

Caring for your indoor cat



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Key points

If your cat starts to do something that is out of character, the first thing you should always do is book them in for a health check with your vet to rule out any medical problems that could cause this behaviour. Medical disorders are very common causes of behavioural issues, even if the link is not immediately apparent. Always discuss the cat's behaviour and all your observations and concerns with the vet. For guests and hosts of cats undergoing home isolation always contact your authorised veterinarian to discuss any behavioural concerns you might have. They may recommend referral to a suitably qualified behaviourist, such as a member of the Animal Behaviour and Training Council (www.abtc.org.uk).

Hello and welcome to the UK!

We know that you and your cat have had a long journey to get here and even though you have found a safe place to live, we understand that this will not be an easy time for either of you. This leaflet has been written so that you have all the information you need to be able to ensure your cat settles in well to their new home. Even if they have previously lived as an indoor cat there are still some considerations to take to ensure they feel happy and comfortable in their new surroundings.

Bringing your cat home

The first few hours after arriving can really affect how well they accept their new life. First and foremost, be prepared to be patient and never attempt to rush your cat into doing things they may not be ready for.

It is important to provide them with a quiet place with everything they need, so try and find them a dedicated, secure space or ideally a room (known as a sanctuary room) where they can feel safe. Where possible this safe space should include:

- an area for food and a separate area for water
- at least one litter tray placed as far away as possible from their food and water and in a private, accessible location
- somewhere to hide
- access to a high spot where they can view their surroundings
- a suitable place to sleep or, ideally, a choice of them
- a scratching post
- a few cat toys and space for them to play

For more information, check out our YouTube video - Creating the best home environment for your cat:

bit.ly/YouTube-CP-best-home

Scent is important

Cats rely heavily on their sense of smell and will settle quicker if their new home smells familiar. To help your cat adjust and settle in, take an item of clothing or a blanket that smells of you and leave it with the cat in the sanctuary room for a few days when you arrive.

When cats rub their faces or cheeks on furniture etc, they leave pheromones which provides a calming, reassuring message to the cat. You could also use a synthetic form of feline facial pheromones, such as a product called FELIWAY®, available from your vet or online. These come as a plug-in diffuser or a spray. The scent helps to create a reassuring environment and may help to reduce stress. A plug-in diffuser is easiest. Alternatively, if your cat is friendly and not nervous, then you can collect your own cat's pheromones by gently rubbing a clean cloth on their cheeks and then rubbing this cloth on furniture in the room so it smells of your cat.



The first steps to settle your cat into the new home

The following is a guide to introducing your cat to their new home and family. Take one step at a time, be patient and always work at the cat's pace before moving onto the next stage.

When you arrive home, leave your cat alone to explore their room for an hour or so, although some cats may need longer. When you go in to see them, get down to their level, put out your hand and call their name softly – let them come to you.

If your cat chooses to hide, just sit quietly in the same room and occasionally talk to them gently in low tones – do not force them to come out. Give them plenty of time to adjust and continue to visit them so they can get used to the new room gradually. As long as they are eating and using the litter tray, there should be no cause for alarm. If your cat is very timid, they may not want to come out to eat. In this case, try moving the food bowl closer to their hiding place and leaving the room.



Exploring the rest of the house

Once your cat is comfortable in their space and if you have no other pets in the house, you can gradually let them explore more rooms. Again, it may help to gently wipe your cat's cheeks with a soft cloth – to pick up the facial pheromones – and rub it around points in the house at cat height to make the house smell more familiar. Let your cat come out of their room of their own accord and keep the door open so they can dash back to their refuge if they feel the need. Make sure all external doors and windows are shut so they can't escape outside. Make sure any cat flaps are locked too.

Once your cat has settled in and depending on your cat's personality, you may want to try offering a small treat or using an interactive toy, such as a fishing rod toy with

feathers on the end. Play can be useful as it can relieve stress, provides mental stimulation and an outlet for pent-up energy. You may find it is easier to encourage play at dawn and dusk when cats are naturally more active.

For more information, check out our YouTube videos.

- Moving house with your cat: bit.ly/YouTube-CP-moving-house
- Caring for your cat – keeping indoor cats happy: bit.ly/YouTube-CP-indoor-cats
- The five welfare needs for cats: place to live – cats for kids: bit.ly/YouTube-CP-5WN-kids-place-to-live
- The five welfare needs for cats: understanding behaviour – cats for kids: bit.ly/YouTube-CP-5WN-kids-understanding-behaviour
- The five welfare needs for cats: right diet – cats for kids: bit.ly/YouTube-5WN-kids-right-diet
- The five welfare needs for cats: right vet care – cats for kids: bit.ly/YouTube-CP-5WN-kids-vet-care
- The five welfare needs for cats: space – cats for kids: bit.ly/YouTube-CP-5WN-kids-space

Understanding cats' needs

Solitary

Domestic cats share common ancestry with the African wildcat – a species still found today. The African wildcat lives in the savannah with a sparse concentration of prey, so individuals are well-dispersed and solitary to avoid competition for the small amounts of available food.

Like their ancestors, domestic cats want to maintain an independent territory and are generally happy to live without other cats for company. In fact, many cats living together under the same roof only tolerate the presence of others to gain access to resources such as food, water, toileting areas and outdoor access. This can result in anxiety and chronic stress, which is not always obvious – especially as cats often spend time together to access the resource.

The introduction of a new cat to existing cats can cause stress for both parties, and if an appropriate, gradual scent-sharing integration programme is not followed, may lead to a behavioural problem such as spraying or inappropriate toileting.

Although most cats prefer their own company, some cats can happily live together. Once your cat's quarantine period has ended, you will want to let them have the full use of the house. If there are other cats in the house, as long as the cats are carefully introduced and each one has the ability to access separate resources without having to interact with any other cat, this should be possible to achieve. They also need to be able to choose an independent life if they wish. You will know if your cats are getting along if you see them sleeping next to each other, with bodies touching or they spend time grooming or rubbing against each other.

Play

The drive to hunt is not triggered by hunger and cats that have free access to the outdoors will often engage in hunting activity, including playing with fallen leaves or grass blowing in the wind if there is no access to prey. Each part of the hunting activity – the stalk, pounce, play and kill – releases feel-good hormones called endorphins. For cats kept indoors it is important that they are given frequent opportunities to replicate hunting style play to keep them mentally stimulated and feeling good.

Keeping your cat amused with toys can not only help to keep them happy, but also provides good exercise and a chance to strengthen your bond, they don't have to be expensive. A cardboard box with holes cut into it provides a fun hiding place. Even a ball of tin foil makes a perfectly adequate toy, as long as the cat can't swallow it.

Play is more fun if you get involved too – you could use fishing rod toys with feathers on a string to mimic their prey!

Allow them to catch and 'kill' the toy periodically to avoid frustration.

Older cats will love playing three or four times a day, while younger cats will be happy to play 10 times a day or more. Very short games of one to two minutes are fine. Swap toys around regularly to keep them interesting but don't leave your cat unattended with toys which could be shredded and eaten or cause entanglement. Check toys regularly for signs of wear, replacing them when appropriate.

For more information, check out our YouTube videos.

- How to play with your cat: bit.ly/3YouTube-CP-play-with-your-cat
- How to make your cat's feeding time exciting: bit.ly/YouTube-CP-exciting-feeding-time

Communication

Cats are often thought of as aloof, but because solitary species don't need to communicate with others on a regular basis, cats haven't developed the complex muscles required to make a variety of facial expressions. Instead, they use long-lasting scent messages, allowing them to communicate with other cats remotely. These messages, left by rubbing, spraying urine and scratching, enable them to maintain a territory without coming into direct conflict with other cats.

Domestic cats often rub facial pheromones around the house to indicate a familiar 'safe zone' and spray or scratch the edges of their territory. They may spray indoors if they feel they need to indicate an area of caution. Cats that live in the same social group will maintain their bond by keeping a common scent profile through frequent rubbing sessions. Household cleaning and new scents, such as shopping or new furniture, may cause anxiety.

In the wild, cats rarely communicate vocally, but many domestic cats quickly learn that miaows lead to feeding or attention so learn to 'talk' more regularly!

For more information, check out our YouTube videos.

- Body language in cats: bit.ly/YouTube-CP-body-language
- Why does my cat miaow? bit.ly/YouTube-CP-why-miaow

Avoidance of stress and conflict

African wildcats are small predators and rely on staying fit for survival. As a solitary animal, they cannot rely on others in their group to hunt for them if they are injured. They would much rather avoid conflict by running, climbing or hiding than staying to fight.

This is why providing domestic cats with places to hide or get up high can help them to cope with stressful situations. Sometimes cats are aggressive if they are anxious or fearful but do not have the option to run away.

Sleep

African wildcats need plenty of sleep to replenish their energy reserves, enabling them to hunt whenever they detect prey. They will look for a safe place within their territory and rotate the spot to help keep parasite levels low. They often scratch when they wake up to stretch their muscles and to maintain their claws. Although domestic cats have food provided for them, instinct still tells them to conserve energy to ensure survival. It is a good idea to provide cats with a scratching post next to their sleeping area. If it is tall enough for cats to stretch to full height, sturdy enough for them to lean into and in the correct location, it is likely they will use this for scratching, rather than furniture or carpet!

Toileting

Toileting is a vulnerable activity for an African wildcat, so they choose a safe and private location within their territory. They won't toilet in areas in which they eat and drink to avoid contamination of their food and water and they bury their deposits in the sand, maybe to elude detection by prey or predators. Domestic cats also prefer to toilet in a safe and private location, away from their food and water source. Cats generally like a fine sandy substrate with enough depth to be able to bury their deposits.

Where possible try to provide a litter that is similar to the one your cat has used previously.

Water

African wildcats prefer to drink from a moving water source than a stagnant pool. They will drink in an alternative location to their sites of eating and toileting to avoid contamination from gut contents of prey, or their own faeces. Domestic cats often also prefer moving water and will often drink more if their water source is away from their food source and toileting area. Cats generally prefer wide brimmed ceramic or glass containers that don't touch the whiskers. Plastic or metal bowls can sometimes taint the water.

A balanced diet

Like humans, cats need a balanced diet with the right amount of nutrients, so it's best to stick to a pet food which includes everything cats need to stay fit and healthy. Commercial pet food is classified as either complete or complementary:

- complete foods provide all the necessary nutrients in the right balance so that no other food needs to be added
- complementary foods must be combined with other foods to provide a complete balance of nutrients
- whichever food you choose, remember cats always need fresh water, which should be changed daily

A sudden change of diet can cause an upset stomach. If your cat has returned from quarantine and you know what they have been fed during their stay it is recommended to continue this. If you are not sure what your cat has been fed it may be that you want to start feeding a bland diet formulated to help reduce the chance of an upset stomach. Examples of suitable diets include:

- Purina Pro Plan EN Gastrointestinal (suitable for kittens)
- Hills i/d (provides complete balanced nutrition for adult cats and for growing kittens and is suitable for long-term feeding)
- Royal Canin Gastrointestinal

These can be fed for the first week that the cat is home. If you would like to change your cat's diet following this first week you can slowly introduce the new food by mixing it with the bland food over a period of a week or more.

- Day 1: Feed $\frac{3}{4}$ bland diet, $\frac{1}{4}$ new diet
- Day 2 and 3: Feed $\frac{1}{2}$ bland diet, $\frac{1}{2}$ new diet
- Day 4 and 5: Feed $\frac{1}{4}$ bland diet, $\frac{3}{4}$ new diet
- Day 6: Feed new food as normal

Time to see the vet...

You should watch for changes in your cat's eating or drinking behaviour as they may indicate an underlying problem with their health. You should see your vet if your cat:

- normally eats well but suddenly stops
- has not eaten for 48 hours
- develops a ravenous appetite
- will only eat on one side of the mouth
- makes a grinding noise while eating
- starts drinking noticeably more than usual
- has unexplained weight loss
- is vomiting or has diarrhoea

Cats that don't eat, even for a few days, can develop a condition of the liver which in severe cases can be fatal. Regular eating is essential.

Remember, your cat...

- cannot be a vegetarian – they are obligate carnivores and must have amino acids such as taurine that can only be found in meat in their diet
- should not be fed dog food. The balance of ingredients are not suitable for cats' digestive systems and will not provide your cat with all the nutrients they need
- likes to eat, drink and toilet in different places. In an evolutionary sense this allows them to avoid water that may be contaminated with waste from prey, so move the water bowl to a site away from the food bowl and move the litter tray away from both the food and water bowls
- prefers to eat away from other cats. Reduce any potential competition for food between cats by feeding them in different areas of the house

Cats have evolved to eat little and often – in the wild a cat would eat around 10-12 small meals throughout the day. Pet cats will often prefer the same, although their feeding behaviour is influenced by their environment and previous experiences. Fresh wet food should be replaced at least twice daily and dry food at least once daily. Once neutered, cats typically have reduced energy needs, so consider cutting down their daily amount accordingly.

For more information, check out our YouTube video

- What should I feed my cat? bit.ly/YouTube-CP-feed-cat

Obesity

It is important that you manage your cat's weight by ensuring they are not overfed and have plenty of opportunities to exercise. You should be able to feel your cat's ribs easily when you stroke their body lightly and you should clearly see a waistline when you look at them from above. Many overweight or obese cats have a poor quality of life. Their weight can restrict their ability to groom properly. They can also suffer with joint problems and have an increased risk of developing weight-related diseases such as diabetes mellitus and urinary infections.

If your cat is overweight, a vet can help you find an appropriate feeding regime which will ensure that they get the right amount of food without being overfed. It is a good idea to weigh food out daily. Many dry foods come with calibrated scoops, but it is easy to overfill these. Remember that any treats will add calories onto the daily ration. If you like to give your cat treats throughout the day, it is much better to put a small amount of the daily portion aside so

that you don't increase the total amount of food eaten throughout the day.

Overweight cats should never be starved or put on a 'crash diet' as any period of no food can very quickly be harmful. A gradual, steady decrease in bodyweight is ideal – it may take up to a year for a severely overweight cat to reach their ideal body condition.

Because exercise is such an important part of weight control, indoor cats are particularly prone to obesity and it can be a sign of stress. It can be useful to look at your obese cat's lifestyle, their environment and placement of resources, as well as their diet. Providing the overweight cat with a toy that slowly releases food can help to increase the amount of time they spend eating and give them a little exercise. Microchip pet feeders are available that restrict access to food to specific cats – linked to their unique microchips. They will need to be shown the new location of their food.

It can be difficult to manage a cat's weight in any household with more than one cat. Some cats will happily finish anything the others do not appear to want. Feeding the overweight cat in a separate room can give the other cats in the household some time to eat and will reduce stress between cats. Any leftover food should be removed before the overweight cat is let out of the room so that it can't be finished off.

Updating your cat's microchip details

All cats entering the UK from Ukraine will need to have been microchipped. Microchipping offers cats a safe and permanent method of identification and increases the chances of a lost cat being safely reunited with their owner.

Remember that you should update your cat's microchip details when you arrive in your host home. This is essential to ensure you can be traced should your cat go missing. If your cat strays with your details still registered overseas, you cannot be traced and their legal entry to the UK cannot be confirmed, your cat faces a further period in quarantine or even euthanasia by the authorities.

In the UK, you can update your cat's registered details by contacting your existing UK database company, or Petlog – on **01296 336 579** or via www.petlog.org.uk – or Identibase – on **0330 912 8077** or via www.identibase.co.uk



For more information, please visit
www.cats.org.uk