



REDUCING FELINE STRESS IN THE CLINICAL ENVIRONMENT

A GUIDE FOR VETERINARY PROFESSIONALS



FELINE SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS

Responsible cat ownership means maintaining both the physical and emotional well being of the cats in our care. More emphasis should be placed on the importance of meeting cat's behavioural needs to bring it in line with our excellent standards of healthcare.

It is up to us, as Veterinary Professionals to advise our clients as best we can so that they have a better understanding of their Cats needs. It's also vital that we are doing everything we can to meet those needs within the veterinary practice setting..

When we have Cats hospitalised in practice, we should be aiming to provide the highest level of care.

This means not only providing the best medical treatment that we can, but also ensuring that they feel as comfortable and at ease as possible. It is important to look after the emotional health as well as the physical health of our feline patients, if we want them to recover as quickly as possible from illness and injury. We know that an increase in stress delays recovery in several ways:

- > Reduced appetite leads to inadequate calorie intake
- > Reduced mobility leads to constipation
- > Reduced food and water intake leads to dehydration
- Reduced grooming and maintenance behaviours leads to depression
- > Increase in vital signs such as heart rate, BP and Temperature can lead to misdiagnosis of disease
- > Increased strain on cardiovascular system can exacerbate underlying disease
- > Increased volume of drugs needed to achieve sedation and anaesthesia



HEARING

It is important for us as veterinary professionals to understand how Cats see the world, in order for us to handle them in a way that doesn't provoke their natural fight or flight instincts. We must remember that they have evolved as very efficient predators, so their senses are far superior to ours. They also have a very strong survival instinct and do whatever it takes to avoid a perceived threat and protect themselves from injury. By building their trust, ensuring that they feel safe and handling them in a respectful way, we can provide the best standard of veterinary care to our feline patients.

Let's consider the Cats' senses and how they might react to the various stimuli in vet practice.

Cats can hear sounds far beyond our range of frequency and their hearing is around

four times as sensitive as ours. Cats can hear higher pitched noises better than humans and dogs, as they are designed to hear small prey animals and accurately locate them by moving their pinnae in the direction of the noise. Their ears are controlled by thirty-two muscles, which can move and rotate independently of each other to detect their prey. This means that they can be easily frightened by all the different sounds that they hear in practice, not just other animals but all the machinery such as washing machines, infusion pumps, ringing phones and people.

It is important to consider this when you are working with cats, particularly those more timid patients. There are some sounds, which are impossible to remove such as monitoring machines, but we should try to be as quiet as possible. If you have metal kennels, think about how loud it must sound for the cat inside when the doors are banged shut. Ensuring that the kennel is lined with a towel or blanket will help to reduce the noise level inside a metal kennel.



VISION

As Cats can see well in dim light, up to seven times better than us, it can often be beneficial to turn off harsh and bright light in the cat ward, in order to settle a nervous or stressed patient.

Feral Cats can be particularly sensitive to the bright lights in a veterinary environment, so this should be considered when they being admitted for neutering and treatment.

Cats are sensitive to movement and can become more reactive if rapid movements are used. Cats find a direct stare very intimidating, so we should avoid this whenever possible.

A slow blink between cats is a reassuring gesture and works well when trying to make friends with a nervous Cat.

Considerations in Practice

Try and minimise visual cues that may lead to anxiety. Keep other patients away from the cat's line of vision. When possible, provide a separate feline entrance and feline waiting room or area. Cover cat carriers with a blanket or towel and minimise harsh lighting.



SMELL

A Cats' nose contains up to ten times more olfactory epithelial cells than ours and so it's very sensitive to smell, both good and bad. Odours are detected by specific receptors that lie within the epithelium of their nose, whereas pheromones are detected by a special additional olfactory organ, called the VMO (Vomeronasal or Jacobson's').

The VMO is initially located by two holes behind the upper incisors, which are directed into two fluid filled, blind ended passages situated in the hard palate. The VMO enables the cat to analyse pheromones in their environment and their epithelial receptors allow them to process odours. Cats will perform what is known as the 'Flehman Response' when they are trying to process a pheromone. This can look really unusual to us, but is perfectly normal behaviour for a Cat.

Considerations in practice

Cats are very sensitive to the smell of cleaning products and other substances such as surgical spirit, so be careful to minimise the use of spirit on a cat's coat.

The reason they dislike a topical flea product being applied, is usually due to a combination of the alcohol content that is used to make the product evaporate and the strong smell of the actual product. Minimise odours by cleaning surfaces, washing hands and removing lint between patients.

Cats are macrosmatic- their sensitive sense of smell drives many of their behavioural responses. Some odours eg. air fresheners, disinfectants, rubbing alcohol, blood and unfamiliar clothing may cause anxiety or fear.



TOUCH

Even the friendliest of Cats' tend to have 'No Go' areas on their body where they do not wish to be touched. Most cats' prefer to be touched around the head and chin, where the scent glands are located. Each cat is individual and although stroking a cat along it's back may be acceptable for some cats', other cats will respond negatively, especially if they are not familiar with you. Touching cats' paws, legs or on their abdomen will often induce a negative reaction.

It is worth noting that when a cat rolls over, this is not an invitation to touch their tummy, although some cats do enjoy a good belly scratch. Cats do this in the presence of others that they are closely bonded with, whether it's another cat or their owner. It is a display of trust and acceptance. It is also breaking their trust if you touch an area that is vulnerable.

Considerations in Practice

As much as possible, have equipment needed for examination and testing in the exam room before handling the cat. To minimise the negative effects of gestures and noise, have all your materials prepared. Use silent clippers or scissors.

Think 'Go slow to go fast' For most cats, using a slow approach is more efficient in achieving the results you want. Adopt a calm, positive demeanor and work at a consistent pace.

Open the door of the carrier while taking the history, to allow the cat to choose whether it wants to venture out on it's own..

Rely on the cats response (body language) to determine your own behaviour, if needed break longer procedures into steps to prevent escalation of fear. If the cat begins to show fear, slow down or take breaks from handling to prevent escalation of arousal.

Brush up on how to recognise early signs of feline arousal.



TO SCRUFF OR NOT TO SCRUFF?

Scruffing cats is an area of contention, although less and less people are scruffing routinely, which is great. The charity international Cat Care has started a campaign to encourage veterinary practices to make the 'Scruff Free' pledge. Scruffing is sometimes used when veterinary staff feels that this is the only way they can restrain a cat without being injured, but if a situation has occurred where force is being used for restraint then alternatives should always be considered.

Remember that cats' need to feel in control of what is happening to them, so scruffing them causes great distress and can be terrifying if they are already feeling vulnerable.

It is often mistakenly believed that holding a cat by its scruff will induce the 'Limp Kitten Reflex'. This is no longer present in adult cats and they have less flexibility in their necks and are much heavier. Bear in mind that queens stop carrying their kittens around in their mouths after a few weeks of age.

Scruffing is uncomfortable for cats' and can even cause pain and bruising. The only occasions when an adult cat would be grabbed by the scruff of the neck is either during mating, fighting or being attacked by a predator. None of these are scenarios we should be mimicking and definitely won't induce a calm, relaxed state.

This practice is now considered by feline experts to be unnecessary and not in the cats' best interest. There are other, more effective ways to handle the cats in our care, which we cover in great detail on the Online CPD Course.

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Get on board and learn how to integrate the
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ONLINE COURSE INFORMATION

The Feline Fear Handling and Behaviour Accredited Online CPD Course, is aimed at ALL Veterinary Practice staff who want to excel at Cat care and decrease unnecessary stress in their feline patients. With content covering both clinical and non-clinical aspects of feline veterinary care and packed with practical tips and advice on how your practice can deliver a five star service to cats and their owners.

Many cat owners are reluctant to visit the vets unless absolutely necessary, due to high levels of stress experienced by both Cats and owners. There are many stages of the veterinary visit that can result in fear.

This course will help you and your practice in providing a feline friendly service, to attract new clients, retain existing clients and encouraging more frequent practice visits.

Unit 1: Environmental needs of Cats

- * Understanding the Cat and fears surrounding the Vet visit
- * Overview of basic environmental needs of cats
- * How we can provide these in Veterinary Practice
- * Educating owners on environmental needs in the home
- * Feline social systems and communication

Unit 2: Feline Fear Free Handling

- * Stress reduction in the clinical environment
- * Feline fear free handling principles
- * Educating clients on feline travelling and post hospital re introduction

Unit 3: Common Feline Behaviour Problems

- * Understanding Feline Behaviour
- * Overview of Behavioural Welfare
- * House Soiling
- * Feline Idiopathic Cystitis
- * Multi-Cat Households