

# Cats and people



**CATS PROTECTION**  
**ESSENTIAL GUIDE 14**



If you already share your life with a cat, you're probably aware that you get far more than just companionship and affection in return, but did you know that owning a cat has proven health and social benefits?

Cat owners are less likely to suffer from stress and are known to relax more and have greater life satisfaction. Cats keep their owners feeling young and active and learning how to care for a cat can do wonders for a child's self-esteem, social skills and sense of responsibility to others. For many owners, their cat is an integral member of the family – inspiring feelings of peace, joy and happiness and providing fun and laughter. The emotional bond between human and pet can be as rewarding as many human relationships and may offer similar psychological benefits. Cats can make a house a home.

## Domestication

Domestication of cats probably began in the Middle East. A change in farming activities meant that quantities of grain were stored near human settlements. Rodents fed on the grain, attracting wildcats which found them an easy source of food. Humans grew to value these cats for protecting their grain stores from vermin and probably encouraged this mutually beneficial relationship to some degree. As cats became more esteemed – even idolised as gods – man looked after them and in some cases, controlled their breeding. This has resulted in the domestic cat species found throughout the world today. However, the term domestication relates to a species where all the breeding and care has been controlled by people and this is not strictly the case for cats.

These days, in spite of 'domestication,' all cats need to have positive and friendly experiences with humans from a young age in order to feel safe around people. Between the ages of two to eight weeks of age, the brains of kittens are developing – it is a key time in their life known as the 'socialisation period' when they are able to be socialised to people and the domestic environment. If they are handled and gently cared for by a variety of people during this crucial time, alongside having exposure to key stimuli they will encounter in the home, they will usually grow up to be adequately suited to a normal pet-home environment. Without this early learning experience, kittens will become wild – feral cats – and remain fearful of people throughout their life.

Feral cats are usually the offspring of abandoned cats, or those already living wild. They make great mousers so are often found living as farm cats, but they also live in towns and cities. Feral cats can survive in the wild with little or no human intervention. Obviously, they are still able to breed with our pet cats, which is one of the reasons why neutering is so important. For further information, see Cats Protection's *Essential Guide: Feral cats*.

## Cats in modern society

Cats continue to benefit people in a wide range of ways – providing eco-friendly vermin control on farms and stables, companionship in family homes or cheering up the residents in a care home.

Living with a feline friend brings many benefits and it also places legal responsibilities on the owner. Much of the law in relation to animals has now been consolidated into the Animal Welfare Act 2006 – England and Wales. Scotland and Northern Ireland have equivalent legislation – the Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006 and the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011. The Act applies to both domestic and feral cats and in addition to cruelty offences, it places a duty of care on owners and those responsible for looking after cats to ensure that their welfare needs are met. These emphasise the need:

- for a suitable environment (place to live)
- for a suitable diet
- to exhibit normal behaviour patterns
- to be housed with, or apart from, other animals
- to be protected from pain, suffering, injury and disease

Sadly, cats sometimes become the innocent victims of people – through ignorance or neglect, or due to intentional cruelty and overbreeding – so it is important to understand what they need to ensure their physical and emotional welfare. Pets can sometimes become targets for abuse in households affected by domestic abuse, so Cats Protection runs a temporary fostering service for people fleeing domestic abuse, called Paws Protect. Visit the Paws Protect site here: [www.cats.org.uk/what-we-do/paws-protect](http://www.cats.org.uk/what-we-do/paws-protect) to find out more about this service.

For more information on an owner's duty of care and cruelty, see Cats Protection's *Essential Guide: Cats and the law*.

It is important that owners provide the right care and resources to meet their pet's biological and emotional needs, as well as neutering their cat before they can breed. It is very important to neuter your cat – there are already thousands of unwanted cats and kittens and not enough homes for them. A large cat population also has a negative impact on our current pets. Cats often live in close proximity in neighbouring homes – this reduces their territory size, causing conflict as each cat defends their patch. Discord can also occur between cats in the same household if they are forced to share territories and they can't get along. The fashion for minimalist home interiors and gardens also means there are fewer refuges for cats to retreat to. Feline infectious diseases are also more efficiently spread when cats are densely populated. Cats are rapid breeders and the number of kittens they produce increases with ample food and shelter, so the population of our loved pets can quickly get out of control if they aren't neutered.

Neutering not only helps with population control but it also brings many benefits to the individual cat, particularly if performed before sexual maturity is reached. This includes health benefits eg a reduction or prevention of certain cancers and behavioural benefits – neutered cats are less likely to roam, fight or spray. For more information on the benefits of neutering see Cats Protection's *Essential Guide: Neutering – family planning for felines*.

## Cats and children

Growing up with a pet can be an extremely rewarding experience for any youngster. Many children regard their cat as their best friend and it is through this friendship that important lessons are learned – in trust and empathy, care and love – which help children become responsible and caring adults. For an only child, their cat may provide a vital source of friendship and opportunity for play – children often prefer to share their feelings with a pet rather than another person. There are many physical benefits for children too and pet ownership can provide a source of comfort during recovery and rehabilitation. A number of studies in the UK and USA report that exposure to pets during infancy may significantly reduce the risk of asthma and allergies in later childhood. Primary school children from pet-owning households are also shown to have lower sickness absenteeism from school.

### Learning by experience

From their earliest days, children can be taught to be gentle and kind with cats. Children learn best by example – if you treat your cat gently with love and respect, it's more likely your children will grow up to do the same.

As soon as your children can understand, explain that cats like to be left alone when sleeping or eating and that they can become frightened when people shout, make sudden movements or try to grab them. Children soon learn to interpret even the early signs of an unhappy cat – avoidance and pupil dilation, which occur prior to the swishing tail, ruffled-up fur or hissing – and will avoid doing things that upset them. Your children will love helping to take care of your cat too, so involve them in the feeding, grooming and playing routines and you'll have happy children and a content cat!

Cats feel safer if they can watch events taking place from an accessible high vantage point. Provide your cat with a high window sill, cupboard top or add some cat shelves. This will mean they can still be involved in family life but out of the hectic hullabaloo going on below! Teach children not to disturb the cat while they are in their safe place, or while they are sleeping, eating or using the litter tray.

Food or litter trays should be moved out of the reach of toddlers, but put some thought into the new locations. Ensure they are still located in a place suitable for the cat, to avoid any stress or toileting accidents.

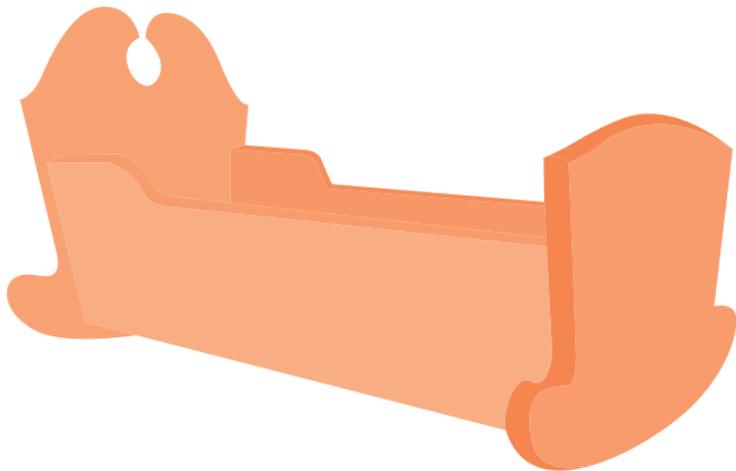
Children can learn more about cats on our website [www.cats.org.uk/cats-for-kids/](http://www.cats.org.uk/cats-for-kids/)



## Cats and babies

Most cats will get on famously with a new arrival in the household but a baby does bring a whole change of routine and lifestyle for your cat. The character of your cat – whether shy or confident – will affect how they react to this new experience. It's important to remember that even though you have a new baby and all the sleepless nights to contend with, you still have a responsibility to keep your cat healthy and happy. The new and unusual noises, smells, objects and restrictions are all potentially unsettling for your cat. Your cat will have been used to having your undivided attention before the birth and a sudden change in priorities can further worry them.

Following the tips outlined in this leaflet can help ensure everyone in the household is happy and contented.



## A growing family

It's always best to be prepared, so once you know you are pregnant:

- make sure your cat is in good health by taking them for a check-up at the vet
- if your cat is not neutered, get this done without delay
- introduce your cat to any baby items you buy, such as nursery furniture or prams – let your cat investigate but don't let them climb on them and then keep them shut away. It is important to ensure the items are off limits because some will be very tempting places for your cat to sleep
- begin getting your cat used to the sounds of the baby. Record a friend or relative's baby or buy a CD that you can play on a very low volume to begin with and gradually increase the noise. Crying can be worrying for a cat that hasn't heard it before. You can make use of CP's 'sounds library' here: [www.cats.org.uk/kitten-socialisation](http://www.cats.org.uk/kitten-socialisation)
- consult your doctor or health visitor about any other steps that you need to take

## A safe pregnancy

Sadly, some mums-to-be consider giving up their cats over fears of toxoplasmosis, a microorganism that can affect the foetus if a pregnant women is infected.

However, a major study in the British Medical Journal concluded that contact with cats was not a risk factor for toxoplasma infection, despite many believing this to be so. Although cats are a link in the transmission of toxoplasmosis, the main sources of infection to people are through contact with contaminated soil – from gardening without gloves or eating unwashed fruit or vegetables – or by eating undercooked meat.

It is best to wear gloves and an apron when dealing with your cat's litter tray – better still, it's the perfect excuse to get someone else to do it! If you are worried about owning a cat while pregnant, seek advice from your doctor and see Cats Protection's *Veterinary Guide: Cats and pregnant women – Toxoplasmosis*.



## New routines

Cats are creatures of habit and thrive on routine. Introducing a new routine gradually for your cat before the baby arrives will help ease the situation when the big day comes. Begin by:

- putting the nursery room strictly out of bounds – this is particularly important if your cat has previously had free rein in the house
- reducing the amount of ‘lap time’ your cat gets – you won’t have time to give your cat as much attention once the baby arrives
- if you need to move your cat’s feeding or toileting place, do it gradually so it will not upset your cat’s routine too much
- increasing the amount of enrichment feeding and provision of toys for self-directed play

## Once baby arrives

It is never too early for children to learn to respect, love and understand animals and it’s important they feel confident around them. It’s the basis of true companionship. Your baby will be around three months old before they first notice that there is something not human in the house. Your cat will have noticed the baby from day one and may be curious about the new arrival, so don’t panic if your cat sniffs the baby’s feet or hangs around the pram like a guard-cat. Not all cats are baby lovers, many will just ignore the new infant and keep a wide berth.

### **Do:**

- use a safe cot or pram net to keep the cat at bay – pull it taut to deter your cat from using it as a bed
- keep the nursery inaccessible to your cat while the baby is asleep and make sure any open windows are cat proof
- keep all of the baby's feeding utensils out of the cat's reach
- keep the baby and cat food separately, you don't want to get them mixed up in a sleep-deprived moment!
- try and set aside a part of the day to make a fuss of your cat as it's important that their normal routines are maintained – it will give you a chance to grab a quiet moment and relax
- remember your cat should be regularly treated for fleas and worms and their litter tray kept clean

### **And don't:**

- leave a baby and a cat together unsupervised, even if you trust your cat 100%
- leave any children's sandboxes uncovered in case a cat is tempted to use it as a litter tray

If you have concerns about your cat's behaviour once the baby has arrived, please seek advice from a qualified cat behaviourist who may easily be able to pinpoint a trigger factor and help you to get back to the harmony you previously enjoyed. Further information can be found here: [www.cats.org.uk/cats-and-babies](http://www.cats.org.uk/cats-and-babies)

## Cats and the elderly

Cats can be an enormous source of comfort for older people, providing some structure for each day, and a sense of purpose. Feline companions provide friendship, affection and social support. Stroking a cat has been shown to reduce blood pressure and older people with a pet have also been found to be more attentive to their own care needs and have an improved sense of their own wellbeing. The benefits cats can bring the elderly are frequently recognised by day centres and residential care homes, some of which now allow occupants to bring in their own cat or have a resident cat.

## Cats and health

There is an increasing body of evidence that shows cats can be beneficial to physical and mental health. Many cat owners derive comfort and a renewed sense of well-being by stroking and grooming their cat. Such activities can improve people's mood, reducing levels of stress hormones and increasing the levels of a variety of feel-good hormones – as well as bringing great enjoyment for the cat. Many people can benefit from interaction with cats – especially those affected by a mental and physical health issues. Cats can be therapeutic for those with depression, dementia or autism. Stroking a feline friend can help reduce high blood pressure and improve the recovery of trauma victims. Caring for pets can also be helpful as part of the rehabilitation of offenders.

## Bereavement

The bond owners share with their cat is similar to that found in human relationships – people often relate to their cats as family members. Understandably, grief reactions are natural following feline bereavement. The sadness felt following the demise of a cat as well as the loss of companionship, emotional support and motivation can leave bereaved cat owners feeling isolated and alone. All individuals react differently and bereavement support is available. For more advice on coping with bereavement, see Cats Protection's *Essential Guide: When to let go* or visit CP's designated grief support service, Paws to Listen, which can help you in dealing with the loss of your cat here: [www.cats.org.uk/what-we-do/grief/paws-to-listen](http://www.cats.org.uk/what-we-do/grief/paws-to-listen).

## Working with cats

There are many opportunities to spend more time with cats, beyond enjoying them as pets in your home. Vets practices, pet-sitters, animal welfare organisations and boarding catteries welcome feline enthusiasts, who find helping cats in need extremely rewarding. For more opportunities for volunteering or working with Cats Protection, see our website, [www.cats.org.uk](http://www.cats.org.uk)

## Keeping safe

As with all things in life, interaction with animals is not absolutely risk-free, but it is important to balance the positive influence cats can have in people's lives with any potential risks. Being fully informed can help cat owners minimise the risks.



### Bites and scratches

Taking some time to understand a cat's behaviour and motivations and providing appropriate resources for them, all go a long way to help avoiding feline aggression. See Cats Protection's *Essential Guide: Managing you cat's behaviour* for more information and seek appropriate behavioural advice early on if you have concerns about your cat. Cats can bite or scratch on occasion due to a variety of health or behavioural reasons. It also is a normal defence reaction if they are feeling threatened, or are in pain. If you are scratched or bitten, it is important to act promptly.

All animals carry microorganisms such as bacteria in their mouths and on their skin and nails. Bites and scratches can lead to infection with those microorganisms, some of which can cause more harm than others. Early medical treatment is usually required to prevent the debilitating effects of such injuries, particularly in those people with weakened immune systems.

## Shared infections

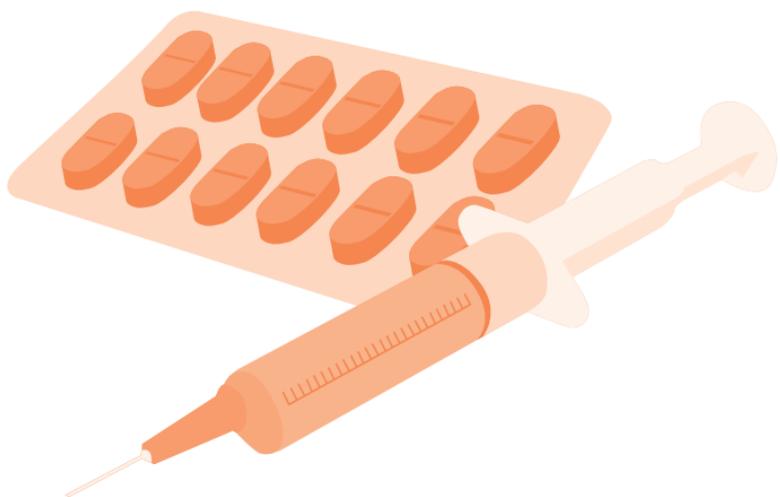
You will be well aware of the many infections that are shared between people, such as colds and flu. Cats can also suffer with infections which can be passed to other felines. There are also some infections which can pass between animals and people, known as zoonoses. Some zoonoses can pass from cat to person – including those transmitted through bites and scratches – as well as from person to cat. The risk of catching a zoonotic disease from a cat is very small. Using common sense together with a good hygiene routine will significantly reduce the risk, for example:

- provision of appropriate toileting areas and careful hygiene with litter trays
- feed a good quality, complete diet designed for cats
- routinely treat your cats for fleas, roundworms and tapeworms
- keep your cat's vaccinations up to date
- seek veterinary advice if your cat is unwell
- avoid situations which could lead to bites and scratches and if they occur, seek medical advice

Some examples of feline zoonotic diseases include ringworm, salmonella and flea infestation. If your cat is diagnosed with a zoonotic infection then your vet will alert you to the risks and advise you on how to care for the animal and prevent the spread to humans.

Infections are more commonly shared between people, than between people and cats. However, it is recommended that immuno-compromised people – such as organ transplant recipients, AIDS patients and those having chemotherapy for cancer – seek medical advice, particularly if considering close contact with an immuno-compromised cat – such as those infected with FIV or other chronic diseases.

For further information on ringworm and fleas please see our *Veterinary Guides: Itchy cats and skin disorders* and *Fleas and other parasites*, or see the Cat Group policy statement on zoonoses at [www.thecatgroup.org.uk](http://www.thecatgroup.org.uk)



## Cats and allergies

Things that cause allergic reactions are called triggers or allergens. Almost anything can be an allergen including pollen, dust mites or tobacco smoke. Detergents and perfumes can also cause an allergic reaction, as can insect stings, pet hair and feathers.

The severity of an allergic reaction varies dramatically from person to person. Symptoms include:

- sneezing and a runny or blocked nose
- itchy and watery eyes
- coughing and wheezing
- itchy skin

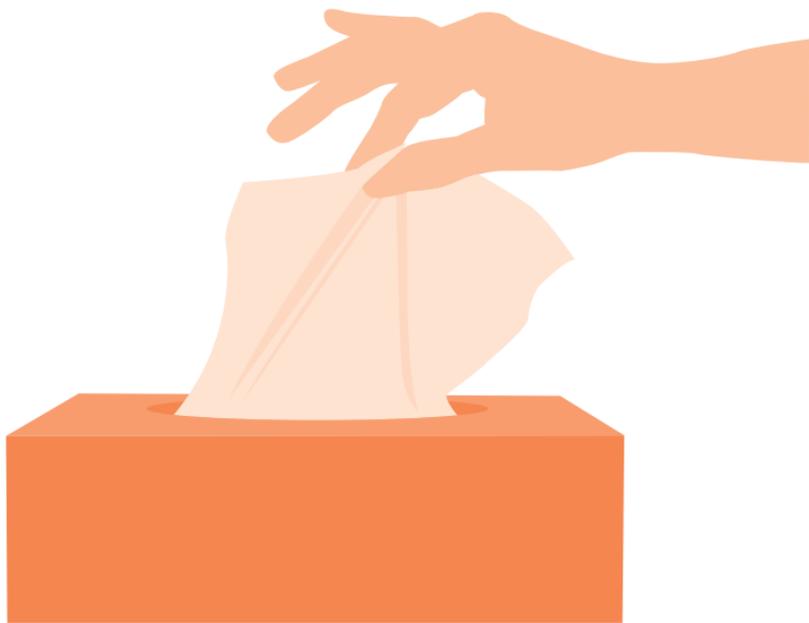
Asthma and eczema sufferers may find that their symptoms are exacerbated by the presence of an allergen.

### Am I allergic to cats?

It is fairly obvious that some people are allergic to cats because they have an almost immediate reaction to a cat entering a room. In other cases it may not be so easy to tell, particularly if someone is allergic to more than one trigger in their environment.

If you think you or a family member might be allergic to your cat, it is a good idea to have a trial separation to determine if the cat is the cause of the reaction. Cats are often singled out because they are easily identifiable, but it is important to remember that they are just one possible cause and that dust mites are by far the most common trigger for household allergies.

If you don't own a cat but are thinking of getting one, a visit to someone who has a cat or to an adoption centre may indicate whether you are allergic or not – although some people may react to some cats and not others. If you are suspicious that you are allergic, it may be a good idea to speak with your doctor first.



## Is there anything I can do to ease my symptoms?

Most importantly, speak with your doctor first. It may be helpful to discuss the following actions that can significantly ease allergy symptoms for sufferers:

- using antihistamine tablets or nasal spray – please consult your doctor first
- having hardwood floors instead of carpets and using blinds instead of curtains
- avoiding woollen clothing
- designating some areas as cat-free zones, particularly bedrooms
- open the windows for at least one hour every day and move the litter tray and cat bed away from air vents
- regularly cleaning rooms where the cat sleeps – vacuumed rooms should be allowed to settle as vacuuming stirs up allergens. Air filters may also help
- fitting plastic covers over cushions and mattresses
- grooming your cat outdoors on a daily basis and wiping them with a damp cloth or if this worsens your symptoms, get someone else to groom your cat for you
- washing your cat's bed regularly
- a pet cleanser which helps remove allergens from the cat's coat

For more information on anything allergy-related or recommended products, please visit the Allergy UK website [www.allergyuk.org](http://www.allergyuk.org) or phone their helpline 01322 619 898.

### **Are any cats hypoallergenic?**

There is no such thing as a hypoallergenic cat breed. Allergic reactions are triggered in people when we come into contact with a specific protein called 'Fel d 1' which is present in the cat's saliva and gets deposited on the cat's coat and skin during grooming. Individual cats may have different amounts of this protein in their saliva, which is why allergic reactions triggered by some cats are worse compared to that caused by others. Trial and error is the best way to find out which individual cats trigger your allergy.

### **Can I get a cat if I am allergic?**

If you still want a cat even though you have a reaction to them, then your symptoms are probably mild to moderate and therefore manageable via the steps above.

### **Should I keep my cat?**

The answer to this varies greatly from person to person. First you must make sure that it is the cat causing the allergic reaction; you don't want to go through the stress and upset of rehoming a much-loved pet only to discover that stress is what brings on your asthmatic attacks!

In the end, the decision about whether to get or keep a cat depends entirely on you and the severity of your reaction. In some cases the symptom-easing steps above may provide enough relief for you to live happily with a cat, but in others it is advisable to avoid cats and seek advice from your doctor.

For further details on this, please see Cats Protection's *Essential Guide: Caring for your cat.*

## Make your house a home

Cats are popular pets and can be great stress-busters for families and people living alone or house sharing. They can provide companionship, emotional support and motivation for young and old – as well as opportunities for play and nurture.

It is very rewarding to provide for your cat's needs, learn more about their behaviour and ensure you have a mutually beneficial relationship. Cats Protection has thousands of cats in care across our UK network of branches and centres. Consider adopting a cat and make your house a home. You can get contact details for your nearest branch or centre by phoning our National Information Line on 03000 12 12 12 or via our website [www.cats.org.uk](http://www.cats.org.uk)

For more information on caring for a cat, see Cats Protection's *Essential Guide: Caring for your cat.*



**Learn more about your cat online!**

Take a look at our free online course, *Understanding Cats' Needs*, to better understand why cats do what they do and how to best meet their needs:  
[www.cats.org.uk/online-learning](http://www.cats.org.uk/online-learning)



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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.

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