Community cats should not be handled when conscious and therefore require special care when they’re recovering from spay or neuter surgery.

When you pick up community cats from the clinic or veterinarian’s office, they should have already regained consciousness (and may or may not be moving around in the trap). They should be in the same traps you dropped them off in and the traps should be completely covered with a sheet or towel. Ensure that the trap doors are secured before exiting the building. Here’s a rundown of further recovery instructions.

**Initial recovery**

- Cats should stay dry, inside and in a temperature-controlled area after surgery. Anesthesia interferes with an animal’s ability to regulate his or her own body temperature, so it’s important that we help these cats stay warm in the winter and cool in the summer.

- Cats hallucinate as the anesthesia wears off, so keep them away from people, loud noises and especially dogs. Any sort of sound, light or touch may annoy them greatly. Cats may growl, claw at invisible objects and generally act unpredictably for up to 10 hours post-surgery. They will become more active and alert as the evening goes on. Keep them in a quiet, dark place, such as a bathroom, closet or basement. Cats are independent animals and generally come out of anesthesia without human help.

- Keep the traps covered to reduce the cats’ stress. Never open the trap doors or allow the cats out of the trap. Do not stick your fingers into the traps or attempt to handle the cats for any reason.

- For the most part, leave recovering cats alone but check in every hour or two to monitor their progress. Watch for signs of distress, such as vomiting, bleeding, labored breathing or gogginess more than 24 hours after surgery. If you see any of these symptoms, seek veterinary assistance immediately. If you cannot reach a veterinary office, call us. We may be able to help.

- If a cat is vomiting while still unconscious, the head should be turned to avoid choking. Sometimes this can be achieved by gently tipping the trap to the side to change the cat’s position. When tipping the trap, be careful that you don’t harm the cat by jostling her too much.

- Ear-tipping is a universally accepted method to identify a spayed or neutered and vaccinated community cat, and involves the removal of the tip of the left ear (though in some parts of the country, the right ear is tipped). Occasionally, a cat will shake his head while waking up from anesthesia, opening up the ear-tipped area and causing some blood to splatter. This is typically only a small amount and tends to stop quickly.

**In-trap care**

- The cats regain consciousness approximately 6-8 hours after surgery. Once a cat’s eyes no longer have a glazed-over appearance and he’s sitting in an upright position, you can offer him a small amount of food (three ounces for adults, one-and-a-half ounces for kittens). Canned food is recommended because of its high water content; if you’re holding the cat for 24 hours or less, there’s no need to provide water separately. For kittens six months or younger, feed them as soon as they regain consciousness (monitoring for any vomiting) and again 8 to 12 hours later.

- To feed a cat in a trap, there are a couple of options. You can purchase or borrow a trap fork (also called a divider or isolator), which is used to separate the cat from the door area, and then open the door and slide the food in. Another option is to put the food on a paper plate on the floor, gently pick up the trap and press it down onto the food so that it squishes up through the wire bottom of the trap. This method makes it more difficult for the cat to eat, but it’s better than no food at all (and ensures your safety).
• It is generally recommended that cats be held for 24 hours after surgery, although they can sometimes be returned within 12–24 hours, as long as they are fully awake and alert. Lactating mothers should be returned as soon as possible (i.e., once they are fully awake and alert). They will immediately return to the spot where they left their kittens and will be able to continue nursing their young.

• If a longer recovery period is needed, you can use a feral cat den (or feral cat box) placed in a larger cage; this allows the cat to have a safe place to hide (and provides an added measure of safety for you). The den’s sliding acrylic door will line up with the trap’s rear door for easy transfer. Once the cat is inside, the den is placed in a large cage or crate, along with a litter box, food and water. The cat goes in and out of the den via the circular opening on the side. A pivoting door is used to cover the opening when cleaning or feeding.

Returning cats

• Release the cat in the exact location where she was trapped. Do not relocate the cat; it might be seen as abandonment and the cat may die. Make sure the spot you pick for release does not encourage the cat to run toward dangerous conditions (e.g., a busy street, dogs).

• Keep the trap covered until you are almost ready to release the cat. Then, quietly uncover the trap, allowing the cat to take in her surroundings (i.e., recognize her home) for 15–30 seconds. When you are ready to release the cat, simply hold the trap with the rear door facing away from you and open the door. If the cat doesn’t race out of the trap immediately, tilt the trap so that the end closest to you is raised slightly. You might also try tapping lightly on the trap to encourage the cat to leave. Again, never put your hand in the trap.

• Just FYI: We use dissolvable stitches, so they do not need removal.

• Also FYI: Male cats might still act as if they wish to breed; it can take up to 30 days for their testosterone levels to drop following surgery.

• If a released cat is friendly, you can check the incision site every other day for excessive swelling, discharge or redness. Incisions rarely get infected or open up, but if you see signs of either of these, contact a veterinarian. If you cannot reach a veterinary office, call us.

To find out more about Best Friends’ cat initiatives, go to bestfriends.org/felines or email catinitiatives@bestfriends.org.