

UK to USA Pet Import Guide: Everything Owners Need Before Take-Off

Moving a pet from the UK to the USA is not complicated once you know the order of operations. The trouble is that most owners piece the process together from forums, outdated blog posts, and half-remembered airline emails. This guide puts the current federal rules, realistic costs, and a working timeline in one place, so you can move your dog, cat, or other companion animal without a last-minute scramble at check-in.

Whether you are relocating for work, joining family, or simply starting a new chapter in the States, this is the practical roadmap for UK to USA pet import: what the CDC and USDA actually require, what your airline will ask for, and how to avoid the paperwork mistakes that cause pets to be delayed or turned away.

The Quick-Glance Snapshot

Before the detail, here is the shape of the process for the two most common travellers: dogs and cats.

Requirement	Dogs (from UK)	Cats (from UK)
Federal entry authority	CDC	USDA APHIS has no animal-health entry rule for cats; CDC and airlines still apply
Core document	CDC Dog Import Form receipt	No federal form required
Microchip	Required, ISO-compatible	Recommended, often required by airline or state
Minimum age	6 months	Set by airline, usually 8-16 weeks
Rabies vaccination	Not federally required from the UK (a low-risk country) but strongly recommended	Not federally required, but recommended and sometimes required by the destination state
Quarantine	None for UK-origin dogs meeting the rules	None
Health certificate	Not federally required, but almost every airline asks for one issued within 10 days of travel	Almost always required by the airline within 10 days of travel

The UK sits on the CDC's list of dog rabies-free or low-risk countries, which is the reason this route is one of the more straightforward pet import journeys into America. That said, "straightforward" still means paperwork, timing, and a few decisions you need to make early.

Dog Import Rules in Plain English

Since August 2024, the CDC simplified entry for dogs arriving from low-risk countries like the UK. If your dog has spent the last six months only in the UK or other rabies-free or low-risk countries, here is what you actually need.

The essentials for a UK dog entering the USA:

- A completed **CDC Dog Import Form**, submitted online before travel, with the printed or digital receipt ready to show at check-in and to US Customs and Border Protection
- A **microchip** that a universal scanner can read, implanted before any rabies vaccination is given
- The dog must be **at least 6 months old** on the date of entry
- The dog must **appear healthy** on arrival; visible illness can lead to further examination at your expense

You can complete the CDC Dog Import Form yourself in a few minutes, any time from six months before travel up to the day you fly. The receipt stays valid for six months and can be reused for multiple trips as long as your dog has not visited a high-risk country in between.

A point worth flagging: the microchip must go in before the rabies jab. If the order is reversed, the vaccination record may not be accepted, which can complicate your paperwork even though rabies proof is not strictly required from the UK.

Rabies vaccination is not mandatory for dogs travelling directly from the UK, but the CDC recommends it, most US states expect it for local registration, and it protects your dog if your travel history changes. It is worth doing regardless of the minimum legal requirement.

Cat Import Rules: Simpler Than You Think

Cats have an easier ride at the federal level. USDA APHIS has confirmed it holds no animal-health import requirements for pet cats arriving from another country. There is no federal health certificate mandate and no rabies vaccination requirement to enter the United States.

That said, "no federal requirement" is not the same as "no requirements at all." Three things still apply:

- **Airlines** almost universally require a veterinary health certificate issued within 10 days of departure, plus proof of vaccinations they consider standard
- **Destination states** sometimes set their own entry rules, particularly Hawaii, which has stricter conditions than the mainland
- **CDC inspection** can happen at the port of entry; a cat that appears unwell may need veterinary examination before it is allowed through

If you are moving to a mainland state, plan around your airline's paperwork rather than a federal cat import requirement, because that is where the real checklist lives.

What About Other Pets?

Birds, rabbits, reptiles, and small mammals fall under different rules, sometimes involving the US Fish and Wildlife Service alongside USDA APHIS. If you are bringing anything other than a dog or cat, confirm species-specific requirements directly with APHIS before you book flights, since rules vary widely and some species face outright restrictions.

Your Week-by-Week Countdown

A well-run UK to USA pet move usually starts eight to twelve weeks out. Rushing the paperwork is the single biggest cause of delays, so use this as your working timeline.

Timeframe	What to handle
8-12 weeks before	Book your flight and confirm your airline's pet policy and crate rules; find a USDA-accredited vet in the UK if you need one
6-8 weeks before	Have your microchip implanted (if not already done) before any vaccinations; schedule rabies vaccination if you are choosing to have it done
4-6 weeks before	Complete the CDC Dog Import Form (valid for six months, so this window has flexibility); confirm crate specifications with your airline
10 days before	Get your veterinary health certificate issued, since most airlines require it within this window
1-3 days before	Print your CDC Dog Import Form receipt; pack documents, food, and familiar bedding; reconfirm your pet's booking with the airline
Departure day	Arrive early, carry both digital and printed copies of every document, and keep your pet calm and hydrated before boarding

Paperwork You Cannot Skip

Even with the UK's low-risk status keeping things relatively light, a folder of the right documents saves you from being turned away at check-in. Keep both paper and digital copies of each of these.

- CDC Dog Import Form receipt (dogs only)
- Veterinary health certificate, issued within the airline's required window
- Microchip registration confirmation
- Proof of rabies vaccination, if administered

- UK export paperwork, since Great Britain requires its own export health certificate for pets leaving for a non-EU country like the USA
- Airline-specific forms, including any crate or booking confirmation
- Ownership proof, useful for customs and for your new state's pet registration

Budgeting for the Move

Costs vary by pet size, airline, and whether you use a relocation specialist, but here is a realistic range for planning purposes.

Item	Typical cost
Veterinary health certificate (UK)	£50 to £150
Microchip (if not already done)	£20 to £40
Rabies vaccination	£30 to £60
UK export health certificate	£100 to £250
IATA-compliant travel crate	£50 to £300 depending on size
Airline pet fee (cabin)	\$125 to \$200
Airline or cargo pet fee (hold or dedicated cargo)	\$1,000 to \$4,000+ depending on size, route, and carrier
Pet relocation consultant or agent fee	£300 to £1,500+ depending on service level

Cargo and dedicated pet-transport costs are usually the largest line item, particularly for large dogs that cannot travel in the cabin. Get quotes from more than one airline or specialist agency before committing, since prices differ significantly by route and season.

Picking the Right Route to America

You generally have three options for getting a pet across the Atlantic.

In-cabin travel. Available for small dogs and cats under a set weight, usually travelling in an approved soft-sided carrier under the seat. This is the cheapest and least stressful option if your pet qualifies by size.

Checked baggage or airline cargo. Larger pets travel in the hold in an IATA-approved crate. Airlines have seasonal temperature restrictions, so summer travel from the UK can be affected by heat embargoes at US airports.

Dedicated pet charter or relocation service. Companies that specialise in pet transport handle documentation, crate training, and door-to-door logistics. This suits nervous flyers, brachycephalic breeds with higher travel risk, or owners who simply want the process handled by specialists.

Mistakes That Delay Pets at the Border

A handful of avoidable errors account for most of the hold-ups owners run into on this route.

- **Vaccinating before microchipping.** The chip must go in first or the rabies record may not be accepted.
- **Booking a health certificate too early.** Most airlines require it within 10 days of travel, so getting it done a month out means redoing it.
- **Assuming cats need the same paperwork as dogs.** Cats face a lighter federal requirement, but airline rules still apply and catch owners off guard.
- **Ignoring destination state rules.** Federal clearance is not the end of the story if your new state has its own pet entry conditions.
- **Skipping the UK export side.** Meeting US entry rules does not automatically satisfy what Great Britain requires before your pet can leave.
- **Underestimating crate training time.** Pets that have never been in a travel crate need weeks, not days, to adjust before a long flight.

Why a Relocation Partner Makes This Easier

You can absolutely manage a UK to USA pet import yourself, and many owners do. But if your timeline is tight, your pet has specific health needs, or you would rather not juggle CDC forms, airline crate specifications, and UK export certificates on top of an international move, it is worth booking time with a pet relocation specialist.

A good pet import consultant will confirm your dog or cat's eligibility, schedule the right vet appointments in the correct order, complete the CDC Dog Import Form on your behalf, and coordinate crate compliance with your airline. Many owners choose to hire this support specifically for the document sequencing, since a form completed in the wrong order is the most common reason pets get held up.

If you would like a second pair of eyes on your paperwork, our team can review your pet's situation and schedule the remaining steps with you.

Quick Answers to Common Questions

Do dogs from the UK need to quarantine when entering the USA?

No, UK-origin dogs meeting CDC requirements do not need to quarantine.

Is a rabies vaccination mandatory for a UK dog entering the USA?

It is not federally required from a low-risk country like the UK, but it is strongly recommended and often expected by US states.

Does my cat need a CDC Dog Import Form?

No, that form applies only to dogs; cats have no equivalent federal requirement.

How far in advance should I start the process?

Start eight to twelve weeks before travel to allow time for microchipping, vaccinations, and the health certificate window.

Can I complete the CDC Dog Import Form myself?

Yes, it is a short online form you can complete without a vet or agent, though many owners choose to have a specialist handle it.

What happens if my pet's paperwork is incomplete at check-in?

The airline can deny boarding, so double-check every document against the airline's specific list before you travel.

Do I need a UK export certificate as well as US entry paperwork?

Yes, Great Britain requires its own export health certificate for pets leaving for a non-EU destination like the USA.

Are there breed restrictions for flying to the USA?

Restrictions come from airlines rather than US entry rules, and short-nosed breeds often face additional carrier conditions.

Will my destination state have extra pet rules?

Some states, including Hawaii, apply stricter entry conditions than the federal baseline, so check before you book.

Is professional help worth the cost for a straightforward UK to USA move?

It depends on your timeline and confidence with paperwork, but many owners book a consultant specifically to avoid document sequencing errors.

Rules from the CDC, USDA, and individual airlines can change, so confirm current requirements directly with those agencies close to your travel date. If you want help turning this checklist into a scheduled plan for your specific pet, our UK to USA pet import specialists are ready to walk through it with you.