

Training Cats to Love Getting Injections*

By Dr. Sophia Yin

OVERVIEW

We can train animals to love procedures and other things that they dislike or even hate by combining the process of **counterconditioning** with **desensitization**.

With **classical counterconditioning** we train the pet to associate the handling with things she likes such as food, treats, petting, or play so that she's in a positive emotional state rather than feeling fearful or angry. We generally combine counterconditioning with **desensitization**, meaning that we start by introducing the handling or aversive stimulus at a level that the pet barely notices and gradually increase the level. The goal throughout the process is that the pet always acts as though she doesn't even notice the handling or stimulus that she previously disliked.

With **operant counterconditioning**, we train the pet to perform a behavior that's incompatible with the undesirable behavior. Ideally the pet earns a reward so that she's simultaneously learning a positive association with the situation. For instance, we may reward a pet for remaining stationary and calm while you perform a given procedure.

Part 1: Train the cat that the syringe is associated with good things.

If the cat is already fearful when she just sees the syringe, then you'll need to first train her to associate the syringe with good things.



Fig.A

Fig.A, Step 1: Start by placing the syringe in or near the cats food. If she won't go near the food bowl with a syringe there, then place the syringe farther away from the bowl.



Fig.B

Fig.B, Step 2: Next, feed the cat food off the syringe; use it like a spoon. When the cat sees you bring out the syringe, and looks as happy as she does when you're bringing out food, you know the counterconditioning was successful.

*To see video depicting this protocol go to www.AskDrYin.com.

This page is excerpted from, *Low Stress Handling, Restraint and Behavior Modification of Dogs and Cats*, by Dr. Sophia Yin. (www.nerdbook.com)

For more information about animal behavior, go to www.AskDrYin.com, where you can view free and subscription-based videos that provide step-by-step behavior modification instructions.

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Part 2: Train the cat that having her skin handled for injection is fun.



Fig.C, Step 1: In this photo, the technician has placed canned cat food into a syringe with the tip cut off.



Fig.D, Step 2: After about 3-5 seconds of eating, remove the food and stop handling simultaneously. This way it's clear to the cat that having the skin handled is what gets her the treats.



Fig.E, Step 3: Gradually get rougher—as rough as you'd need to be for an actual injection. But always stay under the pet's threshold of pain, because you want only a positive association. The cat should always be focused on the food and act like she doesn't notice that you are handling her skin. You can also handle the skin 1 or more seconds before you pair the handling with treats.



Fig.F, G, Step 4: Eventually, you can change to operant counterconditioning. Handle the skin first, then give the treat. Be sure to give the treat and stop the handling before the cat starts to get irritated. You can also use a marker word like "yes" said in a distinct voice a split second before you give the treat so that the cat knows a treat is coming. (It's best to have taught this marker word first by saying "yes" and immediately giving a treat 20 to 40 times.)



Fig.H, Step 5: Now get the cat used to having the skin not only handled but also jabbed with a capped needle. Do this while she's eating, or do it and when she holds still, say "yes" and feed immediately afterward. When it's time for the cat to receive an injection feed treats while giving the actual injection.

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