

<i>Shelter/Behavior SOP</i>	Humane Feline Handling	Shelter/Behavior
<i>Effective Date</i>	<i>Authorized by:</i>	



Name of Organization or Shelter

Standard Operating Procedures

I. PURPOSE

This procedure establishes standardized guidelines for handling cats.

Cats, given a choice, try to avoid conflict. When afraid, they will freeze, flee, or if pushed, fight or panic to escape something stressful. Cats can be aggressive when they experience pain or fear. Use gentle handling techniques to keep the cat calmer. Hissing indicates the cat's emotional state. It is a defensive behavior and not an aggressive one.

When handling cats, look for signs of fear and anxiety. Follow these two rules: "Go slow to go fast" (Stay within the cat's comfortable limits) and "Less restraint means more cooperation."

Why you should not scruff cats.

Scruffing should be avoided and should not be the 'go to' method for working with cats. A cat should never be hung or dangled by the scruff of the neck.

Scruffing may immobilize the cat but since the cat is powerless to move, she will become more fearful and reactive upon subsequent approach and handling. Scruffing increases the risk of injury to the handler and the cat. Scruffing increases intraocular pressure which contributes to cataracts and glaucoma.

If you do need to scruff an aggressive cat, do so gently and so that the cat's entire body is supported or wrapped in a towel. Never hang or carry a cat by the scruff of the neck. Do not scruff a fearful cat who is not aggressive as it will cause the cat to lash out upon subsequent handling, when she otherwise would not.

Most cats can be examined with minimal restraint. The use of towels can protect the cat and the handler. Towels should be thick enough to prevent injury, but thin enough so that you can easily feel and handle the cat.

Handling a cat roughly, pinning the cat, scruffing the cat, being loud around the cat or making quick movements in the cat's presence will increase the likelihood of the cat becoming reactive and the handler getting bitten or scratched. Although handling the cat roughly may work in the moment, the cat will become more defensive and reactive upon future handling.

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It is possible that personnel will find themselves in situations not specifically addressed in this procedure. In these cases, personnel must use discretion and sound judgment, and direct questions to their supervisor.

II. PROCEDURE

Have a Positive Attitude

- Use words and phrases that describe the cat's behavior and that do not negatively label the cat. Choose words and phrases such as "fearful," "hiding," "avoidant," "will not come out of the carrier," "lunging," "hissing," "afraid," or "swatting" etc. Do not use words such as "bad," "nasty," "evil," or "mad."
- Be calm. Move slowly and steadily around cats. The gentlest, most skilled cat handlers should be the ones who work with cats and supervise and teach others.

HANDLING

Approach

- Speak softly. Cats dislike loud, sudden noises and can be easily startled. Avoid repeatedly "shhsh"ing the cat.
- Move slowly, but steadily. Rapid, sudden or quick movements frighten cats.
- Look at the cat, but then look away again or avert your gaze as you approach the cat and during handling. Avoid staring at the cat.
- Stand sideways or angle yourself to the cat as you open cages. Do not stand directly in front of the cat or lean or loom over the cat, especially when the cat is confined.
- Approach cats from next to or behind them. Position yourself so that they are facing away from you when you handle them or pick them up to carry them.
- Most cats need at least ten minutes to acclimate to a room before you handle them. If possible, allow the cat to acclimate or calm down before handling them or performing procedures.

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How to Touch Cats

- Cats prefer be touched on their forehead, on top of the head, around the occiput (bony protrusion at the base of the skull), on their cheeks, neck, and under the chin. Cats prefer light, gentle touch or massage over rapid petting or quick long strokes over their entire body.
- Do not pat or tap cats on the head. If a cat does not want to be petted or does not like how you touch them, they will usually show signs such as pulling away from you, flicking their tail, flattening their ears, or fidgeting.

Holding and Carrying a Cat

- Carry cats similar to how you would hold and carry a football. Support the cat's torso and abdomen. One hand can control the front legs by placing it on the cat's chest. The other can support the cat's torso with fingers positioned under and around the cat's front legs. If a cat is uncomfortable with restraint or you are not familiar with the cat, do not cradle the cat's back legs.
- If a cat is fearful or hesitant, turn the cat away from you or angle yourself so that you are positioned next to or slightly behind the cat. Place a towel over the cat's body as you pick up the cat. When carrying the cat, the cat should be supported by both your body and the towel.
- When handling and carrying kittens, support the entire body. Do not hold kittens by their belly or dangle them in mid-air. This type of handling startles kittens and they will squirm and cry in response. Do *not* hold or carry a kitten by the scruff.

Removing a Cat from the Cage

- Allow the cat to approach you. If the cat appears calm, offer your hand for the cat to sniff and/or give the cat treats. 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. When you hold or carry the cat, support her entire body. You can control the cat's front legs by placing a hand on the cat's chest or by supporting the cat's torso with your other hand under and gently holding the upper forelegs.
- If the cat is fearful and in a cat bed, turn the bed so that the cat is oriented away from you or to your side. Remove the cat and bed together (This is sometimes referred to as a 'cat

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taco.'). The cat can then be carried in the cat bed.

- Use a towel, if needed. A stressed cat can be given a few treats or distracted by a toy before you go in with a towel. Gently place the towel over the cat's head or body as you pick up the cat. The cat's body should be supported by your body and the towel.

Removing a Cat from a Carrier

- Do not dump cats out of carriers or reach into carriers and pull cats out by the scruff of their neck.
- Introduce yourself to the cat. Speak softly. See if the cat voluntarily comes out of the carrier. Wait a minute or two.
- If the cat does not come out of the carrier, remove the top half of the carrier. Do most, or all, of the exam with the cat remaining in the bottom half of the carrier. If the carrier has zippers, do as much as you can while keeping the cat in the carrier.
- Use towels, if necessary. As you remove the top to the carrier, slide a towel over the cat. Do as much as can with the cat underneath the towel while the cat stays in the bottom half of the carrier.
- Weigh the cat in the carrier and then weigh the carrier once the cat has been removed or weigh an equivalent-sized carrier. Alternatively, weigh the cat in the bottom of the carrier (remove the top). Then weigh the top of the carrier separately. Subtract the weight of the carrier top from the weight of the cat and carrier bottom to get an approximate weight for the cat.

Examining a Cat

- Keep activity to a minimum. Too many people in a room and too much background noise will startle and stress cats.
- Place soft towels or a non-slip soft rubber mat on the exam table and underneath the cat. Metal exam tables are loud, slippery and there is no traction for the cat. Cats do better on soft surfaces and when their bodies are fully supported.
- Cats prefer to hide when they are frightened. Hiding is an excellent coping mechanism and important for fearful cats. Use a soft towel to cover a fearful or timid cat in a carrier, when

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the cat is waiting for a procedure, over a cage, and during examination.

- Examine the cat in the position the cat is most comfortable. If the cat prefers to stand, examine the cat while she is standing. If the cat feels more comfortable lying down, examine the cat and perform as many procedures as you can with the cat lying down.
- Begin with the least painful and invasive procedures and save more stressful ones for the end. Cleaning ears and drawing blood are more stressful procedures so should be done last.
- If the cat becomes too heightened or aroused, give the cat a few minutes to calm down before continuing to handle the cat or continuing on to the next procedure.
- When holding and positioning limbs for blood draws and inserting catheters, move the limb gently from above the joint (elbow or patella, carpals, and so on). Do not pull on the cat's legs or paws.
- Keep the cat's limbs within their natural (passive) range of motion. Moving limbs beyond which they can naturally extend or rotate is painful and uncomfortable for the cat, can cause injury, and make the cat more reactive.
- Hold and keep the cat's back legs in their natural position for procedures. Do not stretch or pull on them.
- Do not stretch the cat for blood draws.
- For older cats, use the base of the tail to read blood pressure. Cats who are 12 years or older have some form of arthritis. Do not pull on the cat's legs.
- For cystocentesis, allow the cat to be in the position she is most comfortable.
- Verbally reassure the cat during procedures and while handling.
- Use high-valued food, toys, and treats to positively distract cats during and after procedures. This will create a positive association (or lessen a negative one) during and following any handling. Kittens, especially, can be distracted through some form of food or play.

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Putting a Cat into a Carrier

- Use carriers with entries that are large enough for the cat. Most carriers are too small for adult cats. Do not try to shove a large cat into a small carrier. The larger the carrier entry, the easier it will be. With some cats, it is easier to use a carrier where the top opens and to place the cat into the carrier from above.
- Place the carrier at waist level or higher so that it is easier to put the cat into the carrier.
- Encourage the cat to go into the carrier on his own by placing food in the carrier or by putting a soft blanket or towel in the carrier. If the cat will not go into the carrier, position yourself next to or behind the cat. Pick up and hold the cat similar to how you would hold a football while maintaining controlling of the cat's front legs. Use a small kitchen-sized towel, if needed, for covering the cat's head, or place your hand gently on top of the cat's head or neck. Then place the cat into the carrier. Keep your body behind the cat so that the cat cannot back out of it.

Housing and Placement in Cages and Carriers

- Place fearful and timid cats in the higher cages. Avoid putting fearful, timid, or reactive cats low to the ground or in bottom cages.
- Higher cages help prevent escape and can make handling as well as moving the cat to and from a carrier or to another cage easier and less stressful for both the handler and the cat.
- Cats in carriers should be placed on countertops and higher surfaces. Being low to the ground makes cats feel vulnerable. Cats in carriers should not be kept on the floor.
- Do not keep cats near foot traffic or adjacent to slamming doors.

Feline-Friendly Environment

- Classical or a Zen-type instrumental music will keep cats calmer and create a more soothing atmosphere.
- Close doors on cages and to cat wards gently. Cats have an acute sense of hearing. Loud, sudden noises can frighten cats.

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- Avoid harsh smelling cleaners and alcohol while examining cats. A cat's sense of smell is much more pronounced than ours. Strong chemical odors can overwhelm the cat and increase his anxiety. Chlorhexidine disinfectant solution can be used instead of alcohol for disinfecting instruments and for cleaning examination tables.
- Topically, witch hazel can be used in place of alcohol. If using alcohol, let it dry before proceeding with injections.
- Feliway diffusers can be used in examination rooms and cat wards. Feliway spray should be applied to towels 30 minutes before using them on a cat. The use of Feliway may calm a cat, but it will not prevent a cat from struggling during handling procedures or when frightened. *Do not spray Feliway on or at the cat.*



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References: Alana Stevenson, MS; American Association of Feline Practitioners; International Society of Feline Medicine