

How to Clean a Cat Cage

Cleaning a cat cage is something shelter workers do every day. It's a relatively simple task, but you'll need to take your time and follow the steps in the proper order. Do it hastily and you may do more harm than good. Thoroughly clean each cage at least once a day and do "spot checks" on your cats' accommodations to make sure everything's spotless. A clean cage will minimize the spread of disease and will reflect the level of care that your shelter provides each animal. An improperly disinfected cage invites health problems in cats and may even increase the animals' stress level. Remember also to clean walls, windowsills, and especially floors at least once daily.

Plan cleaning and other activities with "life-stage groupings" in mind: Clean the cages of kittens first, adult cats second, and sick or injured cats last. Use a separate set of cleaning equipment for each life-stage group or thoroughly disinfect the items after every step.



1: Make a Move

Remove the cat from the cage and place her in a clean cage or carrier. Ideally, your shelter should set aside one empty cage for every cat in your care, so that each cat can be transferred from the dirty cage to the clean cage every day. If your shelter houses cats in carriers while cleaning, disinfect the carrier after each use to prevent the spread of disease.



2: Empty the Place

Remove every item from the cage, including food and water dishes, litter pan, blanket, and toys. If newspaper is used to line the cage, dispose of it daily. Wash dishes and pans, soak them in disinfectant according to label directions, then rinse and air-dry each item prior to reusing (or use a dishwasher to accomplish the same task). Blankets should be cleaned daily in a washing machine. Toys should be kept with the same cat throughout his stay, and then disinfected or disposed of afterward.

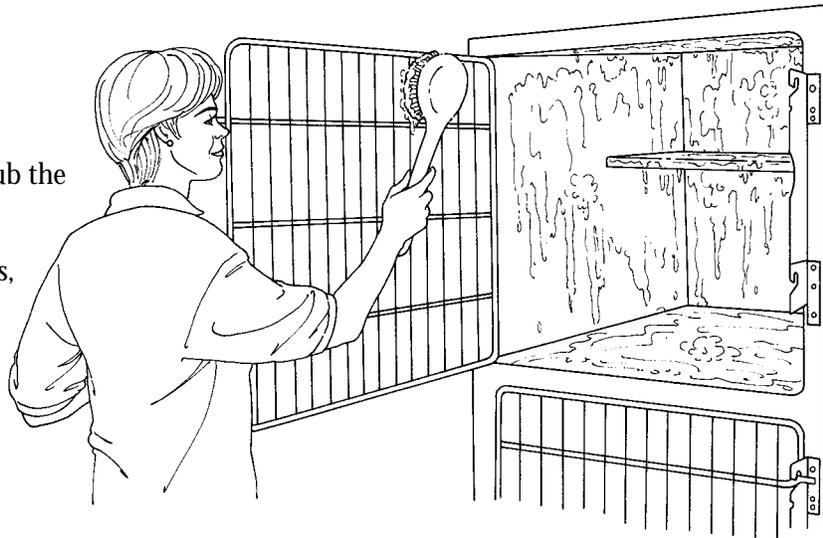


3: Just Add Water and Spray

Now, disinfect the cage. Read the product label carefully and be sure to dilute disinfectants according to the instructions. (Be especially careful to dilute bleach and thoroughly rinse surfaces after its use because bleach may corrode metal cages, ruin clothing, and even irritate cats' nasal passages and upper airways.) Thoroughly apply the solution to all surfaces of the cage, including the cage door.

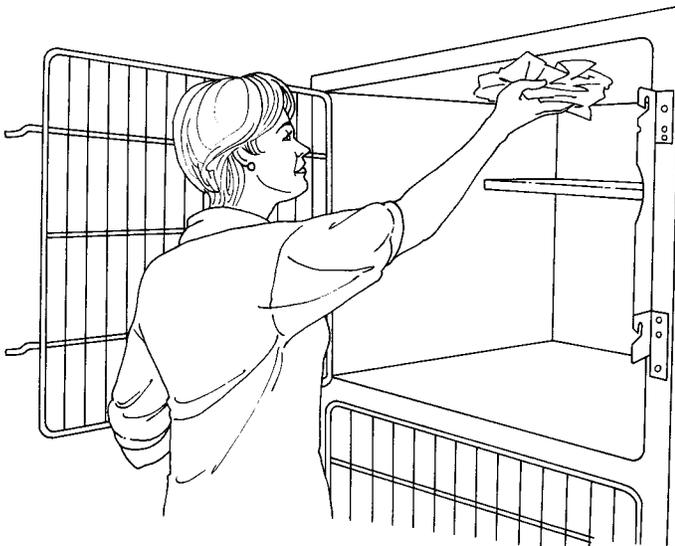
4: Give 'em the Brush Off

Use a hard-bristled nylon brush to scrub the floor, walls, and ceiling of each cage. Don't forget to scrub and disinfect the front and back of the cage door, hinges, latches, the top of the cage, and the surfaces between cages. The solution needs time to work its magic, so allow it to stand for the time specified by the manufacturer.



5: Dry and Dry Again

Use a squeegee or paper towel to dry the cage as thoroughly as possible, then wait a few minutes to allow the cage to air-dry completely.



6: Add the Finishing Touches

Provide about five or six layers of newspaper, bedding, a clean litter pan, food, fresh water, and a toy.



Spot-Cleaning a Cat Cage

BY NANCY LAWSON AND KATE PULLEN

For years shelter experts and veterinarians have emphasized the importance of daily disinfection of cat cages—and for good reason. With the constant arrivals and departures of seemingly half the animal kingdom, shelters are busier than international airports. A facility that's anything less than immaculate is a disaster waiting to happen: the grime left behind by the nose of one kitty could be harboring an opportunistic germ just waiting for the chance to pounce on its next victim.

Warding off such easy modes of disease transmission has long meant pulling cats out of day-old setups—along with their toys, newspapers, food bowls, and litter boxes—and disinfecting every crevice of the cage while bowls and pans head for the dishwasher and newspapers and food head for the trash.

But where to put kitty amid the cleaning frenzy?

One option is to assign each cat a cardboard carrier that will be either thrown out or sent home with him when he's adopted, but the extra handling involved requires disinfecting your hands twice and risks further stressing out your feline guests.

Reserving two cages per cat allows you to move them from their dirty abodes to already clean ones during disinfection, but that method may be hard to explain to members of the public who wonder why a shelter with empty cages would still have to euthanize.

And rotating cats around from cage to cage—even to those that have just been cleaned and disinfected—is a practice that's been implicated in the spread of disease.

No method is perfect, but one thing is clear: There is more than one way to clean a cat cage. And in the last few years, one of those ways has evolved into something long shunned by those trying to protect cat health: spot-cleaning.

Though it was originally used most often as a way to feed and pick up after cats whose aggressiveness or fearfulness made them hard to handle, spot-cleaning is now the preferred alternative to daily disinfection



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in some facilities. Shelter workers who employ this method work around the cat while cleaning out his cage, waiting to disinfect until after the cat has been placed in a new home or euthanized.

When done correctly, spot-cleaning can be less stressful on cats, and in at least one documented case it even helped reduce the incidence of disease (see “Kitty Comforts,” *Animal Sheltering*, Jan-Feb 2005). Like all creatures, cats exhibit a strong link between emotional health and physical well-being, so many animal care professionals suspect that allowing a cat to stay in the same cage and smell the same scents will help him cope better in strange environments.

While alleviating a scaredycat’s fears, the minimized handling is also likely to curb the possibility of passing along a harmful germ from cat to cat. An added benefit: If you’re really efficient, you’ll save valuable minutes on the cleaning of each cage.

Spot-cleaning is not for everyone—and shouldn’t be done if it can’t be done properly. Every operating procedure must be evaluated based on the design of a facility, the level of staff resources, the overall health of the animals, the number of animals cared for, and the goals of the organization. But if you think you might want to implement spot-cleaning even on a trial basis, follow these tips for getting started.

Start With a Cart

Performing room service and maid service for all your kitties every day requires the sleight of hand of a professional waiter and the proficiency of a head chef cooking for a party of 50. Keep tools at the ready to help simplify these drive-by cleaning tasks.

A rolling cart with shelves will enable you to employ a “salad station” approach. Fill the cart with all the ingredients of a happy home: a full bin of dry cat food, a pile of fresh towels or newspaper, a small stack of clean bowls, a container for dirty towels and dishes, and a watering can with a single-pour spout that will allow you to refill water bowls on the spot instead of running

across the room to the sink for each cat.

Attach a large movable trash can to your cart for collecting old food and used litter and towels, and also take along a 55-gallon drum full of fresh cat litter.

Contain the Kitty

Some kitties may hang the “Do Not Disturb” sign when they see you coming and curl up in a fearful ball, but your presence might trigger the flight response in other cats. If you’re not lucky enough to have double-sided cages that let cats hide while you clean, create makeshift refuges using simple cardboard boxes or paper bags.

Cats who see your arrival as a chance for a jaunt around town will challenge your motor skills; learn to use one hand to occupy the kitty or gently block his passage and the other to grab all the soiled items out of the cage.

For super-adventurous kitties, ambidexterity will not be enough. Keep disinfected or disposable cardboard carriers on hand—one for each escape artist.

Decide What to Leave In, What to Leave Out

If the food and water bowls are in reasonable shape, with no crusted bits or visible grime lining the edges, you don’t have to remove them each day (unless you’re serving wet food). Just fill the food bowl using a scoop, and toss the day-old water out before replacing it with the fresh stuff from your watering can. Keep a small stack of clean, disinfected bowls on reserve on your cart, though, in case you come across a messy eater or a sick kitty.

Ideally, litter should be dumped each day—using the same scoops to clean pans is asking for trouble. Even if you have multiple scoops that you disinfect between cages, you just won’t have time to do all the things required for proper disinfection: scrubbing, soaking in bleach for at least ten minutes, and rinsing thoroughly.

But if you don’t have a regular, cheap supply of litter or if you have so many cats that dumping litter each day seems impracti-

Disinfection Resources

For more information about protocols, products, and recommended disinfectable materials for use in the shelter, check out these resources, all of which are available online at www.AnimalSheltering.org:

“Kitty Comforts,” *Animal Sheltering*, Jan/Feb 2005

“Outbreak of Drug-Resistant Salmonella at an Animal Shelter,” *Animal Sheltering*, Nov/Dec 2004

“The Right Stuff,” *Animal Sheltering*, Sept/Oct 2004

“The Disinfection Connection,” *Animal Sheltering*, Jul/Aug 2003

“Keeping Your Cats Healthy,” *Animal Sheltering*, May/June 2001

cal, you can take a shortcut when encountering relatively clean boxes—by using disposable, clear plastic food-service gloves to pick up offending items from the litter pans. The gloves can be thrown out and replaced before moving on to the next cage, reducing the possibility of passing along pathogens.

Donning gloves throughout the day for drive-by removals will also minimize the presence of unsightly waste products and reduce odors that may bother both the public and the kitty.

If staffing and resource levels dictate that you must use scoops, use stainless steel tools that are disinfectable. Have at least ten on hand and label them by number so you can use them in consecutive order, making sure to let each sit in the disinfection bucket for at least ten minutes before it’s reused. Be sure to change the water several times during cleaning so the level of contaminants doesn’t overwhelm the bucket’s disinfecting power; remove any scoops that become too soiled with caked-on debris.

If the litter pan itself is dry and free of diarrhea, you don’t need to replace it with a new one; just add fresh litter after dumping the old stuff into your mobile trash can.

Shake out still clean but crumb-ridden towels and place them back in the cage, but remove and replace any wet towels and newspapers with fresh resting items for the kitty. Leave clean cat toys, replacing only those that are dirty.

Accommodate the Need for Speed

As you progress from one cage to the next, and from one day to the next, you'll develop

your own rhythm, learning to evaluate a cage quickly and serve your kitties adeptly.

But to save as many steps as possible from the get-go, try your hand at removing dirty items in one fell swoop. Crusty food and water bowls, for example, can be stacked on each other and tossed into a dirty litter pan along with soiled towels, meaning you only have to reach in once during the removal process.

Keeping items of high demand closest to you on the cart—and putting the less fre-

quently used ones on the bottom shelf—will help you save time and energy in reaching for the things you really need at every cage.

De-Deck the Walls and Floors

If you have a budding artist on your hands who's decided to fingerpaint his whole cage with the contents of his stomach and bottom, you'll need to fully disinfect now instead of waiting until the kitty goes home with his new family.

But if there's just a smudge here and there, use a fresh paper towel with water on it to wipe off the soiled spots. Also use paper towels to sweep spilled litter into a dustpan or onto the yet-to-be-cleaned floor.

Avoid using chemicals during spot-cleaning; they are unsafe for kitty paws, mouths, and digestive systems.

Just Give Them a Sign

Once a cat has been removed for adoption or euthanasia, it's time to fully disinfect. (See "Disinfection Resources" on page 17 for articles on recommended protocols.) But don't make the mistake of walking off without giving coworkers some indication of the status of the cage. Otherwise, another staff member may come along, spot a cage that's ostensibly clean even when it isn't, and place a new kitty in there.

Avoiding this snafu is as easy as clipping a laminated red card to the door; this color-coding system will alert other staff that the cage has yet to be disinfected.

A subtler form of communication is one that can be built into standard operating procedures. Staff can send a kind of smoke signal to coworkers by placing items in a certain way; for example, after a kennel caretaker disinfects and cleans a cage, she can get the space ready for new arrivals by setting a full litter box in the corner, adding toys, and putting food and water bowls upside down in the center to indicate the cage's "freshly cleaned" status.



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