TNR & COLONY CARE

What Is TNR? Trap-Neuter-Return for Cats, Step by Step

How Trap-Neuter-Return works, step by step, from feeding schedule to return, and what to have ready before trapping day. What happens at the clinic, why TNR works, and caring for the colony afterward.

By Catt County Cat Nippers • Reviewed October 28, 2026 • 5 min read • 5 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. Alley Cat Allies calls TNR the humane, effective approach to outdoor cats: it ensures no new kittens are born, stabilizes the colony, provides vaccines and improves the cats' lives. It also stops the behaviors and stresses that come with mating, such as yowling, spraying and fighting.

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.

Wondering whether TNR is allowed where you live? See **TNR and the law in New York**.

AT A GLANCE

- Withhold food for about 24 hours before trapping, but never withhold water.
- As soon as a cat is caught, cover the trap with a sheet or towel. Covering calms the cat.

The seven steps at a glance

TNR, STEP BY STEP

Step	What you do
1. Learn	Read up or take a TNR workshop: working with community cats safely takes some training
2. Work the neighborhood	Find out who feeds the cats, explain the plan, and get permission where you need access
3. Feed on a schedule	Same time, same place, no food left out all day; count the cats
4. Find a holding space	Warm (at least 65°F), dry and secure: a garage, basement, shed or spare room
5. Book surgery, traps and transport	Appointments first, then one trap per cat and a way to get them there
6. Trap	Withhold food 24 to 48 hours, never water, and trap close to the surgery date
7. Return and care	Back to the same spot after recovery; keep feeding, and watch for newcomers

Adapted from Neighborhood Cats' seven steps of TNR.

Before trapping day

Print the **caretaker starter kit** to work through these steps: checklists for planning, trapping day and recovery, tips for hard-to-trap cats, and a colony log.

1. Talk to the neighbors. Ask about the cats' history and habits, find out who else feeds them, explain what you plan to do and why, and get permission from property owners where you need access.
2. Count the colony. Note each cat's coat, size, and whether any are pregnant, nursing, injured or very young.
3. 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.
4. Book surgery first. Arrange the clinic appointment (or **contact us for a voucher**) before you trap, so cats are not held longer than needed.
5. Prepare a warm, quiet, covered holding space (a garage, basement or spare room) where cats can recover in their traps: at least 65°F, Neighborhood Cats says; around 70°F, Alley Cat Allies says.
6. Borrow or buy enough humane box traps for the number of cats you plan to catch, and practice setting them.

This quick sheet is the start of the guide. Still to read: Trapping, At the clinic, Recovery and return and 3 more sections, plus the Colony Caretaker TNR Binder. Read it all free when you join our pet health emails at cattcountycatnippers.org/articles/what-is-tnr-trap-neuter-return-guide

Sources

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