinique Veterinaire Foch



This Guide to Creating a Cat Friendly Clinic is brought to you by the International Society of Feline Medicine, and is based on ISFM's standards of feline wellbeing within a veterinary clinic.

ISFM (International Society of Feline Medicine) is the veterinary division of the charity International Cat Care - icatcare.org



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