



## Training Cats to Love Getting Injections

### Overview of Behavior Modification Terms and Processes

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 then 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 behaviors that are incompatible with the undesirable behavior. Ideally the pet earns rewards and enjoys performing the behavior 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 or have her hold her nose to a target while she is handled.

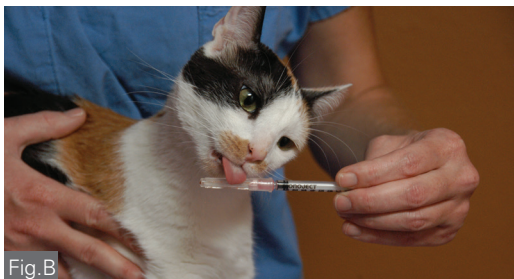
Further description, examples and pictures of these terms and processes can be found in the *Low-Stress Handling, Restraint and Behavior Modification of Dogs & Cats* book and DVD set.

### Part 1: Classical Counterconditioning - Train your cat that the syringe is associated with good things.

Some cats who have had bad experiences with injections have learned to fear the sight of a syringe. If your cat is wary of syringes you'll need to start by training her to associate the syringe with good things.



**Fig.A, Step 1:** Start by placing the syringe in or near your cat's food. If she won't go near the food bowl with a syringe there, then place the syringe farther away from the bowl. The goal is that she immediately goes to the food even with the syringe is nearby.

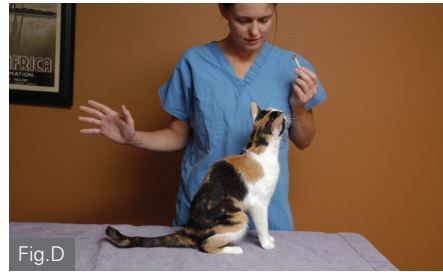


**Fig.B, Step 2:** Next, feed your cat food off the syringe; use it like a spoon. When the cat sees you bring out the syringe, and looks as happy as she does when you're bringing out food, you know the counterconditioning was successful.

## Part 2: Classical Counterconditioning - Train your 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. Feed treats while handling the skin. Handle it firmly but gently enough so that your pet remains focused on the treat.



**Fig.D, Step 2:** After about 3-5 seconds of eating, remove the food and stop handling simultaneously. This way it's clear to your cat that having the skin handled is what gets her the treats. Part 3: Operant Counterconditioning: Switching reinforcement for good behavior



**Fig.E, Step 3:** Gradually get rougher, but only as rough as you'd need to be for an actual injection. Always stay under your pet's threshold of pain because you want only a positive association. Your cat should always be focused on the food and act like she doesn't notice that you are handling her skin.



**Fig.F, G, Step 4:** Eventually, you can change to operant counterconditioning. Handle the skin first, then stop handling and give the treat. Be sure to stop the handling and give the treat before your cat starts to get irritated. You can also use a marker word like "yes" said in a distinct voice as you stop the handling and therefore, 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



**Fig.H, Step 5:** Now get your 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 your cat to receive an injection feed treats while giving the actual injection.

After training your cat to enjoy having her skin handled, it will surely make getting vaccinations and injections a more pleasant experience for both you and your pet.