

Clinical Evaluation of the Feline Neurologic Patient

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KEYWORDS

• Seizures • Myelopathy • Encephalopathy • Cat

KEY POINTS

- Efficient, gentle, and safe handling of cats can result in complete neurologic evaluations and accurate neuroanatomic localizations.
- The clinic environment should facilitate the examination by providing a quiet and secure environment for the cat.
- When direct examination of a cat is not possible, the practitioner should fully use indirect methods of examination and video recordings of cat behavior or clinical signs.
- Direct examination of a cat should proceed in a logical order, where the most useful tests are performed early on in the examination.



Video content accompanies this article at <http://www.vetsmall.theclinics.com>.

INTRODUCTION

Animals with neurologic disease can be challenging for any practitioner. This task may seem even more daunting when the patient is a cat. As a result, veterinarians' level of stress in dealing with these patients and the emotional environment they create for their patients, themselves, their staff, and clients can set up failure or success. A few accommodations in preparation for cat examinations and adaptations in the neurologic evaluation can result in a successful visit that is defined by low stress, accurate neuroanatomic localization, and appropriate diagnostic plan.

The preparation of the clinic, staff, and doctors involves developing an understanding of the unique qualities of feline behavior and altering the environment, handling, and examination accordingly. Cats with neurologic disease may present additional obstacles due to the relative lack of tolerance for the length of and restraint in classic veterinary neurologic evaluations.

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In the authors' experience, examination of the neurologic cat has key differences, such as limiting repetition, using tests that are reliable, and focusing the examination on what is most likely to yield results that determine a neuroanatomic localization. The authors' practical steps to preparing for the examination and the indirect and direct components of the examination in the cat are discussed.

GOALS OF THE EXAMINATION

1. Provide an environment and handling techniques that promote a low-stress interaction
2. Using indirect techniques whenever possible
3. Acquiring information from the cat using minimal handling and restraint
4. Localizing the neuroanatomic lesion

PREPARATION STRATEGIES

The Nature of the Cat

The inherent nature of feline patients is that of a solitary hunter that fights as a last resort if flight from a confrontation is unsuccessful or not possible. Veterinarians are in control of many factors in the veterinary clinic that could result in a cat identifying a need to run or confront. These include noise level, odors, quick movements, presence of other species such as dogs, the brightness of a room, brusque or aggressive handling, and agitated handlers. Even when the best prevention strategies are used, cats may still display behavior that indicates they are threatened.^{1,2}

Clinic Admission

Although a trip in the car can be a joyous occasion for a dog that could result in a trip to a lake or dog park, cats are unlikely to be in a car at any time other than when they visit a veterinarian. They are not conditioned to being placed in a carrier and transported. By the time cats arrive at a veterinarian's office, they may already be in some state of stress from the car ride to the clinic. The additional stimuli of a visit to the hospital from the noises, smells, and other elements encountered in the lobby of a clinic can be of further threat to a cat.

To limit the negative factors that can detract from the visit, several steps should be taken:

1. Discuss with clients that all cats must be in their own carrier at the hospital and cannot be removed from the carrier until they are moved to the examination room.
2. Allow more time for appointments where the chief complaint is consistent with neurologic disease.
3. Provide a separate waiting area and entrance for cats when possible.
4. Guide the client and cat into an examination room as quickly as possible if a separate waiting area is not available.
5. Maintain 1 or 2 examination rooms that are for feline patients only.
6. Control the light, odor, and noise in the room by providing soft light, synthetic feline facial pheromone analogue, and keep the doors closed.
7. Provide equipment in the examination room to make the cat more comfortable, such as a thick towel on the examination table, catnip, laser pointers, cat treats, and toys.¹⁻⁶

Recognition of Feline Behavior

A well-trained veterinary team can recognize when a cat is fearful or combative and can change an approach when these signs are first identified, rather than reacting after

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