

Safe Cat Handling and Restraint

Handling is one of the most important aspects of being able to safely examine a cat or dog. Maintaining a cool head and careful control over a cat's movement limits the risk of accidental injury to you or the cat. During treatment or an exam, you may sometimes need to manipulate a cat's limbs and joints to reach areas such as the underarms and belly. In order to handle a cat safely and properly, you need to understand how their joints move.

Joints are where two or more bones come together. Some joints do not move; some allow slight movement, and some allow for a full range of motion. Cats have three different kinds of joints:

- **Fibrous/fixed joints (ligaments):** Fibrous joints have no flexibility; they are made of dense connective tissue, mostly collagen. Ligaments connect bones in the skull and the jawbone.
- **Cartilaginous joints:** Made of tough cartilage like the thick discs between the spinal vertebrae, cartilaginous joints allow for some, but not total flexibility. The cartilaginous joints in cats are more flexible and supple than in other species, allowing cats to have a greater degree of flexibility in their torsos.
- **Synovial joints:** The most common type of joint; allow for free movement between the bones they join. Nearly all joints in feline limbs are synovial. You will mainly handle the synovial joints of the ankles, shoulders, elbows and knees and the joints of the feet. Be cautious and gentle; notice how the joint naturally moves.

While the joints of cats bend in similar ways to dogs', theirs are more flexible, especially in their spines. Cats can move their spines in both concave (shape of the interior curve of a circle) and convex (shape of the exterior curve of a circle) positions; dogs can only bend their spines in the concave position.

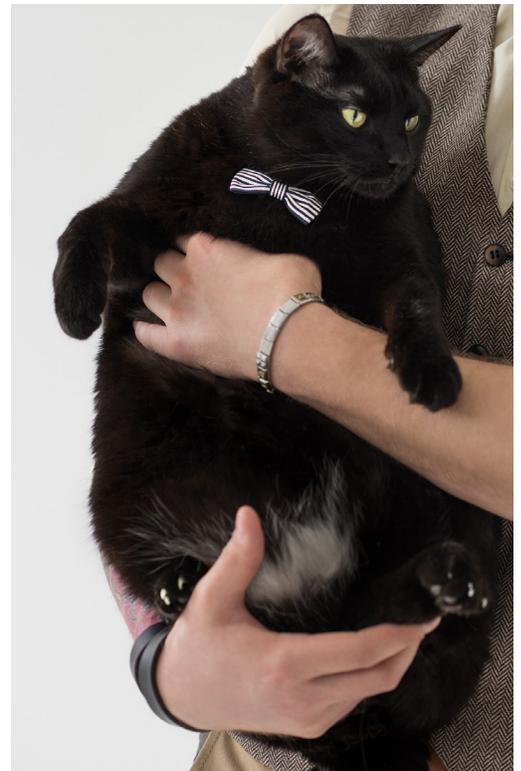
Forcing a joint to bend or stretch in an unnatural position can easily lead to injury, so always remain conscientious of how you are manipulating the cat's joints. When you handle a cat with confidence and consideration for their comfort, you allow them to relax and learn to trust you so that the process can be enjoyable for both of you.

How to Lift a Cat Properly

As a veterinary assistant, you must know how to properly lift a cat to prevent injury and/or upset them. Dealing with cats can be a difficult task. They are very particular when it comes to handling, and even their owners will often have a difficult time lifting them, especially when they prefer not to be.

Some clients will bring their cat to you in a carrier, others will either carry them in and/or have them in a harness. If a cat arrives without any type of restraint, make sure you put a figure-eight harness on them before their owner leaves. There are two basic ways to pick up and carry a cat; the method you use depends on the willingness of the feline. For a calm cat, slide your hand or forearm under the forelegs with your palm facing your chest; place your other hand under their rear feet. Lift while supporting their rump and rear feet. Bring the cat close to your body (*see image right*) to carry them.

For an anxious or reluctant cat, gently "scruff" the back of the neck with one hand and enclose both rear feet in your other hand. Make sure most of the weight is lifted with the hand holding the feet and not the neck. Adult cats should never be lifted entirely by their scruff.



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Tips for Feline-Friendly Handling and Care

Of course, we know that it is just as important for cats to go to the vet as it is for dogs. However, far fewer cat owners than dog owners consistently take their pets to the vet. The reasons behind this are varied, but generally, the inherent nature of cats makes visiting the vet a daunting venture for them and their owners.

In 2012, the American Association of Feline Practitioners (AAFP) introduced a Cat Friendly Practice Initiative aimed at getting American cat owners to do a better job of getting veterinary care for their pets. Similar to the Fear-Free Initiative, all aspects of the initiative focus on making a visit to the vet less stressful for cats.



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Following are tips for providing feline-friendly care in any clinic:

Educate cat owners on how to eliminate a cat's stress while traveling to the vet.

- On the owner's part, this includes helping their cat for positive associations toward their carrier and car travel as early in their pet's life as possible.

Make the physical environment within the clinic as comfortable as possible for cats.

- This means making sure that cats do not have to see or interact with dogs or other animals during their appointment time. Areas where cats wait to be treated should be quiet and dimly lit and have space (off the floor) for carriers to be set.
- To the extent possible, exam areas for cats should be quiet. Cats shouldn't see or hear other animals. Lighting should be dim, and the use of strong-smelling cleaning and medical products should be kept to a minimum.
- Diffusers containing synthetic feline facial pheromone should be used in areas where cats wait, are examined and treated or held in enclosures.

Be flexible about restraint methods, examination areas and the order in which procedures are completed.

- Be open to examining the cat in the space (within the exam area) where they feel most safe. A cat may prefer to be examined while in their carrier (with the top off), or on the floor, etc.
- Avoid making direct eye contact; use a calm and quiet voice throughout examination and treatment.
- Always use the minimal amount of restraint possible; often simply putting a towel over a scared cat's head to block their view or allowing them to remain in their carrier during treatment can calm them.
- Perform less invasive procedures earlier in the exam; perform more stressful procedures later during the exam period.

Sources:

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Using Pheromones in the Veterinary Setting to Calm Dogs and Cats

Animals, including dogs, cats and people naturally release odorless chemicals that help members of the same species communicate their emotional states. These chemical messengers are called pheromones. Most pheromones are detected through the sense of smell, and according to Tristram Wyatt in *How Animals Communicate Via Pheromones* at americanscientist.org, “A pheromone signal elicits a specific reaction in the receiver, for example, a stereotyped behavior (releaser effect) or a developmental process (primer effect).”

Veterinary professionals can put the calming power of positive pheromones—chemicals that signal an animal is happy and relaxed—to work in the clinic by using commercially available synthetic pheromone products in diffusers in different areas of the clinic or spray form.

For cats, VCA Animal Hospitals recommend Feliway®, a synthetic copy of the feline facial pheromone cats use to mark their territory. According to DVMs Tammy Hunter and Cheryl Yuill of VCA Animal Hospitals in the online article *Medication to Reduce the Stress of Veterinary Visits*, “By mimicking the cat’s natural facial pheromones, Feliway® creates a state of familiarity and security in the cat’s local environment. As a result, it can help comfort and reassure cats while they cope with a challenging situation, and help prevent or reduce the stress caused by a change in their environment.” Pet owners can spray Feliway® on the bedding in their cat’s carrier and the car to make travel to the vet more relaxing.

For dogs, products by Adaptil transmit comforting chemical messages to help dogs cope with stressful situations.

Sources:

Wyatt, T. *How Animals Communicate Via Pheromones*. Retrieved from <https://www.americanscientist.org/article/how-animals-communicate-via-pheromones>

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