

Feline Fundamentals – Humane Handling Basics 2 Webinar Script

Hi. I'm Alana Stevenson. I'm an animal behaviorist and help clients resolve feline behavioral problems. In Humane Handling Basics 1, we covered gentle approach and why gentle, low-stress handling is important, how to read the body-language of fearful and stressed cats, and things we can do to improve how cats are housed and where they are placed in carriers and cages. For Basics 2, we will go over humane handling principles, how towels can help keep cats calmer, why we want to avoid scruffing, the applications of minimal restraint, and how to touch, pick up, hold and carry cats, as well as how to transfer them into and out of cages and carriers.

Handling recap – Remember, if the cat becomes too scared, heightened or aroused, give them a few minutes to calm down before continuing. The more aroused or reactive they get, the harder it will be to handle them. If you are going to sedate a cat or provide an analgesic, do this before they become too upset. Otherwise, there is a good chance the medications will not work.

Think when handling, 'go slow to go fast.' If you go at the cat's pace and comfort level, they will generally be more cooperative and you ultimately will go faster.

Humane, gentle handling is both safer and more efficient than the 'get it done' or 'pin, scruff, and grab em' mentality.

Many cats can be distracted or redirected through some form of food or play. Use food, toys, and treats to distract and reward cats during and after handling. Kittens can be distracted with toys and some adults with highly palatable food and treats. This helps to create a positive association. Whenever you can, begin with the least stressful handling and procedures first, and save more stressful ones for the end. This prevents the cat from becoming aroused or too upset.

When handling a cat, before you do so, prepare everything in advance. Make sure you have everything you need ready, including all treats and equipment, before you start handling the cat. It's best to keep movement and activity to a minimum when handling cats. The less people and activity, the better.

Do not handle a cat on a metal exam table. These tables are loud, cold, slippery and provide no traction. Use soft towels or rubber mats such as yoga mats for cats to stand or lie down on when handling them. Always place something soft under the cat.

Feliway, a synthetic feline pheromone, can be misted on towels 30 minutes before working with the cat. Feliway diffusers can be placed in rooms that have outlets. This may help to calm and relax some cats.

Towels can be a great aid in gentle and low-stress handling. Towels can prevent stress and injury. Towels can help to keep the cat calm and limit the amount of prodding or poking they feel from our hands. Towels should not be used as way to roughly handle the cat or to force a cat to endure rough handling.

The use of towels can protect both the cat and person from injury. Towels should be thick enough to prevent injury but thin enough so that you can easily feel the cat and position him.

Towels are used to keep the cat calm and lessen the amount of poking and handling the cat will feel by your hands. Towels are not used to wrestle the cat or to force procedures and implement rough handling. If towels are frequently used for rough handling and scary procedures, cats can become fearful and more reactive when they see a towel.

Why do we want to avoid scruffing? For many of us, we've been taught that this is the normal and accepted way to carry and hold cats and kittens. We've been told this is how mother cats carry their kittens so it's natural for them to hang this way. However, mother cats have no choice but to carry kittens in their mouths and they do this when kittens are newborns. Mother cats are also very sensitive to how tightly they hold their kittens. As kittens get older, even after a few weeks, they are no longer carried this way.

Although scruffing may work temporarily, the cat is powerless to move, so becomes actually more frightened of being handled in the future. Scruffing increases the likelihood the cat will bite and it increases the risk of injury – for both the person and the cat.

There is a term used in gentle or low-stress handling called 'minimal restraint.' This means we should only use the amount of restraint that is minimally necessary for you and the cat. Most cats can be examined with mild restraint.

Scruffing creates fear and anxiety and any increased stress, makes the cat more reactive, and potentially more aggressive. Scruffing cats also increases intraocular pressure and the likelihood of eye-damage that can contribute to eye issues such as glaucoma and cataracts.

In this video, a veterinarian, gently demonstrates how 'scruffing' is unpleasant for her cat, Snowbell. Although it looks like she is pinching Snowbell, she is only lightly touching her. Snowbell is an older cat and a rescue. She is easily handled when people are gentle, but the moment she is lightly scruffed, she cries and wants to get away.

Instead of scruffing a cat to control them, your hands, arms, and body should support and control the cat's movement. In the upper left photo, Josh the cat, is fully supported by the table and is lying on a towel. By placing a hand in front of his shoulders or chest, the handler can prevent him from moving forward. The handler's body is behind him and her other hand is placed on his hip. Her right arm is also in line with his body which provides support and control.

In the lower left photo, the handler to the left restrains the cat Moo very gently. Both arms run the length of his sides to control his sideways movement. Her hands are placed on Moo's shoulders and chest to prevent Moo from moving forward and her body blocks Moo's backward movement and also provides support.

In the lower right photo, the cat is being fully supported by the table. The handler's arms are on each side of the cat and the hands are placed on the cat's chest to prevent forward motion.

To control a cat's movements, the cat's body should be fully supported. Ideally, all four paws should be on a surface. Instead of grabbing them or pinning them down, support and control the cat's movement with your arms, hands, and body. Your hands can rest on the cat's chest and torso to prevent the cat from moving forward.

Towels can also be used to control a cat's movement. In these two images, a towel is used to prevent the cat from moving forward simply by placing or wrapping the towel in front of the cat's chest and front legs.

When approaching a cat, do so from the side or from slightly behind them. Leaning over a cat and facing them directly or staring at them can be very unnerving. A cat will be more relaxed if you show non-threatening body-language. Notice in all these photos, the cat's body is fully supported and the hands rest in front of the cat's chest to prevent forward motion.

In these photos, the handler is examining the cat from slightly behind him. This can be done wherever the cat is most comfortable — on the floor, in a cat bed, on your lap, on a table, or in the bottom half of a carrier. If you approach and handle cats from the side or from behind them, they are more comfortable so generally more cooperative.

When applying minimal restraint, allow the cat to choose the position he prefers and is most comfortable in. If the cat prefers to sit, allow him to sit. If the cat prefers to lie down, allow him to lie down for most, if not all, of the handling. If the cat prefers to stand, examine or work with the cat in the standing position.

Speak softly to cats and verbally reassure them. Introduce yourself, say 'Hi Kitty,' and while examining the cat say things like 'you're doing great,' 'Can I look in your ear?' 'Can we get a weight on you?' 'It's going to be fine,' 'You're being very brave,' 'I know it's not fun,' 'It'll be done soon,' 'What a good kitty.'

Don't yell at the cat, say 'No,' or repeatedly tap the cat's head or poke them as a distraction. Likewise, don't continuously say 'Shssh.' All of these can stress the cat and make them more fearful.

When picking up a cat to carry, hold and support him as you would carry a football. Support his torso and abdomen. The cat's body is supported by your arm and body. Allow the back legs to dangle. Your free hand is placed in front of the cat's chest. The cat should face away from you and be parallel to ground. Do not tip him vertically.

As you lift the cat, turn or position yourself or the cat so you are next to or slightly behind her. As in the video to the right, keep the cat's body in line so her spine is straight and fully support the cat as you lift her.

When holding and carrying the cat, one hand can be placed in front of the cat's chest to control the front legs (as in the picture to the left) or it can be gently placed on the back of the cat's head or neck. Try to keep the cat's spine straight and her head parallel to the ground and facing away from you.

When placing down the cat, don't dump or toss the cat, and don't let the cat jump from your arms. Place her down gently as you fully support her. Be sure all four paws are on the surface you are placing her on before you let go.

Some cats are too large to comfortably carry in a standard football hold. As you lift the cat, one arm and hand control the front legs and support the cat's front, while the other support the cat from the bottom and control the back legs. The cat's body and legs are fully controlled and supported.

Some cats who are squirmy or hesitant may stay calmer while being carried when a towel is draped over them or wrapped around them. The cat's body should be fully supported by both the towel and your body.

Cats prefer light and steady touch over rapid petting or quick long strokes. When a cat does not like to be touched in a certain location they will usually give signs - pulling away, ears flattening, tail twitching, fidgeting or vocalizing.

Cats generally prefer to be touched and massaged on the face, head, and neck. Specifically, on top of the head, on the forehead, and on the occiput ~ the little bony protrusion at the base of the skull, often called 'knowledge knot', on and around the cheeks and under the chin. Many cats are comfortable being examined from behind while you gently massage the head and chin.

Instead of 'scruffing,' the cat's head can be controlled by your hand. Place your hand on top of the cat's head with your thumb and pinky on each side of the cat's jaw and your second, third and fourth fingers on top of the cat's head. You can gently massage the cat's head and forehead as hold.

Using a towel to cover the cat's head is helpful for cats who try to get away, hide, cower or try to get small when you handle them. Lightly covering the head with a towel can help timid and fearful cats remain still. You can cover the cat's head while examining or handling the cat in the bottom half of a carrier.

When holding the hindlegs, gently hold above the hock or ankle joint. The cat's feet should be relaxed. Do not hold or squeeze the tail between and with the back legs and do not stretch or pull on the legs. The cat's back legs should be in a natural position.

When positioning or holding limbs, move the leg gently from above the joint. Do not pull on legs and feet. Keep the limb within its natural range of motion. Positioning or stretching limbs in ways they do not naturally move or rotate is painful and uncomfortable. The cat will react and this may cause injury to you and the cat.

When picking up, holding and handling kittens, make sure to support the kitten's entire body. This includes their chest, torso, abdomen and hind end. If they are very small (as the kitten on the left), support their limbs as well. In all 3 photos, these kittens are being held and handled while being fully supported.

At no time should a kitten be scruffed. Mother cats carry newborns in their mouths because they have no choice. The mother has good intentions — to move her kittens to a safer place. Mother cats are very sensitive to how much pressure they use and they do not scruff kittens to interact with them socially or to punish or correct them.

Do not hold or carry kittens by their belly or back of the neck and let them dangle in mid-air. This type of handling easily startles and frightens kittens. They will squirm and cry in response. The kitten's entire body should be supported when you hold, handle or carry them.

To remove a cat from a cage, introduce yourself to the cat and speak softly. Open the door and see if the cat will approach you. Stand or turn sideways or angled to the cat. Turn the cat away from you or position yourself so that you are next to or slightly behind the cat as you pick her up. Use a towel if needed.

If the cat is in a cat bed and is fearful or timid, turn the cat bed or position yourself so that the cat is facing or turned away from you. Remove the cat and the bed together.

There are a few ways to coax or remove a cat from a carrier or to move a cat from one carrier to another. We can see if the cat will come out on his or her own. We can use towels or we can remove the top half of the carrier.

Do not reach in and yank, pull, or drag the cat out of the carry and don't tip the carrier upside down to dump the cat. Both of these will frighten the cat and increase the likelihood of you getting hurt.

Instead, first see if the cat will come out of the carrier on her own. Introduce yourself (Hi kitty) and speak softly to the cat. Offer treats.

If the cat does not come out of the carrier, calmly remove the top half of the carrier. If there is no way to remove the top half of the carrier but there are top or side openings, use a towel to gently lift or remove the cat.

Often we take cats out of carriers earlier than we need to and many routine examinations and procedures can be done with the cat remaining in the carrier. The cat can be weighed while still in the carrier. Weigh the entire carrier and cat and then weigh an equivalent-sized carrier. If there are side or top openings, the cat can be physically examined gently while still in the carrier and vaccinations can be given.

When the top half of the carrier is removed, the cat can be examined and handled while still remaining in the bottom half. Do as much as you can with the cat in the bottom half of the carrier. Use a towel if needed to cover the cat. The towel can keep the cat still, comfortable and prevent escape.

If needed you can weigh the cat in the carrier bottom and then weigh the carrier bottom, once the cat is removed or weigh the bottom of an equivalent carrier.

If a cat is very fearful or aggressive and you need to remove the cat from the carrier, use a towel and slide it between the top and bottom of the carrier as you carefully remove the top. If you have someone to help, have them hold the carrier door to prevent escape as you take the carrier apart. If you are by yourself, position the opening of the carrier towards a wall or another barrier before you remove the carrier door.

The purpose of the towel is to allow the cat to remain hiding with the least amount of handling. The towel will keep the cat calmer and help prevent escape and injury. Examine or do as much as you can with the cat in the bottom half of the carrier under the towel, only removing as much of the towel as you need, at any given time, to see the cat.

For a frightened cat in a carrier that opens from the top, open the top as you lay a towel over the opening and the cat. Gently tuck the towel around the cat's sides and lift the cat from the box. Make sure the cat is fully supported by both the towel and your body.

To transfer a cat from one carrier to another — try one of two things, depending on the cat and situation. Face the entry of the carrier the cat is in to the entry of the empty carrier. If there is a difference in the size of the carriers, use a towel to cover any empty space. Often, if you wait a minute or two, the cat may move from one carrier to the other. Carefully close the door to the new carrier and keep a towel positioned to block any openings or gaps as you do so.

For many cats, they are too fearful to move. In this case, line up the carriers so their entries face each other. Carefully, remove the top part of the carrier the cat is in. Use a towel to allow the cat to continue to hide, as well as for safety and to prevent escape.

When the top half of the carrier is removed and the towel is gently over the cat, 'scootch' the cat into the new carrier. Many cats will enter on their own. If the cat does not need to be moved to another carrier and you just needed to look at or examine the cat, simply put the carrier back together with the cat inside.

Use carriers with entries that are large enough for the cat. Many carriers are too small for adult cats. Do not try to jam or wedge a large cat into a small carrier. The pink carrier above is too small for this cat who at the time of this photo is only 10 pounds. The blue and grey medium-sized carrier to the lower right is more appropriate.

A right-sized carrier is a carrier that the cat can easily enter, stand up, and turn around. Before putting a cat into a carrier, place the carrier on a counter-top or table so it is at your waist level or higher. This will make it easier for you to put the cat into it.

When putting a cat into a carrier, pick up the cat from next to or slightly behind her. Remember the football hold. Your arms and body support the cat. Place one hand on the cat's chest to control the front legs as you place the cat into the carrier. Keep your body behind the cat so that the cat cannot back away.

You can use a small kitchen-sized towel to cover the cat's head as you place her into the carrier or place a hand gently on the back of the cat's head or neck. This can prevent the cat from reacting and help to keep her calm.

If you would like to learn more about low stress handling techniques using towels, Dr. Sophia Yin's video, Towel Wrap Techniques for Handling Cats with Skill and Ease, demonstrates seven towel wrapping techniques that can be used on cats for routine handling and veterinary procedures. It is available by clicking on this link <https://cattledogpublishing.com/product/towel-wrap-techniques-for-handling-cats-with-skill-and-ease-low-stress-handling-seminar/>.

Thank you to the following sources for photos and resources for this presentation. Links are provided if you would like to learn more about low-stress gentle feline handling techniques.

Thank you for participating in this webinar, Feline Fundamentals Low-Stress Handling Basics 2. If you would like to reach out, I can be contacted through my website alanastevenson.com and by email.