

Appropriate Use of Chemical Restraint in Dogs and Cats

Our topics for this week:

- **Chemical restraint is essential in some anxious dogs and cats**
- **Benefits of most traditional physical restraint methods**
- **Potential disadvantages of anti-anxiety drugs**

Dogs and cats can experience anxiety when being examined by strangers. Some do not develop anxiety because of their genetics and gentle handling by their owners and family members. Some do not become anxious because of low-stress training visits to places where they might become anxious if not previously exposed, such as veterinary clinic training visits. However, even with gentle handling at home and low-stress training visits, some dogs and cats are still anxious in new environments. In these situations, consideration must be given to the risk that the animal resisting handling might pose to the animal or the handler.

Whether physical or chemical restraint is appropriately used depends on the skill of the handler. Chemical restraint should be used when necessary, but it should not be necessary on a regular basis. There is a trend in veterinary medicine, in part due animal handling receiving less attention than it should be in veterinary colleges and due to the convenience of sedating animals with prescription drugs. The most used anti-anxiety drugs being used today on dogs and cats are drugs intended for other uses than the control of anxiety and labeled for humans, not dogs and cats.

With the advent of advocating off-label chemical restraint, the groups behind the shift to chemical restraint discourage the use of forms of physical restraint which have been very useful and harmless when used appropriately in the past while saving handlers and animals from injuries. I agree that gloves are not very effective, skin clips are painful, and tongs are dangerous because excessive pressure can be applied to an animal's neck without realizing it. However, other restraints condemned by anti-physical restraint groups include cat bags which have been humane, calming, and provide excellent restraint if used as intended which is restrain a cat that may need restraint during a brief procedure, not to restrain an upset cat. Scruffing of cats is strongly discouraged even though scruffing permits a handler immediate restraint without injury to either the cat or handler, freedom of respiration, and controlled release that can train a cat to be more tolerant of future handling. These groups also ban the use of muzzles for dogs or cats can provide restraint that protects handlers and for cats also covers their eyes which calms most cats. Cat mesh bags are banned although they can be the safest, most humane means to restrain an upset cat in order to administer chemical restraint, especially a cat with respiratory

problems. Restraint poles, mistakenly referred to as “rabies” poles are banned. These poles can be used to restrain the head of vicious dogs and position their body to administer chemical restraint.

So, if traditional, effective, and humane means of physical restraint are being banned by so-called “friendly” pet associations or “fear free” pet groups, what is their secret means of handling dogs and cats with apprehension of a change in their normal daily routine? It is frequently pre-visit chemical restraint administered by the owner.

The antianxiety drugs most often used are gabapentin in cats and trazodone in dogs, or combinations of both drugs. Neither is approved for use in dogs and cats by the FDA. Gabapentin is a prescription drug for humans with seizures. Britain classified gabapentin as a Class C controlled drug in 2019 due to risks of abuse and addiction. It can cause ataxia, drooling, and vomiting. Pfizer, the pharmaceutical company that sells gabapentin, was recently fined \$240 million dollars by the FDA for illegally promoting the off-label use of gabapentin in humans. The off-label use of gabapentin in pets has not yet been questioned.

Trazodone is a prescription antidepressant for humans. It can cause dilated pupils, protruding third eyelids, vomiting, diarrhea, panting, ataxia, hypotension, and arrhythmias. It should be noted that ataxia can lead to dogs or cats falling off furniture or down stairs.

ROLES OF CHEMICAL AND PHYSICAL RESTRAINT

The potential advantages of appropriately used chemical restraint are sedation of the animal which can be highly beneficial to animals, owners, and veterinarians in alleviating animal stress and possible physical injury. Also, the convenience of chemical restraint can lead to shorter handling time.

The potential disadvantages of unnecessary chemical restraint include interference with a physical exam results by altering vital signs (heart rate, respiratory rate, and body temperature) and potential adverse health effects.

Chemical alteration of consciousness may alleviate some of the fear and resistance to restraint in animals, although in some cases, it can cause memory of the loss of full control of their body during induction or recovery which may instill new fears.

Anxiety is a normal response to a new situation. Learning is facilitated by anxiety, and all anxiety does not need to be suppressed with drugs. Handling an anxious animal without sedation in a non-painful, quiet, calm way is a learning situation that can help the animals become less stressed in the present and future situations.

Chemical restraint should only be used when physical restraint techniques are substantially less safe for the animal or the handler, not just for convenience, to supplement income, or as a substitute for good handling and physical restraint methods.

If you have comments or you're interested in particular animal handling subjects contact us at CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com

Now let's recap the key points to remember from today's episode:

- 1. Chemical restraint is essential in some anxious dogs and cats.**
- 2. Most traditional physical restraint methods are more effective, less expensive, and safer than chemical restraints for brief procedures.**
- 3. The need for routine sedation to handle a dog or cat should be constantly re-evaluated.**

More information on animal handling can be found in my book, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint*, published by CRC Press and available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources. My new spiral-bound handbook, *Concise Textbook of Small Animal Handling* was recently published and available from all major science book supply sources.

Additional information is provided at: www.betteranimalhandling.com . This website has more than 150 past podcasts with notes on handling of dogs, cats, other small mammals, birds, reptiles, horses, cattle, small ruminants, swine, and poultry.

Don't forget, serious injury or death can result from handling and restraining some animals. Safe and effective handling and restraint requires experience and continual practice. Acquisition of the needed skills should be under the supervision of an experienced animal handler.