

Gabapentin to Manage Stress and Anxiety

Cats can suffer from varying degrees of fear and stress while being transported to the veterinarian or while being examined. Not only can stress exacerbate existing physical conditions, it can lead to a number of undesirable behaviors including litter box avoidance, aggression, depression and withdrawal. Unfortunately, one of the most common causes of fear and stress in our companions is the veterinary examination. The entire process, from being loaded into a carrier, to the car ride, to the time they spend here in the hospital, is severely disruptive of your cat's routine, imposes significant sensory stress, and, unsurprisingly, presents your cat to us in a highly agitated state.

Our experience, substantiated by research, demonstrates that the medication gabapentin can significantly reduce signs of stress and increase patient compliance here in the hospital.

Gabapentin is a medication originally developed to manage seizures in humans; subsequently, it was found to be a useful drug to control neuropathic pain in humans, dogs and cats. While not specifically labelled for use for anxiety, gabapentin is finding rapidly increasing use for managing it. The medication comes in tablet, capsule and liquid forms and can be administered with food or treats though it can also be given on an empty stomach. The liquid is slightly bitter and cats may resent this form particularly when given in larger volumes. The medication is best given approximately 2 hours prior to visits or travel as it achieves maximum effectiveness at this timeframe.

One recent study in the Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association showed that cats who received gabapentin prior to veterinary visits led to significant reduction in stress-related behaviors during transportation and examination. Among the multiple reported findings:

- Owners reported significantly lower stress scores over the entire visit, including transportation to and from the hospital;
- Veterinarians rated treated cats as significantly more compliant during examination;
- In 20% of patients, examination was *only* possible after treatment with gabapentin; and
- The most commonly reported side effect was sedation.

The drug has few contraindications; it is metabolized in the kidneys and cats with renal insufficiency may demonstrate prolonged or stronger-than-usual effects from the medication. In these cases, we may recommend a dose adjustment.

Please ask your veterinarian if this might be an appropriate drug for your companion, particularly if your friend has a history of stressful visits to the hospital.