

# Understanding the Cat and Owner: Getting them Back into Your Practice

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Cats are the most popular pet in the United States and several other countries. However, many owners don't understand their healthcare needs, and veterinary practices often don't cater to what both owners and cats need. You can change that in your practice with steps that will demonstrate your knowledge of and compassion for cats and their people, and help your practice grow in one of the largest niches.

## Understanding cat owners

Cat owners love their cats but they often don't understand them, their healthcare needs, or how to recognize when they are sick. The good news is that they want to do the best for their cats. As veterinary professions, we need to not only understand what is best for the cat, but also for cat owners, because it is both the behavior of the cat and the fallacies people have about them that lead to the lack of veterinary care. We must also understand the stress associated with the veterinary visit – for both them and the cat.

If we listen to clients, we can develop opportunities to resolve their concerns and transform them into aware clients who recognize the value of veterinary care. Bayer Veterinary Care Usage Studies have identified the following based on interviews of thousands of cat owners.

Here is what they say:

- My cat *hates* going to the vet: 58.2%
- Just thinking of taking my cat to the vet is stressful: 37.6%
- I don't take my cat to the vet except for shots: 40.9%
- I would take my cat to the vet if I knew I could *prevent problems and expensive treatment later*: 66%
- I would take my cat to the vet if I was convinced it would help my cat live longer: 53%

This information provides us with opportunities to increase veterinary visits through client education and awareness. Carrier training and making the veterinary practice and patient handling less stressful will reduce that barrier to care. Educating cat owners about the value of preventive care and early detection are critical to increase their awareness and to make educated decisions about their pet's veterinary care.

## Understanding the cat

We must understand the cat to understand respectful and successful handling techniques that prevent injury and stress for all involved.

### Feline protective mechanisms

Cats are solitary hunters, who have retained many of the behaviors of their wild ancestors, *Felis sylvestris lybica*.<sup>1,2</sup> They must maintain their physical health and avoid danger, so that they are strong enough to hunt each and every day. They do so by maintaining their familiar territory in which they have a sense of control over their environment.<sup>3</sup> Having a sense of control, even if it is not exerted, makes the cat more comfortable and reduces stress.<sup>4</sup>

Fear is a normal protective response in unfamiliar situations. As solitary hunters, cats must protect themselves to survive, and therefore possess a heightened fear response.<sup>5</sup> If a suspected threat enters their territory (e.g., a new cat), they respond to the confrontation by avoiding or hiding, with fighting occurring only as a last resort.<sup>6</sup>

Feline communication acts to prevent altercations and to avoid the risks of active fighting.<sup>11</sup> Fighting only occurs when other means of communication have failed. Cats use olfactory, visual, auditory, and tactile communication. Olfactory communication plays an important role in social behavior and marking of territory as their own with a long-lasting signal.<sup>3</sup> The sebaceous glands located around the lips and chin deposit the cat's scent by rubbing or marking on others or objects.

Cats communicate with a range of subtle body postures, facial expressions, and tail positions to diffuse tension and avoid physical contact with unfamiliar cats. Body postures help us identify a fearful cat from a medium-ranged distance. Facial signals, especially changes in pupils and ear position, change more rapidly than body postures and provide more immediate indications of a cat's fear and aggression level.<sup>3,11</sup>

The cat perceives staring (especially by an unfamiliar person) as a threat. As visual people, we may stand in front of and look directly at a cat and induce fear. Standing to the side and not directly looking at a cat that considers us unfamiliar or threatening will reduce fear. Additionally, blinking signals that the cat is seeking reassurance in a tense environment; we can help comfort the cat if we blink slowly or make "winky-eyes" in the direction of the cat. Cats are often calmer if they can hide, eliminating the visual cues.

Tactile communication is common in affiliate cats (cats that like each other). Affiliative behavior includes allorubbing (rubbing against another); they will do this with people too to mark us with their scent in the veterinary practice. Massaging or petting on the head and neck from the side or behind is comparable to affiliative behavior. It is safer than scruffing in addition to reducing fear.

## **Using this information to make veterinary visits less stressful**

We can alleviate many of the stressors of feline veterinary visits if we incorporate the information about who the cat is with what we need to do. This starts with making the carrier and other aspects of the veterinary visit familiar. Recognizing that scent is tremendously important in the cat's world, and using synthetic feline pheromones and eliminating strong scents that are offensive to the cat. Recognizing fear and handling cats to prevent fear and aggression is critical and will be covered in the next lecture.

## **Handling principles based on understanding the cat**

1. Give the cat a sense of control
2. The fewer the handlers, the better.
3. Stay calm and speak in a soft voice.
4. Move slowly to obtain quicker results.
5. Do not stare at the cat, but rather look from the side or "wink".
6. Cats like the familiar – have owner bring what's familiar.
7. Cats prefer to be massaged or petted around the face – under the chin, in the cheek area, and between the ears – always try to do this instead of scruffing or "clipping", which don't allow the cat a sense of control.
8. Cats want places to hide (boxes, towels or blankets, tall-sided cat beds)
9. When cats feel more secure, they also like places to perch to oversee their environment (kitty condominiums, the top of a box, shelf, etc.
10. Punishment usually backfires – cats learn from rewarding desired behavior
11. Stand to the side instead of looming over the cat – we are big and scary! – when getting out of a carrier or cage.

## **Handling through an appointment**

### **History**

If the cat is not highly aroused when placed in the exam room, allow the cat a sense of control by obtaining the history with the carrier on the floor, and with the door open so that the cat can come out and inspect the environment on its own. If the cat is highly aroused, cover the carrier with a large towel – either one from home or one sprayed with feline pheromone analog spray – over the carrier to block the cat's vision of us.

If the owner indicates that they think the cat is painful or if you notice the cat acting painfully while collecting the history, a cursory exam can be done and then buprenorphine given to prevent pain during the rest of examination and sample collection.

### **Examination**

Examine the cat where it chooses to be – on a lap, on the floor, a bench or in the bottom half of the carrier.

Many cats prefer to remain in the bottom half of the carrier for as much of the examination as possible. Some cats do well also on our lap or the lap of the client's as long as the cat is calm in their lap. When we sit on a stool near the client with the cat in our lap, we are now on the same physical level as the client (as most clients tend to sit on the chairs/benches in the exam rooms), which creates the sense of being an equal partner with the client in the care of their cat. This increases value and respect by the client for what we do and how we do it. When we are standing and the client is sitting, the height difference is huge, conveying different levels which can create a barrier to engaging the client. Also, without a physical barrier, such as an exam table between us, the communication is more open.

To prevent both fear and pain, it is best to take the cat out of the carrier only once; for example, the exam can be done in the bottom half of the carrier, ending with the weight. After weighing, collect lab samples if indicated. It is much less stressful for the feline patient if lab samples are collected in the examination room instead of the treatment area. Once a cat has acclimated to one room, the stress of moving to another alerts the cat once again to potential danger, increasing blood pressure and other parameters.

If the client brings in more than one cat for an examination, and the cats are not getting along well in the unfamiliar environment, or if one cat is very stressed, separate the cats into different examination rooms, and work with each individually. Discuss the potential problems and how to deal with them if the cats still don't get along well when they return home.

### **Lab sample collection**

Collect samples with the least amount of people and minimal handling. Usually only one holder is needed. Speak softly or distract with food, treats, or toys. Allow the cat to remain in a natural position, and without stretching or holding legs tightly; this prevents both pain and fear. Have a blanket or something soft for them to lie on, preferably one that smells like home. Older, arthritic, and underweight cats are especially uncomfortable on cold and hard surfaces, and need thick padding or fleece underneath them. Gently wrapping the cat in a towel can increase security.

Senior cats and cats of any age with chronic kidney disease or hyperthyroidism should have blood pressures measurements taken. Blood pressure should be measured before other diagnostic tests, while keeping the patient as relaxed and calm as possible to avoid white coat hypertension. The environment should be quiet, away from other animals and generally have the owner present.<sup>1</sup>

Measuring blood pressure is usually best conducted in the exam room, rather than in the treatment area, because it takes 5-10 minutes

for the cat to acclimate to a new room; obtaining the history and performing the examination prior to blood pressure measurement will take approximately that time, allowing the cat to adapt to the exam room.<sup>1,2</sup>

It is best to collect all lab samples in the examination room to prevent additional fear for the cat. Many clients prefer to watch blood pressure evaluation, venipuncture, and cystocentesis instead of worrying about what's happening to their cat "in the back". It is great client education and increases perception of value. If the client prefers not to watch, they can wait in the reception area while samples are collected in the exam room. When all procedures are completed, allow the cat to return to the carrier if it wishes to while the client is educated about necessary treatments and next veterinary visits.

The above applies as well if fine needle aspirates or samples for a dermatologic workup are taken. Pain relief should be given if these conditions are painful.

### **Analgesia and chemical restraint**

Pain relief should be given to cats with painful conditions, regardless of whether that is what the cat presents for.

Chemical restraint may increase safety and reduce stress for the cat, client and veterinary team. It is always better to use restraint pre-emptively because, once the cat is agitated, chemical restraint is less effective or reliable.<sup>6</sup> Low-dose dexmedetomidine (which is reversible), combined with an opioid is an excellent option for sedation; if more sedation is needed, ketamine can be added.

### **Preventing anxiety at future visits**

Alprazolam and gabapentin are both medications that are helpful to prevent anxiety at future veterinary visits. Gabapentin at 100mg per cat given 90 minutes prior to the veterinary visit is helpful in many cases where cats were still anxious or fear-aggressive with alprazolam.

### **Helpful resources**

AAFP Cat Friendly Practice

AAFP and ISFM Feline-Friendly Handling Guidelines

CATalyst Council Handling Videos

The Best Place to Examine a Cat: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=izUsUH5SRUM&feature=relmfu>

Message to calm an anxious cat: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6-IPmWTa\\_0o&feature=relmfu](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6-IPmWTa_0o&feature=relmfu)

Tips for handling a fearful cat: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dZDSoyMs9Y&feature=channel&list=UL>

Handling a Cat for Lab Sample Collection: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C8iAexzg710&feature=relmfu>

Getting a cat out of a cage: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xr5W91nFK4M&feature=relmfu>

Cats and Carriers: Friends not Foes: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9RGY5oSKVfo&feature=channel&list=UL>

Cat Clicker Training into Carrier with Dr. Jacqui Neilson and Bug:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JRGKJ8FCH94&feature=channel&list=UL> and

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b6Bz6K6HqXg&feature=channel&list=UL>

Tips for taking your cat to the veterinarian:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VAaGJTcX0zI&feature=channel&list=UL>

Rodan I, Understanding the Cat and Feline-friendly Handling, in [The Cat: Clinical Medicine and Management](#), ed., Little S, Pub. Elsevier, pp. 2-18.

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Incorporating behavior medicine into practice is a win-win situation for all concerned. 7. Clients often think that the cat is acting "out of spite" or "getting back at them" and are unaware that the veterinary profession can help with these problems. They may even be embarrassed to discuss such incidents and how they are dealing with them. It is important that we change these misconceptions. Without understanding what is normal, veterinarians cannot diagnose what is abnormal. It is important to determine whether the behavior is a normal behavior for the cat that the owner finds unacceptable, a truly abnormal behavior for the cat, or an inappropriate behavior that the client has inadvertently taught or reinforced in the cat. English News Lesson on Cats: Cats are just as clever as dogs, says study - FREE worksheets, online activities, listening in 7 Levels... This notion has been called into question by scientists in Japan, who have said that cats are as smart as dogs at certain memory tests. Cat lovers, of course, have always known this. Researchers at Kyoto University conducted tests on how well 49 cats could recall or relate to an event from the past "known as an episodic memory. The Japanese team got the felines to eat from one of two bowls. Fifteen minutes later, the cats were tested on their ability to remember which bowl they had eaten from and which remained untouched. The team found the cats could recall what they ate and where, suggestin And in early November, a themed train was put into operation in the metro: its carriages feature portraits of over 70 dogs and cats from 15 shelters. The QR code from each photo leads to a detailed profile of the pet describing its story, character and health status. And relations with them become special, because the cat knows that she was rescued. And in return, she gives a lot of joy, positive emotions. - When we wanted to get a cat, we decided to take one from the shelter. There are many of them there, and every one of them needs a home. The shelter employees understand that the pet will feel better staying with them than with other owners or on the street. I advise anyone who is planning to take a pet from a shelter, to consider this seriously.