

## Handling exercises for an aggressive cat

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### Handling exercises for an aggressive cat

Aggressive cats can cause serious injury. These exercises are aimed at getting your cat used to being handled without becoming aggressive. Sessions should be very short and always terminated before the cat becomes agitated.

#### Body language

- Learn how to read your cat's body language and predict when tension is rising.
- Signs of increasing arousal and risk of aggression include:
  - Tail twitching
  - Flattened ears
  - Stiffened shoulders and legs
  - Dilated pupils.

#### Aggression during handling

If your cat begins to show aggression while being handled:

- DO NOT touch the abdomen or other sensitive parts of the body
- Resist the temptation to pull your hands away rapidly, as this can cause the cat to tighten its grip which may tear your skin
- The most appropriate reaction is to freeze. Wearing protective gloves and thick sleeves is recommended during treatment sessions.

#### Principles

- The primary aim is to work gradually to the situation where the cat is on your lap unrestrained.
  - Gently encourage your cat on to your lap, or nearby, *without touching the cat*.
  - Once this has been achieved, your cat can be conditioned gradually to accept increased levels of restraint and handling, and eventually to accept being lifted from the ground.
- Have realistic expectations: intense physical handling is not rewarding for most cats.

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- It is useful to use food rewards:
  - Treats should be of sufficient value to be perceived as a reward by your cat
  - Limiting access to these treats only to treatment sessions helps increase their perceived value.

### **Exercises**

- In the early stages of treatment, a positive association with your presence is achieved by offering the food reward without any request for physical interaction.
- As treatment progresses, your cat should be rewarded for increasingly direct contact with you.
  - Initially, this may merely be sitting or standing nearby without touching the cat, who shows a relaxed body posture and ear position.
  - When this occurs regularly, soft touches to the head and/or neck (only 1–2 strokes) can be initiated.
- If the cat remains calm, a reward is given.
- If the cat becomes distressed, return to the previous level of interaction that did not cause an aggressive response.
- Only when the cat shows no signs of arousal or distress should you progress to the next stage in the sequence.