

TNR & COLONY CARE

What Is TNR? A Caretaker's Guide to Trap-Neuter-Return

How Trap-Neuter-Return works, step by step, from feeding schedule to return, and what to have ready before trapping day.

By Catt County Cat Nippers • Reviewed October 15, 2026 • 2 min read • 3 cited sources

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What TNR is

Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) means humanely trapping the cats in a colony, having them spayed or neutered, vaccinated and ear-tipped by a veterinarian, and returning them to the place they live. A caretaker keeps feeding and watching the colony afterward.

Sterilized colonies stop producing litters. The ear-tip, a small straight cut on the tip of one ear made under anesthesia, lets anyone see from a distance that a cat has already been through TNR and should not be trapped again.

Before trapping day

1. Count the colony. Note each cat's coat, size, and whether any are pregnant, nursing, injured or very young.
2. Feed on a schedule: the same time and place every day, and pick up leftover food instead of leaving it out. Cats that expect food at a set time are much easier to trap.
3. Book surgery first. Arrange the clinic appointment (or contact us for a voucher) before you trap, so cats are not held longer than needed.
4. Prepare a warm, quiet, covered holding space (a garage or spare room) where cats can recover in their traps.
5. Borrow or buy enough humane box traps for the number of cats you plan to catch, and practice setting them.

Trapping

Withhold food for about 24 hours before trapping (always leave water). A hungry cat is far more likely to walk into a trap. Bait each trap with strong-smelling food at the back, set it, and stay nearby but out of sight.

As soon as a cat is caught, cover the trap with a sheet or towel. Covering calms the cat. Never open a trap to move a cat or try to handle it.

Surgery and recovery

Keep cats in their covered traps in the holding space until surgery and through recovery. Most adult cats are held about 24 hours after surgery; follow your clinic's instructions, which may be longer for some females.

Return each cat to the exact spot where it was trapped, in daylight if possible, and keep feeding on the usual schedule.

Do not trap if a mother is nursing very young kittens unless you can also take the kittens. Ask us for help planning around a litter.

Checklist

- ☐ Colony count and descriptions written down
- ☐ Surgery appointment or voucher confirmed
- ☐ Humane traps, one per cat, plus covers
- ☐ Food withheld about 24 hours (water left out)
- ☐ Warm, quiet holding space ready
- ☐ Return plan: same location as trapping

Sources

1. Neighborhood Cats — The 7 Steps of TNR

<https://www.neighborhoodcats.org/how-to-tnr/getting-started/the-7-steps-of-tnr>

2. Alley Cat Allies — A Step-by-Step Guide to Trap-Neuter-Return

<https://www.alleycat.org/resources/how-to-help-community-cats-a-step-by-step-guide-to-trap-neuter-return/>

3. Alley Cat Allies — TNR Basics (PDF)

https://www.alleycat.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/TNRBasics_TruthCard.pdf