AAFP Feline-Friendly Handling Guidelines
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In collaboration with The American Association of Feline Practitioners and
The International Society of Feline Medicine

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Cats Are the Most Popular Pet

- There are 13% more cats than dogs in the US
- 90% of people love their cats
- 78% of people consider their cats to be family members*


But Cats Are Still the Underdog

- Dogs visit the vet more than 2x as often as cats*
- Adult and senior cats are perceived as needing less care than kittens*
- Indoor cats are perceived as needing less care*

* Bayer Veterinary Care Usage Study
**Why Aren’t Cats Getting the Care??**

**Feline Resistance**

- 58.2% of owners say their cat hates going to the vet*
  - Cats go to the vet more often if it isn’t difficult to get the cat into the carrier*
- 37.6% of cat owners say that thinking about taking their cats to the vet is stressful.*
  - Owner dissatisfaction starts before they get to the hospital

*Bayer Veterinary Care Usage Study

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**Goals of Feline Handling Guidelines**

Improve handling to:

- Reduce feline fear, aggression, anxiety, and pain
- Protect and strengthen human-feline-veterinary bond
- Provide better lifelong feline healthcare
  - Increase client compliance and education
  - Prevention and early recognition of medical & behavior problems
- Increase safety, efficiency, and job satisfaction for veterinary teams

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**Overview of Webinar Topics**

- Understanding the cat
- Recognizing fear and anxiety
- Getting the cat to the vet
- A positive practice environment
- How to interact with the cat
Understanding the Cat

- We love our cats, but do we really understand them??
- Misconceptions:
  - Cat owners:
    - Cats are easy to take care of
    - Indoor cats don’t need veterinary care
  - Veterinary teams:
    - Cats are mean, “evil” at the vet hospital
    - Cats need tight restraint
    - Cat people are crazy

Think Like a Cat:
Understanding Cats and Why They React as They Do

- Cats have retained many behaviors of their wild ancestors:
  - Excellent hunters
    - Led to their relationship with people
  - Solitary hunters
    - Can sense and avoid danger
    - Need to protect themselves
  - Hide pain and illness
    - Also to protect themselves

Feline Behavior Concepts
The Flight or Fight Response

If fearful, cats will
- Avoid (Flee or fiddle)
- Hide (Freeze)
- Fight only as a last resort

Allow cats to feel hidden

Cats Are Social Animals

- Their social structure is different from humans and dogs
- When enough food, cats choose to live in social groups, colonies
  - Female cats live together, cooperatively nursing and raising the young
- Cats choose with whom to be social; “affiliates”
  - Affiliates allorub – rub each other
  - Affiliates “allogroom”
  - Preferred areas are the head and neck

How to Work With a Cat

YOU MAKE KITTY SCARED
Each Cat is an Individual

- Genetics
- Environment
- Sensitive period of socialization
  - Definition: the age during which events may have long-term effects on development.
  - Occurs much earlier in kittens than in puppies
  - 2-7 weeks of age
  - Expose to positive experiences and reward/reinforce*
- However, any cat may become fearful if:
  - Loud voices
  - Sudden movements
  - Rough handling

Any Cat Prefers the Familiar

- The unfamiliar
  - Away from home
    - Carriers
    - Car rides
    - Veterinary visits
  - Changes in home
    - New cat or other pet
    - New person in home
- Unfamiliar or loud sounds, voices
- Unfamiliar smells
- Rapid or jerky movements
- Touched in unfamiliar ways

Recognizing Anxiety and Fear

- Fear is a response that enables avoidance of perceived danger
- Anxiety occurs with anticipation of an adverse event because of a prior negative, fearful or painful experience.
The Cat’s Point of View
Understanding Fear and Stress

Frozen in Fear
Aggressive "Bad Cat"
A Content Patient

The act of getting the cat to the vet and all that happens at the practice are unfamiliar – similar to predators in the wild – causing fear.
Our goal is to make our feline patients feel safe and secure.

Cat Posturing

The Calm Cat
• Ears forward
• Pupils not dilated
• Hair flat
• Relaxed body

Fearful Cat - Freeze
• Ears back
• Pupils dilated
• Hair bristled
• Hunkered down
• Tense
Cats Fight Only as a Last Resort

- Because cats are solitary hunters, they must maintain their physical health and avoid fights whenever possible.*
- The primary goal of cat communication is to prevent altercations, and cats fight only as a last resort, when other communications have failed.

*By understanding the cat’s communications and body postures, we can reduce aggression.


Levels of Fear

Preparing the Client and Cat for the Veterinary Visit – *WHY* is this important??

- Cat and owner stress associated with the veterinary visit
  - Reduced feline visits
  - Increased feline diseases
- Patient comfort and reduced fear
  - Fear and fear-associated problems start at home
- Human safety
- Clients will go elsewhere if the experience is bad

What happens if we only tell a client to “put the cat in the carrier”
Client Education: Preparing the Client and Cat for the Veterinary Visit

Teach the principles:
- Cats like the familiar
  - Make carrier familiar
  - Car rides & vet visits familiar
  - Home maintenance procedures and handling
- Stay calm!
  - Cats learn through positive reinforcement
    - Don’t force or push into carrier
    - Reward the positive
    - No punishment

Client Education: The Carrier?

Before the first visit:
- Ask if they have a carrier
  If not, make recommendations:
    - Carriers that can be taken apart in the middle
    - Carriers that load both from the top and the front
    - Hard-sided carriers can be easily seat-belted in
- Ask if they have difficulty getting their cat into the carrier

Client Education – Make the Carrier Familiar

- Start as kittens if possible
- Cats like the security of something around them
- Put the carrier in a room the cat likes to be in
- Add comfortable bedding or clothing of a favorite person
- Toss treats, catnip, or toys into carrier
- Stay calm
  - Don’t force the cat to go into the carrier
  - Let the cat choose to go into the carrier
Make it Familiar

- Use feline synthetic pheromone analog - 30 minutes prior to travel
- Bring familiar items that the cat likes to the veterinary visit
  - Familiar blanket or clothing of a favorite person
  - Favorite treats, toys, catnip
  - Comb or other grooming utensil if cat enjoys grooming
- Fun car trips, including to the vet for treats and weight checks

What Happens if No Time to Train Cat to Carrier

- Calmly place the cat in a small room where can’t hide
- Calmly bring in carrier and place cat through top opening
- Feline synthetic pheromone analog

Don’t chase the cat around the house!!

NPO for Car Trips

- Minimum of 3-6 hours to prevent car sickness
- Fasted sample helps prevent lipemia which can effect lab sample results
- Seat belt the carrier
- To reduce anxiety
  - Alprazolam
  - Don’t use acetaminophen
- To prevent car sickness
  - Cover carrier with towel
  - Alprazolam
  - +/- maropitant*  

Resources for Clients

AAFP Client education brochure
www.catvets.com

Catalyst Council videos:
• Cat Carriers: Friends, Not Foes
• Encourage Cat Vet Visits, I. Rodan
• Tips for taking your cat to the veterinarian, I. Rodan
• Cat Carrier Training, Dr. Jacqui Neilson and Bug
• Day 2 of Cat Carrier Training, Dr. Jacqui Neilson and Bug
www.catalystcouncil.org/resources/video/ and CATalyst Council on YouTube

The Environment:
Any Practice That Sees Cats Can be Feline-Friendly!

Whether an exclusively feline hospital, companion, or mixed animal hospital -
Show clients that we love cats!

Understanding of cats
• Avoidance as protective mechanism
• Cats are not “evil” or “mean”
• FEAR is the most common cause of aggression in the veterinary hospital
• PAIN is also a cause of aggression

Any Practice That Sees Cats Can be “Feline-Friendly”

• Have a separate cat waiting room
• Keep carriers off floor (away from dogs)/cover carriers
• Separate times for cat appointments
• Surgery and dental days for cats only
• Doctors and technicians who work best with cats to see cat appointments
The Exam Room

- If possible, have designated cat rooms
- Try to keep the cat in the exam room for everything
- Have all needed supplies in room
- Keep on fabric or soft surfaces
  - Preferably from home
  - Fleece
  - Stainless steel is slippery and cold
  - Formica is better

Perform Procedures in Exam Room Whenever Possible

- Sample collection
  - Easier on the patient
  - Enhances value
  - Moving a cat to a new environment alerts the cat and increases the BP
- Start with blood pressure if appropriate
  - Preferable to get BP measurements in the exam room instead of taking the patient to the treatment area*

* References:
2. Love L, Harvey R, 2006

Manage Odors

Cats have an excellent sense of smell
Their sense of smell drives many of their behaviors

- Communicate with other cats
- Mark to deposit scent
  - Comfort self
  - Make safe
- Pick up scents that people usually don’t notice
  - Other cats
  - Dogs, etc.
  - Alcohol
  - Cleaning supplies
  - Perfumes
**Feline Synthetic Pheromone Analog**

- Calming effect in stressful environments
- Reduce anxiety, fear, and aggression
- Does not reduce struggling
- Increase normal grooming & food intake if hospitalized

**Uses:**
- Add diffusers to each room where cats may be
- Use spray:
  - On Towels
  - In cages
  - In carriers
  - On uniforms
  - +/- on hands

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**Minimize Visual and Auditory Cues**

- Cats are aroused by rapid movement
- Fearful seeing the unfamiliar
- Move slowly and calmly
- Don’t let them see other animals
  - Cover carrier
  - Take a different route
  - Keep away from clinic cats

- Sense of hearing is more acute than ours

**Speak in soft voices**

- Quiet environment
  - Away from phones
  - Away from loud equipment
  - Use of soothing background music may be helpful

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**Provide Positive Experiences**

- Keep cats calm and comfortable
- Use positive reinforcement
- Reward good behavior
- Offer treats or toys

The Challenges of Cat Cages and Wards

- Fear if see other patients
  - Cat wards
  - Side-to-side cages
- Lack of familiarity and reduced sense of control leads to FEAR
  - Need hiding places to cope better
  - Want vantage points to monitor the environment
  - Space to keep litter away from food, water, and bedding
  - Stress of hospitalization inhibits normal behaviors
- Eating, elimination, sleeping

What the fearful caged cat looks like

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Familiarity and Consistency for Caged Animals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Use cat ’s carrier, bedding, or “house” in cage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regular diet if possible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The cat’s toys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consistent schedule, kennel people, and food*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Provide Places to Hide so Cat Can Choose if Wants to Hide

- What happens if there is not the option to hide
- Provide places that are more desirable for the cat to hide
Optimal Caging Options with Places to Hide and Places to Perch

Stainless Steel or Formica?

Getting a Cat out of a Cage

- Don’t pull the cat out of the cage
- Don’t loom over the cat
- Give the cat a sense of control
  - Let the cat come to you
  - Let the cat go into a carrier
  - Take the cat out along with the cat bed, cat carrier, etc. that is in the cage
Handling the Cat

What Can We do to Make it Less Stressful for the Cat?

- Avoid direct eye contact
- Move slowly; avoid hand gestures
- Be on the same level as the cat
- Never loom over – come from the side
- Speak calmly and quietly
- Stay calm – our emotions can affect the cat

The Exam Room

Whenever possible, get the cat and client into the exam room ASAP

Examine the cat where the cat wants to be examined
- Allows the cat to have a sense of control over their environment, making it less stressful

Interacting with the Cat

- First encounter makes it or breaks it
- Move slowly
  - Safer
  - More efficient and successful
- Least commotion
  - All needed items in exam room
- Allow the cat to remain in the carrier while obtaining history
- Individualize handling
  - Distract kittens with toys
  - Distract adults and seniors with treats or catnip
Other Handling Tips

- Cats prefer to face away from us; let the cat face the client
- Cats feel more secure when leaning against an arm or body while in our laps or as we hold them
- Slow is fast and fast is slow
- Prepare all needed equipment in advance
- The fewer people, the better
- The least restraint is the best

Which is the Best Way to Hold Onto the Legs? Why?

If the Cat Won’t Come out of the Carrier on its Own
Massage or Stroke Around Head or Neck

- The head and neck are preferred areas for physical touch.

Examining Senior and Painful Patients

- Senior patients often have arthritis
  - One study indicates that 90% of cats 12 and older have arthritic changes on x-rays
  - Stiffness upon awakening, slowing down, not jumping to regular places, +/- limping
- Remember - cats are masters at hiding illness.
- Provide "fluffies"
- Don't stretch out if uncomfortable
- Analgesia

Prevent Pain – Remember What Cats Need

- Places to hide
- Comfortable bedding
- Quiet, odor-free
- Familiar scent
  - Clothing of favorite person
  - Synthetic feline pheromone analog
- Gentle handling
- Analgesia – if recognize or suspect pain
What About the Most Difficult Patients?

• Try to break the pattern:
• Think anti-anxiety
  – Alprazolam
• Think analgesia
  – Buprenorphine
  – How many of our patients hurt and we don’t know it?
  – What causes pain in the cat?
• Muzzle to decrease visual stimuli and prevent biting
• Towel techniques
• Sedation or anesthesia if needed

Towel Techniques

For the Challenging Fearfully Aggressive Cat

• Slide a towel between the top and bottom halves of the carrier
• Remain calm
• Sedate if needed
• Analgesia if needed
• Educate the client about what - and why - we are doing
  – We are modeling learning behavior for clients
What About Scruffing or “Clipping”

- Scruffing doesn’t allow a sense of control
- Often increases fear and fear aggression
- Cats are usually calmer and easier to handle if they are not scruffed
- Often safer not to scruff
- Never pick up the cat by the scruff
- Clpnosis also doesn’t allow a sense of control
- May increase fear

So What do You do With THE Most Difficult Patients??

- Remember why they are difficult
  - Fear
  - Pain
  - Never punish, either physically or verbally
- Chemical restraint or anesthesia
  - Increases safety
  - Reduces stress of cat, client, and us
  - Use before cat “loses it”
    - Use if cat is fearful, anxious or aggressive
    - Painful situation where analgesia is not sufficient
    - When other handling isn’t sufficient
- Chemical Restraint
  - SQ or IM – less stressful for patient
  - Use reversible agents when possible
  - Low-dose dexmedetomidine (is reversible) + an opioid to sedate
  - +/- benzodiazepine (midazolam)
    - Increase sedation
    - Muscle relaxation
  - +/- ketamine
    - Further sedation
Preventing Problems Returning Home

- Bring both cats to the clinic at the same time
- Have familiar smell
  - Bedding
  - Feline synthetic pheromone analog
- Monitor reactions of at home before letting the cat out of the carrier
- If needed, separate for 24+ hours
  - If still problems, call
- Remain calm!

Develop a Plan of Action

- Adopt handling techniques that are based on understanding feline behavior to:
  - Reduce feline and client stress
  - Increase veterinary care for cats to improve their health and welfare

Develop a standard operating procedure (SOP) for handling with relatively small and simple steps at each stage of the veterinary visit

www.catvets.com

Questions?
Questions to the Speaker

Please email your questions to webconference@aahanet.org by Sunday, March 25, 2012.

Dr. Rodan will provide written responses to all of the questions and they will be posted on AAHA’s website by Friday, April 6, 2012.

Instructions for CE Certificate

1. To complete the evaluation, please go to the following website:
   http://www.keysurvey.com/survey/414460/1c40/

2. After completing the evaluation, you will automatically be linked to the Continuing Education Certificate. The CE certificate can only be accessed after the evaluation is completed.

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