

Is scruffing the best way to handle an upset cat?

August 15 2019, by Stephanie Borns-Weil, Michelle Damon



In adult cats, scruffing triggers fear and stress rather than relaxation. Credit: Ingimage

Many of us were taught that "scruffing" a cat—or grabbing the animal by the loose skin at the back of the neck—is not only an effective mode

of restraint, but also causes cats to relax. The thought behind this is that kittens relax when their mom carries them by the scruff.

Unfortunately, that argument is flawed. Mother [cats](#) only carry kittens by the scruff for the first few weeks of life. They can do that because kittens have a reflex in which their bodies go totally limp when picked up by the scruff—a reflex that is lost by adolescence.

In adult cats, scruffing triggers fear and stress rather than relaxation. The only time an adult cat is held by the scruff is during mating—if a female in estrus, or "heat"—or when under attack by a predator. Clinically, what is often seen as "relaxation" in a scruffed cat is actually behavioral shutdown, or learned helplessness that occurs when an animal experiences a very high level of fear and stress.

There are other, better ways to work with cats whose stress prevents them from cooperating with the care they need. A gentle hand on the head behind the jaw can stabilize a worried cat without overly restricting its movement. An Elizabethan collar (aka the "cone of shame") may allow a veterinarian to examine a fearful cat with minimal restraint. An "out of sight, out of mind" approach in which a towel is draped softly over a nervous kitty's head works well for some feline patients.

The most important part of managing a stressed or fearful cat is observing and accurately interpreting his or her [body language](#). Cats often tell us how they feel with [body](#) language long before they resort to aggression. A pause in treatment, a few soft words, or a towel may be all it needs for a calm examination.

Provided by Tufts University

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