

## Basics of Handling Cats

Our topics for this week are:

- **Handling non-aggressive cats**
- **Handling aggressive cats**
- **Basic equipment for handling cats**

A 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 need 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.

### **Moving**

#### **Carried in Arms**

When a handler carries a cat, the cat should have a slip leash applied first and then be picked up with the handler's right palm under the cat's chest with an index finger between the front legs at the junction with the chest. The left hand, while holding the slip leash is placed lightly on back of the cat's neck and top of its shoulders. If distraction techniques (petting, scratching) are insufficient to control the cat, the cat can be scruffed with left hand.

An alternative hold is to allow the cat's sternum to be supported by the right wrist while the left foreleg is grasped with the right hand. Both restrains prevent the cat from climbing up the handler's chest.

### **Transport in Crates**

Transport crates are useful in securing cats when they are moved. When confined to a strapped down crate in a vehicle, cats are prevented from escapes during loading or unloading or through open windows. They also cannot become a distraction to driving or a missile during a collision.

Cats in crates in veterinary hospitals are protected from harm from other animals and from doing harm to other animals or humans. However, the cat will still be stressed by the near presence of other cats and dogs and should be kept from viewing them by covering the crate with a towel. Harsh lighting should be avoided, and the crate kept off the floor by placing it securely on a table or other elevated surface.

Crates may be made of cardboard or plastic. Cat crates should have a top opening. Air holes should be present on at least 10% of the surface area of the crate. Absorbent bedding should be provided. Food and water should be considered, depending on the length of time to be in transport.

### **Inserting the Cat**

Docile cats that have been previously acclimated to eating and resting in a crate should be given a chance to walk into a crate to seek seclusion and be offered a food treat. Putting a towel in may be an added lure, especially if the towel has been rubbed by the cat's owner, on a buddy cat, or on the cat to be crated itself.

Failing a voluntary entrance to the crate, the cat should be picked up and placed in transport crates through a top opening, rump first. After the cat stands in the crate, the handler's hand should remain on the cat's neck and shoulders as the other hand closes the top against the handler's forearm. The restraining arm can then be slipped out of the crate and the top opening closed. If a top loading crate is not available, the front of a front opening crate can be tipped up.

If you have comments or you're interested in particular animal handling subjects, contact us at [CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com](mailto:CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com)

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

- 1. Non-aggressive cats should be handled slowly and gently.**
- 2. Aggressive cats should be handled defensively using special equipment.**
- 3. The best means of moving a cat is in a crate with a top door, carried without sway or bumps with both arms.**

More information on animal handling can be found in my books, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint*, *Concise Textbook of Small Animal Handling*, and *Concise Textbook of Large Animal Handling* all published by CRC Press and available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is provided at: [www.betteranimalhandling.com](http://www.betteranimalhandling.com) . This website has more than 250 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.