

## Guide to Picking Up a Cat

**Pet Pride of New York, Inc. has compiled this handout to provide information to volunteers and pet owners of the correct way to putting a cat at ease, picking up, holding and putting a cat down. We want to do all we can to insure our cats are handled properly which in turn will reduce their stress and most of all eliminate the chance of injury to you and the cat. Please review this guide and if you need assistance or clarification ask any one of our staff**

New cat owners often have no idea how to handle their cats correctly. It is very important to pick up a cat in the correct manner, since picking up a cat the wrong way could make the cat very nervous and uncomfortable, or even damage it. On the other hand, picking up a cat correctly can help to ensure a secure and happy relationship between the cat and its owner. Therefore, the right way to pick up a cat is something which every new cat owner should learn.

Mother cats pick up their kittens by the scruff of the neck, and hold and transport them this way. This is fine for very young kittens, up to the age of about three months. But once a kitten has grown beyond this stage, it can be dangerous to carry it this way. A fully grown cat is far too heavy to be picked up this way, and you could damage its neck muscles by picking it up in this manner.

Children, and even some adults, often hold a cat around its middle, and try to carry it with its legs dangling. This is uncomfortable for the cat, and is in any case a very awkward way to pick up a large cat. Cats can react to this method of handling by struggling or even trying to scratch.

How, then, should you pick up a cat? Actually, some cats do not care; you can cradle them like babies, or they will jump on to their owners' shoulders. But in general, for most cats, the best way is to put one hand under the cat's body behind its front legs, then support the back legs and hindquarters with the other hand. That way the cat is fully supported and comfortable. Many cats held in this way will enjoy putting their paws on their owner's shoulders. They will then let you know they are happy by relaxing and maybe purring.

Of course, some cats do not like being picked up, even if you are handling them correctly. It can be very frightening for a nervous cat not to be completely in control, and even some bolder cats dislike having all four paws off the ground. If this is the case, do not try to force the cat, or hold it against its will. Again, this is a way to get yourself scratched or bitten. It is best to allow a cat to do things in its own time and at its own pace. So, if you really want to have a lap cat which enjoys being held, pick it up now and then to get it used to the idea, but always let it get down when it wants to. That way, the cat may in time learn to enjoy being picked up...but it may not. With a cat, nothing is guaranteed, every cat is different, and some cats will never like being picked up.

## Putting a Cat at Ease



Approach the cat. If you want to pick up a cat, then you should first approach it in a way that lets it know you're coming. This can mean talking to it softly, letting it see you, or just making your presence known in some way.

- If you pick up your cat from behind without letting it know you're coming, he's likely to get scared and to feel panicked and unsafe.
- Some experts say it's best to approach your cat from the left or right side because coming at your cat head-on may seem like too much of a threat.
- Never attempt to pick up cats you find on the street without carefully assessing the cat and its behavior. It can be feral and potentially dangerous. It is best to only try to pick a cat up if you have experience with it



Introduce yourself to the cat. It can take time for cats to warm up to you, even cats that you own. Once the cat knows you're approaching, you should be friendly and loving with the cat so it gets ready to be held by you. Most cats introduce themselves to other cats by nuzzling their faces, so you should do the same, focusing on gently petting the cat's cheeks, forehead, the area behind their ears, or even under their chins, if it is comfortable with you.

- This gentle petting can help your cat feel safe and loved and ready to be picked up.
- If your cat is feeling a little bit wound up, this can also help calm him or her down. It may take a bit of time to make your cat feel at ease



Make sure the cat wants to be picked up. Most cats will be able to give you a definite sign that they don't want to be picked up. Though you can slowly calm them down and earn the trust of domestic cats by petting their heads, you shouldn't try to pick up a cat who is either irritated or just not in the mood to be picked up. If the cat tries to run away from you or bites or scratches you, or just starts swatting at you, then it may be time to try to pick up the cat later.

- It is especially important to teach children who want to pick up a cat these warning signs. You want them to only pick up a cat who is feeling calm and relaxed and who trusts them. You don't want a child to end up getting scratched by a cat who doesn't want to be held.

## Holding a Cat Correctly



Place one hand under the cat's body, behind its front legs, if you are sure that the cat is accepting of being picked up. Gently move your hand under the cat's body, just below its front legs, so you have the support you need when you begin to pick up the cat. The cat may resist this or not like it right away, so you should move along and use that second hand soon afterwards.

- It doesn't really matter whether you use your dominant hand to support the cat below its front legs or under its hindquarters; it depends on whatever makes you feel more comfortable.
- Some people actually tuck the front legs together and place the hand under the two legs instead of below them.



Place the other hand under the cat's hindquarters. Now place that second hand under the cat's back legs, giving plenty of support to its legs and bottom. You can almost think of this as cradling the cat with one of your hands. Once you've gotten your hands in position, you can get ready to pick the cat up.



Gently lift the cat. Now that you're holding the cat with both hands, just gently lift the cat up, towards your chest. Try to make contact with the rest of your body as early as you can when you lift it up. This can help the cat feel more secure early in the process. If the cat is too heavy to lift up from the ground, you may be better off picking it up from a table or an elevated platform.



Hold the cat against your chest. Once you've picked up the cat while supporting it with both hands, you can hold it against your chest, so most of its body is touching your body. The back or side of the cat's head can rest against your chest, too.

- In general, the cat's posture should be fairly straight instead of having the cat sag against your chest, with its head and neck craned downward. This is uncomfortable for the cat and may cause it to struggle and scratch you.
- You should always pick up a cat with its head above its body. Never pick up a cat upside down!
- Of course, some cats like to be held differently, especially if it's your cat and it's more comfortable around you. Some are perfectly fine being cradled like babies while others even like placing their hind legs on your shoulders.

## Putting a Cat Down



Know when the cat no longer wants to be held. Once the cat starts shifting around, moving, or even meowing or trying to escape your grasp, it's time to set the cat down. You don't want to hold the cat against its will, as this will make the cat increasingly uncomfortable and it will also feel threatened.

- Some cats don't like to be held for all that long, so if you sense that the cat may be less than pleased in your arms, it's time to let it go.



Gently place the cat down. Don't just throw down the cat the second you feel the little guy is uncomfortable; this may lead the cat to lose its balance or to land awkwardly. Instead, lower the cat down until all four of its paws are on the ground before you comfortably release it.

Of course, some cats will just jump right out of your grasp, so you can be prepared for that, too.



Do not scruff the cat. Though mother cats carry their kittens by the scruff, you should not try to scruff a cat, especially after it is three months old or so. At that point, the cat will grow too big, and scruffing it can really hurt the cat and cause muscle damage, as the cat will be too big to be adequately supported by the scruff.

- Though you or a vet may need to scruff the cat to get it to take medication or trim its nails they never hold the cat off the examination table by the scruff.



Make sure a child has close supervision while picking up a cat. Kids love to pick up cats, but if they want to do this, you should instruct them through every step of the process. Most importantly, make sure the child is big enough to comfortably pick the cat up. If the child is too small, then he or she may be better off holding the cat while sitting.

- Once the child picks up the cat, make sure to keep an eye on them so you can tell the child when the cat wants to be let go. This will help to keep both the child and the cat from being injured.

## Notes

- Some cats simply do not like being picked up. Don't force it. In that case, pick up the cat only when it's necessary, like taking it to the veterinarian. Pick up your cat occasionally so he/she doesn't associate being picked up with the veterinarian.
- Pick cats gently with arms. Don't pick up with just one arm on its stomach as this can be uncomfortable and make the cat struggle to get down.
- Approach the cat calmly and slowly without making sudden movements. Then crouch down slowly and let the cat sniff or study you. If the cat thinks you're not a threat it will walk over.
- Make sure to approach the cat calmly and with no sudden movements, or else you might scare the cat away.

## Warnings

- Always remember the dangers of being bitten and scratched.
- Picking up a cat by the scruff is highly discouraged. The cat can be seriously injured if not picked up by the scruff correctly, and so can you, for this position gives the cat much space to turn around and bite/scratch you.
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- Do not hold the cat on their back in a baby position unless you know the cat doesn't mind this position. This makes the cat feel insecure and trapped, and it might panic and end up scratching you. Always hold the cat in an upright position against your body for a more secure hold.
- Don't pick up a cat without getting to know it a bit first, and never pick up a stray or wild cat.
- If you are scratched, wash it out with soap and water, and use a topical antibiotic. If you receive a cat bite do the same and consult your physician as cat bites can quickly lead to serious infections.