

Animal Research Review Panel Guideline 27-C

Research Animal Rehoming Guideline - Cats

Introduction

This guide is designed to support the implementation of the Research Animal Rehoming Guidelines and can be used by everyone involved in the use of cats for recognised research purposes. It provides specific guidance on the assessment of research cats for rehoming. This guide aims to:

- assist in the assessment of whether the physiological condition and behavioural attributes of the cats indicate that they can be rehomed with only minimal, transient impact on their wellbeing
- prioritise the welfare of the cats and the safety and satisfaction of the public
- ensure cats being rehomed are fit for their intended purpose, healthy and up to date on all standard preventative care
- ensure rehoming conforms to national, state, and local legislation and regulations.

The rehoming of cats kept for research by accredited research establishments and the holders of animal research authorities is now mandatory. This was introduced via the Animal Research Amendment (Right to Release) Bill 2022 to amend the Animal Research Act 1985, which came into effect on 25 November 2022. Part 6A of the Act outlines the requirements for the mandatory rehoming of cats kept for research.

Approach to rehoming

Research establishments may institute their own rehoming program, or they may partner with one or more external rehoming groups. Before assessing animals for rehoming, it is essential to decide on the avenues for rehoming, taking into consideration:

- internal resources to manage the rehoming of the animal
 - agreements in place with external rehoming groups
 - availability of a suitable owner or responsible organisation to:
 - maintain the animals
 - provide routine husbandry procedures
 - assist with special needs of individual animals
 - the capacity (number of animals) that can be rehomed via the research establishment's own rehoming program and via external rehoming groups.
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Establishing good communication with rehoming groups can be beneficial as they can provide advice on:

- the likely success of rehoming
 - best methods of rehoming (such as pairing or bonding animals)
 - preparing the animals before they are released from the research establishment
 - identification of special cases and care strategies where an animal may need assistance to transition from the research environment
 - information/animal profiles needed to assist in rehoming.
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It is recommended that the research institution, rehoming organisation and prospective owner review the relevant legislation prior to any cats being rehomed. Current NSW animal welfare legislation, standards and guidelines are available at the NSW DPI [Animal welfare regulation, Dogs and cats](#) and [Selling or giving away a cat or dog](#) webpages.

During the research project

Planning for the eventual rehoming of animals involved in research should be integrated into the animals' care plan from the beginning of their involvement in any study. The rehoming coordinator should ensure that appropriate monitoring of the programs of socialisation, habituation, environmental enrichment and training are occurring during the research project to increase the chance of successful rehoming. These programs should be outlined in the accredited research establishment's procedure for the preparation of animals for rehoming. The rehoming coordinator should ensure early remedial action is taken, if possible, where an animal is deviating from the desired outcomes of those programs.

Periodic behavioural assessments should be carried out and recorded by animal care staff during the research project. There may be benefits for team morale in involving staff in the rehoming process – e.g. by forming a small rehoming committee. Staff should record individual animal behavioural observations, to be used when assessing the suitability of animals for rehoming. Where these observations reveal animals are stressed, efforts should be made to remove or reduce the stressors if possible.

Cats should receive all applicable routine prophylactic treatments, including vaccinations and parasite control.

Following conclusion of use

If animals are to be desexed and this has not occurred prior to the commencement of, or during, the research project, then determination of whether this is required should occur at the conclusion of the research project.

A final assessment of animals should not be undertaken until the animals have been given time to recover in a suitable environment that provides for normal species-specific behaviours. See [International Cat Care](#) for some useful resources.

Prior to making a final assessment, efforts should also be made to rehabilitate animals with known problem behaviours or that have health conditions that temporarily make them unsuitable for rehoming. It should be noted that rehoming organisations may be prepared to take on or assist in rehabilitating such animals.

Physical assessment of cats

Cats should be assessed by a veterinarian as being physically healthy before rehoming. A physical assessment should consider:

- general demeanour
- movement and mobility: should walk with normal mobility and range of movement
- neurological soundness: general reflexes (sight, hearing), not ataxic (uncoordinated)
- body condition score, for example, a score out of 5:
 1. Emaciated – ribs, spine and hip bones obviously visible
 2. Thin – ribs and top of vertebrae visible, with obvious waist. No palpable fat on rib cage
 3. Ideal – well-proportioned muscle and fat over the ribs, spine and hip bones
 4. Overweight – ribs, spine and pelvis palpable with difficulty. Waist not obvious. Fat obvious on spine and base of tail
 5. Obese – ribs difficult to feel under fat. Obvious abdominal distention
- coat and skin: look for signs for alopecia, ectoparasites, inflammation, lumps, growths, fungal infections, lesions, trauma and coat matting
- respiratory tract: sneezing/sniffles, coughing, nasal discharge. No issues on auscultation
- eyes: should be clear, bright and symmetrical, with normal pupil response and be free of discharge
- gums: pink, capillary refill time less than two seconds
- dentition: no obvious issues with teeth, bite or chewing
- ears: should have no discharge, inflammation or strong odour
- limbs: no obvious lameness, swelling or pain on palpation
- nails: trimmed and neat
- general heart and lungs field auscultation/exams: no issues
- any history of diarrhoea, vomiting, inappetence or unusual drinking or urination
- feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV) and feline leukemia virus (FeLV) status
- any other abnormality.

The significance and appropriate management of any abnormal findings must be determined with veterinary advice. Base rehoming decisions on the expected impact on the cat's long-term quality of life.

Important information about the individual cat, such as health care history, must be provided to the new owner of any animal rehomed. Microchip details should be updated as soon as possible.

New owners should be encouraged to seek advice about care, management and training issues from veterinary practitioners or other people with appropriate expertise.

Behavioural assessment of cats

Cats assessed as physically sound should be behaviourally assessed prior to rehoming, to gauge their likelihood of adapting to post-research life.

It is important to consider the context in which this behavioural assessment takes place. For an animal that has little experience of novel environments and unfamiliar people it would be reasonable to expect it will find many environments unsettling. If it recovers quickly and is actively engaged with its normal behaviour towards humans and their environment, it may be more resilient and therefore more suitable for rehoming.

Where possible, assessment of animals should take place in an environment outside normal territory and housing. Where possible, conduct behavioural assessments on animals that are not stressed to better understand their suitability for rehoming.

This assessment should be undertaken by people that are familiar with species-typical behaviour (usually a suitably qualified animal care staff member and a veterinarian). It should take into account the history of behavioural assessments carried out and recorded over time by animal care staff since the commencement of the research project.

Reasons for conducting behavioural assessments include:

- assessing animals for rehoming
- assessing what kind of environments may be suitable for the animal (e.g. homes where they can be separated from small children or other animals)
- understanding the temperament and needs of the animal
- exploring whether the animal displays any behaviours that have bearing on their rehoming.

A behavioural assessment should assess whether the cat:

- voluntarily approaches, or chooses to remain near, familiar and unfamiliar men, women and children
- rubs and/or bumps against familiar and unfamiliar people
- allows an unfamiliar person to touch/pat it
- meows, purrs, and shows general interest in people
- allows an unfamiliar person to pick it up and hold it
- explores and settles in a novel environment
- attempts to bite or scratch people if being patted
- hisses, growls, retreats or hides from people
- attempts to bite or scratch other cats

- hisses, growls, retreats or hides from other cats
- has a history of spraying or urination that would be inappropriate in a new home
- is vigilant
- shows signs of stereotypic or compulsive behaviour, such as stalking or chasing of carers or conspecifics.

Presence or absence of one of these behavioural characteristics should not by itself ordinarily preclude rehoming. Potential recipients who are aware that an animal does not possess preferred behavioural characteristics may still wish to rehome it.

It is the responsibility of the establishment to decide on the applicability of specific temperament assessment tools to its situation.

The response of the cat is best recorded as a description of behaviour (e.g. hissed, growled, or lunged), rather than an interpretation of the behaviour or emotion (e.g. angry, scared, excessively reactive or aggressive) so that the cat is judged as objectively as possible.

A cat with undesirable behaviours can often be rehomed satisfactorily when the recipient has been informed and is prepared to accept such behaviours. Experienced recipients often have the capacity to improve such behaviours.

Maximising opportunities for human-cat interactions that are conducive to a positive effect in the cat are important for optimal welfare and the likelihood of adaptation to a home environment.

Behaviour can change dramatically after rehoming. Stressors tend to be reduced living outside of a research establishment - mostly due to the fact that animals can usually exhibit a greater range of natural behaviours in the rehoming environment and housing.

References

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