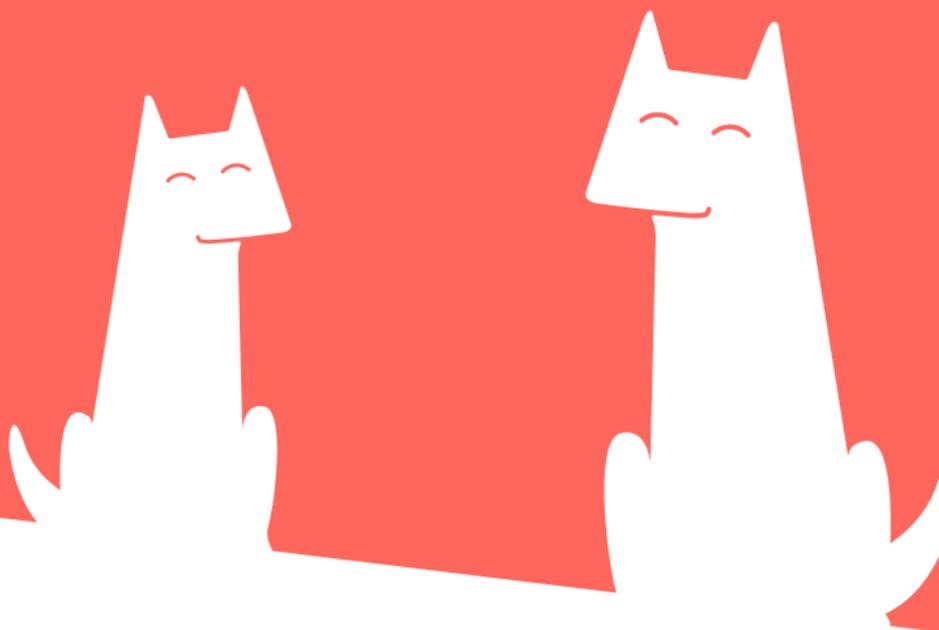


# Cats living together



**CATS PROTECTION**  
**ESSENTIAL GUIDE 11**



If you already have cats that live together, or are thinking of getting two cats or more, there are some important things to consider about their social nature. Taking the steps in this leaflet will help them to live in harmony, without hidden signs of conflict and stress and will hopefully enhance your bond with your cats.

Cat behaviour can be very subtle and just because cats are not fighting or hissing at each other, it does not necessarily mean that they are friends. It can be helpful to watch them carefully to assess whether they get along and consider where their resources are placed, to ensure your cats are all happily cohabiting.

## **Understanding the cat's ancestry**

To understand cats, we need to look at the behaviour of their ancestors. Today's moggy shares common ancestry with the African wildcat – a solitary cat which is still found in North Africa today. It generally chooses to live alone, rather than in a social group with other cats.

The African wildcat lives in the savannah, hunting rodents which are relatively sparse in numbers, so wildcats are widely dispersed to avoid competition for the small amount of food available. They maintain a territory to ensure other cats are kept away from their patch.

## Cat behaviour

Domestic cats are similar to the African wildcat in that they still have an inherent desire to be solitary hunters and maintain a territory. However, they can live well together in circumstances when:

- they perceive each other to be in the same social group **and**
- there are sufficient resources provided for them to avoid competition

Feral cats have not been socialised with people or the domestic environment. Sometimes feral cats live in groups – called colonies – if they perceive each other to be in the same social group and there are sufficient food sources for them. Feral colonies often consist of related females and they recognise each other from a common scent which is shared and reinforced through positive activities, such as rubbing against and grooming each other. They will usually protect the territory from intruder cats which bear a different scent, swiftly sending them packing.

Ferals do not depend on each other to source food, so they hunt and eat separately and the same is true for our pet cats.



# Cohabiting

While some cats can form very strong social bonds, sometimes cats living in the same household do not perceive each other to be in the same social group, although under stress they will tolerate the presence of others – especially for a particularly valued resource such as food, a fuss from the owner, or the sunniest spot in the house.

- Some cats will 'block' access to food, water or litter trays from other cats that they live with. This is done very subtly so owners often do not notice and it can be very stressful for the affected cat – sometimes even leading to behavioural problems
- Some cats operate a more tolerant 'time share' system where one cat may use a particular area in the morning and the other cat will then use that area in the afternoon, for example
- Others may live separately in a particular area of the house. For example, one cat may live upstairs, while the other cat lives downstairs
- Sometimes other events may precipitate signs of conflict – such as illness in one of the cats in a household. For example, a cat which develops a disease which increases its fluid intake – such as diabetes, or renal disease – may start to urinate on a carpet away from the litter tray. There may not be anything wrong with the cat's ability to use a litter tray, instead it may be that the tray is blocked at certain times by other cats in the household and the cat is unable to access the tray when it needs to

## Same social group?

Signs of aggression and conflict are not the only way to tell that cats are in different social groups. The signs can be subtle, so you need to look for the positive signs of social interaction.

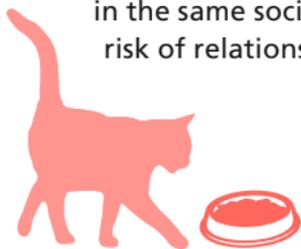
Cats are in the same social group if they sleep touching each other and spend time rubbing and grooming each other, sharing and reinforcing their common scent. There is nothing more endearing than seeing two cats choosing to cuddle up with one another.

If you have more than two cats, you may find you have more than two social groups – in fact it is quite possible to have six cats and five or six social groups within them. This is more likely to happen if they were introduced as adults, were forced to interact too quickly and given insufficient resources. Even sibling cats may not necessarily remain in the same social group and may drift apart as they approach social maturity, between 18 months and four years of age.

## Resource placement

Cats in one social group are best provided with separate food, water and litter trays from cats which are in a different social group. Place these in a different part of

the home. In fact, it may even be a good idea to feed cats in the same social group in different areas to reduce the risk of relationship breakdown.



## Do you want another cat?

If you already have one or more cats, think carefully before getting another cat as it's an important decision. There are many factors to consider. Can you afford the daily costs, including veterinary care for which big bills can be unexpected? Do you have enough space in your home to provide extra resources in the right locations to support another cat? Do you have enough time for another cat? Has your cat coped with the presence of other cats in the past? See Cats Protection's *Essential Guide: Caring for your cat*.

Cats are all unique and have different characters. Although a cat might have lived with another cat in the past, this does not mean that they will necessarily tolerate a new cat immediately or even at all. If a cat's companion cat has recently died, hold off getting a new cat as a 'friend', at least until the remaining cat has had time to adjust. In some cases, cats actually seem to blossom once they are on their own and prefer to remain in a single-cat household. This can be difficult for us to understand as humans are a more social species. Thinking from a cat's perspective takes a different approach.

Cats which have been in contact with unrelated and non-aggressive cats when they were kittens – less than seven weeks of age – sometimes cope better with the presence of other cats when they are adults.

Remember, owners have a legal duty of care to provide for their cat's needs, which includes the need to be housed with or apart from other animals – see *Cats Protection's Essential Guide: Cats and the law*.

## Introducing cats

Unfamiliar cats should be introduced very slowly in the hope that they will ultimately perceive each other to be in the same social group, or at least peacefully cohabit. This can be helped by providing plentiful resources in a variety of different places in the home to avoid conflict and competition.

If cats are forced together too quickly, it may lead to lifelong conflict and stress which is difficult to resolve – first impressions are all important. Unfortunately, all too often, cats are introduced without sufficient time and resources to successfully integrate. The result can be two cats forced to cohabit under stress. Behavioural problems may result, or they may become withdrawn or intolerant of attention.

The tips on the following pages, together with patience and understanding, will help you ensure that initial introductions start off long and happy relationships. If you succeed, not only will your cats be happy, but you will be rewarded with the frequent delight of watching charming interactions between your cats.



## Important resources for cats

If you have an existing resident cat, ensure that all their routines remain the same where possible. Shut the new cat in the room that the resident cat uses the least.

When introducing two cats to each other for the first time, it is best to give each cat a separate room. In each room provide each cat with:

- food and water. Cats like to drink away from where they eat, so place the food and water bowls in separate areas sited away from the litter tray
- somewhere to hide. It is very important for cats to have somewhere to hide – eg a cardboard box on its side, or under the bed – particularly when adapting to a new environment
- a viewing platform. Cats love to view their surroundings from a height. You could offer access to high spots eg shelves or the top of a wardrobe window sills. Ensure easy access by placing a stool nearby
- somewhere to sleep – igloo beds, cardboard box, blankets in elevated places
- toys – be aware that a cat may not want to play while they are settling in
- a scratching post – try placing this near to where the cat sleeps as they often like to stretch and scratch after they wake up
- litter tray – placed away from food and water bowls

You can install a facial pheromone diffuser, such as Feliway®, in the area that each cat uses to sleep, to make the environment more reassuring for the cats.

Before introducing the cats physically, introduce them to each other's scent. Swap scents by:

- stroking each cat with a separate clean, soft cloth and dabbing it around your home and furniture or leaving the cloth in the cat's environment to sniff when the cat is ready to investigate
- keep swapping the scents until the cats show no reaction to the smell
- if the cats avoid the scent cloth, then the scent swapping stage is going to take longer

Keep mixing scents until the cats show no reaction to the smell. You can progress to allowing them to see each other, but not letting them touch or meet one another. Try placing a glass or mesh door between the cats, and allow each cat to approach or hide as they choose. Do not progress to a face-to-face introduction until the cats either ignore each other or show positive feline social behaviour – such as attempting to groom each other or rub heads on each other through the divider.

When it is time to introduce your cats face to face, it helps to:

- ensure easy escape routes are available for both cats, as well as easy access to places higher up, such as furniture or shelves
- start in a fairly large room where they can stay at a distance from each other
- supervise the cats when they are together
- work at a pace that the cats are comfortable with and go back a step if necessary
- only introduce for short periods of time during feeding time to help form positive associations with each other, before returning the cats to separate rooms
- gradually start to fuss or play with the cats for a short time, so their attention is on you, before putting the food down

If this is tolerated, gradually increase the time they spend together.

It can take anything from a day to many weeks for cats to tolerate each other, so don't give up if there is some hissing and spitting initially, just go back a step. They are unlikely to fight, but have a blanket ready just in case, so you can separate them. Take care to avoid being bitten or scratched as the cats may be quite excited. Don't chase or shout at them as this will only lead to them associating each other with bad things.

As the cats become more comfortable in each other's company, try giving them titbits to encourage them to come closer. Choose somewhere where they can escape easily – placing an object such as a chair between the feeding bowls may help them feel less threatened. Over time, you can move the bowls closer together but do not place them side by side.

Many cats prefer to eat separately to other cats – even those cats in the same social group, as a throwback to their evolutionary past when they would hunt – and eat – separately. Cats can feel vulnerable when they are eating, so place food and water bowls slightly away from the wall, so the cat has space to sit with its back to the wall and is able to survey the room while eating or drinking.

**Always remember that, even despite careful introductions, some cats never become friends or part of the same social group. Differences in characteristics play a great part in all social interactions and cats are certainly no exception to this rule.**

Remember that if your cats are apart for any reason, for example if one has to stay at a boarding cattery or a vets, this may affect their scent and they may not be recognised as part of the same social group when they return, The longer a cat is away, the harder it can be to reintegrate. It's a good idea to keep the cats apart – so the absent cat can pick up the smells of home – and slowly reintroduce them. Consider where you place their resources such as food bowls and litter trays, bearing in mind the advice above.

By taking the simple steps outlined in this leaflet, you can often dramatically improve the quality of life of the cats living in your household.

If you have problems please seek help sooner rather than later, as it may be easier to resolve a recently developed problem, than one which has occurred for some time.

If cats have been introduced too quickly, you may need to give them separate rooms and start the integration procedure from scratch. Speak with your vet for further advice who may recommend referral to a suitably qualified behaviourist.

For more information, see Cats Protection's *Essential Guide: Understanding your cat's behaviour*.

### **Learn more about your cat online!**

Take a look at our free interactive tool to help you understand cats' origins and their behaviour within our homes. <http://learnonline.cats.org.uk/content/ufo>

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For more information about Cats Protection or to make a donation, please visit [www.cats.org.uk](http://www.cats.org.uk) or phone our Helpline on 03000 12 12 12.

Reg Charity 203644 (England and Wales) and SC037711 (Scotland)

FEB-15 CODE: 84011