



Animal Care Tech Note

Handling and Husbandry of Neonatal Nondomestic Cats



The Animal Welfare Act (AWA) and regulations set standards of care and treatment for animals used in research, exhibited to the public, or transported in commerce. These standards apply to all covered animals, including those with needs specific to their age or species.

Nondomestic cats in the neonatal period—aged 4 weeks (28 days) or younger—have special handling and husbandry needs. The following is guidance to help licensees and registrants provide care and treatment for these animals that meets the AWA regulatory standards.

Neonatal Health Considerations

Cats aged 4 weeks or younger lack a fully functioning immune system to fight off disease and infection. During the first few weeks of life, they obtain most immunity from



their mother via antibody-rich colostrum in the mother's milk. Neonatal cats are also unable to regulate their body temperature. At this young age, they depend completely on their mother and other external sources for warmth.

Care and Handling Guidance

Neonatal cats should be housed with their mother for as long as possible after birth to promote good health. Because of their limited immunity, their health is at risk if they are exposed to other animals or offered for public contact.

Until these animals can regulate their body temperature and have a fully functioning immune system, they must be housed in a controlled environment. This means a heated, clean, and sheltered enclosure (such as a nursery) or a clean, sheltered enclosure with the mother and any healthy siblings. Neonatal cats must not be exposed to any form of public contact, including public feeding or handling.

AWA Regulatory Standards

Exhibitors, registrants, and dealers must handle and care for neonatal nondomestic cats consistent with the above guidance to comply with AWA requirements for veterinary care and handling. The regulatory citations for these requirements are below:

- 9 C.F.R. § 2.40(a): Each dealer or exhibitor shall have an attending veterinarian who shall provide adequate veterinary care to its animals in compliance with this section.
- 9 C.F.R. § 2.40(b), (b)(1), (b)(2), and (b)(4): Each dealer or exhibitor shall establish and maintain programs of adequate veterinary care that include: (1) The availability of appropriate facilities, personnel, equipment, and services to comply with the provisions of this subchapter; (2) The use of appropriate methods to prevent, control, diagnose, and treat diseases and injuries, ... (4) Adequate guidance to personnel involved in the care and use of animals regarding handling, ...
- 9 C.F.R. § 2.131(b)(1): Handling of all animals shall be done as expeditiously and carefully as possible in a manner that does not cause trauma, overheating, excessive cooling, behavioral stress, physical harm, or unnecessary discomfort.

- 9 C.F.R. § 2.131(c)(1): During public exhibition, any animal must be handled so there is minimal risk of harm to the animal and to the public, with sufficient distance and/or barriers between the animal and the general viewing public so as to assure the safety of animals and the public.
- 9 C.F.R. § 2.131(c)(3): Young or immature animals shall not be exposed to rough or excessive public handling or exhibited for periods of time which would be detrimental to their health or well-being.
- 9 C.F.R. § 2.131(d)(1): Animals shall be exhibited only for periods of time and under conditions consistent with their good health and well-being.
- 9 C.F.R. § 2.131(e): When climatic conditions present a threat to an animal's health or well-being, appropriate measures must be taken to alleviate the impact of those conditions. An animal may never be subjected to any combination of temperature, humidity, and time that is detrimental to the animal's health or well-being, taking into consideration such factors as the animal's age, species, breed, overall health status, and acclimation.



For More Information

To view the full text of the AWA and the Animal Welfare Regulations, refer to the *United States Code*, Title 7, Chapter 54, Sections 2131–2159 and the *Code of Federal Regulations*, Title 9, Chapter 1, Subchapter A, Parts 1–4.

If you have questions, contact the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Animal Care staff at (970) 494-7478 or animalcare@usda.gov.