

Approaching, Catching, and Routine Handling of Cats

Our topics for this week are:

- How to Approach and Catch Cats
- Routine Handling and Handling Equipment for Cats

APPROACHING AND CATCHING

The cat's attitude should be observed before attempting to capture it. Most cats can be classified as nonaggressive or fear-aggressive. Most nonaggressive cats are still resentful of restraint and respond best to an unhurried approach and loose gentle restraint.

Nonaggressive Cats

The handler should move slowly but with confidence, and use a calm assuring voice, and lower his body near the cat with his side toward it. Small bits of food treats can be used if needed to lure the cat closer to the handler. Cats should not be stared at nor leaned over.

A friendly approach by a cat is with its tail held up with back legs slightly extended. Purring may be audible. It will almost touch who they approach with its nose and may rub his face and head on the handler. Rolling over and exposing its belly is not a submission sign in cats. It is an invitation to play, but touching the abdomen may trigger a playful bite.

An apparently friendly cat should be allowed to approach the handler's extended index finger, which mimics another cat's nose, to smell it. The handler can then quietly and slowly move his hand to stroke the cat's head. Cats are not threatened by extended fingers and will not suddenly bite as dogs may do. Stroking a friendly cat's back results in arching of their back to press more firmly against the stroking hand, a signal of invitation for more petting. A slip leash should be applied and then the cat is moved so that it is in front of the handler facing his right side. The handler's left hand reaches over the cat's back and grasps the cat's right front leg. Holding the front leg prevents escaping the handler's support or the cat climbing up the handler's chest. The left wrist is then under the cat's juncture of the abdomen and thorax for support of its body.

The right hand holds the slip leash and is kept near the cat's head to pet it as it is carried and grasp the scruff of the neck if struggling occurs. Lifting the cat should be done without squeezing its chest. The handler's right hand is used to comfort and distract the cat while being carried. Distraction techniques include gently rubbing the cat's head and ears, scratching the ears or throat and chin, gently and rhythmically tapping the cat's head or face, blowing softly on the nose, and stroking or wiggling the cat's foot or leg.

Aggressive Cats

The body language of an aggressive cat is that of piloerection, arched back, tail down with its tip flicked slowly, and ears erect and pointed forward. If approached, it will flatten its ears back, bat with paws, and lean away from the threat, vocalizing. Aggressive cats must be handled by two people. The handler has to concentrate on only the restraint. The other person performs the examination, administration of medications, or other procedures needed.

The surroundings should be prepared for possible escape attempt. All doors, windows, and cabinet doors must be closed. Access to vents, backs of refrigerators, chimneys, or any other escape or hiding area that will impede efforts to recapture the cat if it escapes during the first capture attempt must be blocked. Anything breakable or spillable on countertops should be removed.

If a cat is in defensive posture but does not attempt to strike and retreat, a loop from a slip leash should be dropped over the cat's head to provide a means of gently moving the cat toward the handler. The handler can then either stroke and pick the cat up or if necessary, use additional capture means (wrap in a towel, pull into a transport crate or box, or administer chemical restraint). Use of a thick towel to begin the stroking and gradual wrapping of its body from the neck back may be effective. Thick leather gloves with gauntlets to protect the wrists and forearms are an alternative but less desirable approach.

Fractious cats that will attack when capture is attempted in a cage should be entrapped by a capture pole, cat tongs, nets, or a cat loop on a flexible rod. Cats can wiggle, roll, and spin in a net; therefore, gloves or towels may be needed to hold the cat down to administer medications or sedatives.

Feral cats may be caught in humane traps which are commercially available and transferred to a squeeze cage for chemical restraint to be safely handled.

HANDLING FOR ROUTINE CARE AND MANAGEMENT

Basic Equipment

Tractable cats require no equipment for handling, but slip leashes should be used on cats whenever they are outside a cage to aid in positioning the cat to be picked up and to increase security against an attempt to escape. If additional restraint is needed, particularly for cats that have not been declawed, towels and blankets are basic equipment.

Slip Leashes

A slip leash is a rope, cord, or flat woven strap with a metal ring honda or tied honda knot used for routine handling of cats. Flat, strap slip leashes should not be used due to their inability to maintain an open loop when being placed over the cat's head and neck. A slip leash serves as a sliding collar and lead rope in one piece.

Slip leashes should not be used on cats with breathing problems. If an alternative does not exist, the loop should be placed around the neck with one front leg through it to prevent pressure on the trachea. Cats should never be tied and left unattended with a slip leash because either escape or strangulation may result.

Towels and Blankets

Towels can be used in the same manner as cat restraint bags. The first wrap should be around the neck and then the rest of the body is swaddled to restrict movement of the cat's limbs, euphemistically called making a cat *kitty burrito*. A leg can be withdrawn for venipuncture or the cat held on its back with the head extended for jugular venipuncture. Another method of swaddling cats for restraint is to fold a blanket in half while making sure there is enough remaining to easily wrap the cat.

While standing behind the cat, the handler drops the blanket over the entire cat, including

its head. Then, he quickly entraps the cat using both his forearms to sweep in and *taco shell* capture the cat, pressing the blanket edges under the cat's legs. Rear escape is blocked with the handler's torso, and forward escape is blocked by the towel over the cat's head. The wrap is then used to immediately swaddle the cat in a burrito style wrap.

Tables and Table Covers

Cats prefer elevated positions to rest, but stainless steel exam tables are not well tolerated. Time handling a cat on a table should be kept to a minimum and avoided when possible. Covering the table with a pad or towel will provide traction and insulation but allowing a struggling cat traction for its feet may be a disadvantage for the handler. Whether or not to cover a table should be determined on an individual basis depending on the actions of the cat on an uncovered table.

Table covers should be cleaned and sanitized after each use. Warming table towels has been recommended, but the added benefits to handling cats by using warmed towels has not been objectively assessed.

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

- Most cats resent having their abdomen rubbed
- Minimum possible restraint is best is particularly true of cats
- Slip leashes should be used whenever cats are moved outside their cage or crate
- Swaddling cats in towels or blankets can be a useful moderate restraint for cats

More information on animal handling is available in my book, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint* published by CRC Press. It is also available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

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.