

Caring for your cat

cats.org.uk



Cats are one of the most popular pets in the UK and they can make a wonderful addition to a household. We've written this guide to provide some useful information to help you care for your cat.

If you're thinking about having more than one cat go to cats.org.uk/other-cats for more information and advice.

Cats can be independent but they still need to be looked after. You'll want to spend time playing with and grooming your cat, as well as feeding them and generally watching them to understand them as an individual. Taking the time to get to know your cat will mean you will know if they are unhappy or unwell. By following the advice in this leaflet, you can do your best to ensure you have a happy and healthy cat.

Food

Cats should be fed a complete, balanced, good quality meat-based food. If it has 'complete' on the packaging, the food contains all the essential nutrients that most cats need. 'Complementary' or treat foods will not carry this label. Cats cannot be vegetarians. There are many different brands of cat food on the market, and most will offer both wet and dry options. Wet food contains more moisture, which can be especially important for some health conditions. Dry food can be left out a little longer, and used in puzzle feeders. Many cats enjoy both. Speak to your vet about the best food for your cat.

Follow the manufacturer's instructions and your vet's advice for the amount of food to give your cat each day. Cats like to be fed little and often, with their food split into several meals throughout the day. Fresh wet food should be given at least twice daily or fresh dry food at least once daily. Neutered cats typically need less energy so you might want to reduce the amount of food you give to them.

We recommend that you put your cat's food:

- in an area where your cat feels safe
- away from their water bowl
- away from their litter tray

Tip

- If your cat eats dry food, you could try putting some in a puzzle feeder. This mimics your cat's natural hunting instincts and can help reduce boredom

When adopting a cat, you should initially follow the diet that your cat has been fed previously. Before you take them home, find out what they have been eating and at what times. If you wish to change your cat's food, it's important to introduce the new food gradually over a week or more to avoid an upset stomach.

Water

Cats generally don't need to drink lots every day. However, always ensure fresh, clean drinking water is available at all times, especially if you feed your cat dry food. This is best placed away from their food, as cats generally prefer not to eat and drink in the same place.

Important: Avoid giving your cat anything other than plain water to drink, especially cow's milk as many cats are lactose intolerant.

For more information about feeding your cat, including what to do if your cat stops eating, go to cats.org.uk/feeding

Hunting and play

The drive to hunt isn't triggered by hunger. Each part of the hunting activity; stalking, pouncing, playing and 'killing', releases feel-good hormones called endorphins.

Cats that can go outdoors often engage in hunting activity, including playing with fallen leaves or grass blowing in the wind. To learn more about how to deter your cat from hunting wildlife visit cats.org.uk/garden-and-outdoors

It's important that all cats, especially indoor cats, are given frequent opportunities to play, to allow them to engage in hunting activity and keep them mentally stimulated.

Toys

Keeping your cat amused with toys can help to keep them happy. It also provides good exercise and strengthens your bond with your cat.

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.

- A cardboard box with holes cut in it provides a fun hiding place
- A ball of tin foil (ensure your cat can't swallow it) is fun to chase and catch
- Fishing rod toys with feathers on a string can mimic cats' prey. Allow them to catch and 'kill' the toy occasionally to avoid frustration
- Swap toys around regularly to keep them interesting
- Don't leave your cat unattended with toys which could be shredded and eaten or that your cat can become tangled in
- Check toys regularly for signs of wear, replacing them when appropriate

For more information visit cats.org.uk/cats-and-play

Somewhere to hide

It is important to provide your cat with a place to hide which will help them to feel safe and secure. Many things can make a cat anxious or fearful, such as fireworks, building work in the house, unfamiliar visitors or conflict with other cats.

A hiding place can be something as simple as:

- a cardboard box on its side
- an igloo-style cat bed
- a space under the bed
- in a wardrobe with the door left ajar

The cat shouldn't be disturbed while they are in their hiding place.

For more information visit cats.org.uk/cats-hiding

Somewhere to get up high

Cats feel safer if they can view their surroundings from a height. This is another important coping mechanism for cats who feel anxious or fearful.

Places could be:

- on top of a wardrobe with a cosy blanket (provide access by placing a stool or similar item next to it)
- windowsills
- shelves

Extra consideration should be given to elderly cats, as they will have more difficulty reaching higher places.

For more information see cats.org.uk/elderly-cats

Sleeping

On average, cats spend about 16 hours a day sleeping. Cats generally rest or sleep intermittently throughout the day and will prefer to sleep in a warm, comfortable and safe place.

This could be:

- your bed
- igloo-style cat beds
- cat hammock specifically designed for the radiator
- a cardboard box on its side with a soft blanket inside

Cats frequently change their preferred sleeping area and they shouldn't be disturbed when sleeping.

For more information visit

cats.org.uk/cats-and-sleep

Scratching

Scratching is a natural behaviour for cats; not only is it essential for claw maintenance but scent is released from between the cat's toes. It is a form of scent marking similar to when they rub their cheeks on something. If you want to protect your furniture and furnishings from your cat's claws, provide them with a suitable alternative to scratch instead, such as a scratching post or scratching mat. Cats like to stretch and scratch after they wake up so try placing the scratching post/mat near where they sleep.

A good scratching post has the following features:

- a strong sturdy base, so that your cat can lean against the post without it wobbling
- tall enough that your cat can stretch fully
- a vertical thread that allows your cat to scratch downwards

Some cats may prefer scratching a horizontal surface, so you could provide them with a scratching mat instead.

For more information visit cats.org.uk/scratching

Eating grass

Many cats like to eat grass, though it isn't completely understood why. It's thought it may help to clear furballs and other substances that are difficult to digest from their stomachs.

Watch outs:

- ensure all grass in your home and garden is free of herbicides or pesticides
- if your cat suddenly sneezes excessively get them checked out by your vet. Sometimes a blade of grass can be accidentally inhaled and become stuck in the nasal passage
- grass seeds can get stuck in your cat's ears, nose, eyes, fur and paws

If your cat can't go outside, cat grass can be grown indoors. Seeds are readily available from garden centres and pet shops. Check that these are cat safe. If no grass is provided, your cat may try to eat other household plants which may pose a risk.

See cats.org.uk/keeping-your-cat-safe

Toileting

Whether toileting outdoors or in a litter tray indoors, cats prefer to poo where they feel safe and then bury it.

Indoor litter trays:

- provide one litter tray per cat, plus one extra
- don't place all the trays in a line as cats will see it as just one big litter tray
- place them in different, quiet, private areas of the home, away from food and water bowls
- allow access without having to pass other cats or things that make them anxious such as a noisy washing machine
- clean out the litter tray at least once a day
- with clumping litter remove solid lumps once or twice a day (with some types of litter you may need to replace all the litter on a daily basis)
- cats prefer at least 3cm depth of litter and most prefer a litter of a sandy texture because it is softer and more comfortable under their paws
- make any changes to the tray, the litter or its location very gradually to avoid toileting accidents

- trays should be cleaned once a week by rinsing with water and then using a cat-safe disinfectant. Caution: phenol-based disinfectants are toxic to cats
- always rinse carefully with hot water, and dry well before refilling with litter
- rinsing the disinfectant off ensures safety, as well as removing the smell which some cats don't like

You will be able to buy a suitable disinfectant from your vet or a pet shop.

Outdoors

Some cats prefer to toilet outside. You will need to provide a suitable area close to the house where your cat feels safe.

For more information visit cats.org.uk/toileting

Grooming

Cats are very clean animals and like to groom themselves, but sometimes they may need a little help. Grooming also gives you some valuable bonding time with your cat.

Long-haired cats should be brushed daily to stop their coat becoming tangled. If they are not regularly groomed fur can become matted and uncomfortable. These mats may need to be removed under anaesthetic by a vet.

Short-haired cats will probably only need to be groomed once a week.

Older cats may struggle to look after their coats and need gentle grooming to help keep their skin healthy.

Need help?

- Check out our helpful advice and videos on grooming cats.org.uk/grooming
- Speak to your vet for advice as they can refer you to a qualified behaviourist or experienced groomer, to avoid developing grooming problems

Indoor or outdoor?

Ideally all cats would be allowed access to outdoors to express their natural behaviour. However there are some cats that need to stay indoors for their own benefit such as those with disabilities or special health care needs.

For cats given access outside, consider providing a magnetic or microchip-operated cat flap. This will allow them the freedom to choose when to go out. It also stops other cats from the neighbourhood entering the home. Cats usually learn how to use cat flaps very readily.

For some tips, see cats.org.uk/cat-flaps

We recommend that cats are kept indoors at night, when they may be at more risk of being involved in road traffic accidents. Also, they are more likely to hunt wildlife at dawn and dusk.

Cats are naturally curious and love to explore. Those that don't have outside access need extra consideration to keep them mentally stimulated. They need opportunities to display their natural behaviours such as hunting and exploring to keep their minds busy and prevent boredom. It also provides physical exercise. Cats who experience boredom and frustration may be more prone to behaviour problems and obesity.

See cats.org.uk/home-and-environment

Holidays

Your cat will need looking after every time you go away. Either put them in a cattery or get a cat-sitter to come in to feed and play with your cat while you are away. Never leave your cat to fend for themselves.

For more information visit cats.org.uk/going-on-holiday

Important veterinary care

All cat owners should make sure their cat is:

- neutered
- vaccinated against disease
- microchipped (this is a legal requirement in England from June 2024)
- treated against fleas and internal worms based on their lifestyle and individual risk
- seen by a vet for regular health checks and when ill or injured

Find a vet

You'll need to register your cat with a vet as soon as possible. A recommendation from a friend or neighbour is a great place to start. You can also find details of your local practices on the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons website rcvs.org.uk

It's important that you get on with your vet, are able to ask questions and have faith in the care they can offer. More information is available from cats.org.uk/finding-a-vet

Neutering

Cats Protection recommends that cats are neutered at around four months of age. This is a simple operation which has many health benefits for your cat:

- to prevent unwanted kittens
- to reduce the spread of disease
- to reduce wandering
- to reduce territorial behaviour such as scratching, spraying pee and fighting

All cats from Cats Protection are neutered, if old enough, before being rehomed, or rehomed with a voucher for free neutering. For more information see cats.org.uk/neutering-your-cat

Vaccinations

Kittens and adult cats should be vaccinated to help them stay healthy and help stop the spread of disease. The most commonly advised vaccinations include:

- feline infectious enteritis (also known as feline parvovirus or panleucopenia). This is a severe and potentially fatal gut infection
- cat flu, a common respiratory syndrome which can have severe and lasting effects
- feline leukaemia virus (FeLV), a devastating fatal disease that damages the cat's immune system and can cause cancer

Kittens need their first vaccine at around eight to nine weeks old and a second dose at 12 weeks. Your cat should also receive regular booster vaccinations throughout their life (these could be annually or less frequently depending on their risks). These will help maintain their protection against these diseases. Consult your vet for more advice.

For more information see cats.org.uk/vaccinations

Microchipping

Microchipping is the safest and permanent way to identify your cat. It is a quick and painless procedure that helps owners to be reunited with their cats should they stray or be involved in an accident. In England, from June 2024 microchipping is compulsory for all owned cats over 20 weeks of age.

A microchip is no bigger than a grain of rice and is inserted under the cat's skin between their shoulder blades. It carries a unique ID number linked to a database holding your contact details. This allows you to be quickly contacted should they be found and scanned. It's important to update your details if you move house or change phone numbers. For more information on microchipping see cats.org.uk/microchipping

Collars

If your cat is microchipped, using a collar to carry a cat identification tag isn't necessary. If you do choose to put a collar on your cat, use a 'quick release' collar so they can free themselves should the collar get caught on something. Fit it carefully. Two fingers should snugly fit between your cat's neck and the collar. Sadly, severe injuries resulting from poorly fitted collars or those with no quick-release function are common.

Fleas

Fleas are very common in cats but can be hard to spot. The most effective products to treat and prevent fleas are available from your vet, so seek their advice.

Never use a dog flea treatment on your cat as some can be rapidly fatal. Do not let your cat come into contact with a dog that has been treated for fleas until the product has dried.

Your vet can advise you on the best treatment regime based on your cat's lifestyle and individual risks.

If you do have a flea outbreak, you will need to treat all the pets in the home and de-flea your home, too. Treat carpets, the bottoms of curtains, furniture, your cat's bedding and all their favourite sleeping places.

For more advice go to cats.org.uk/fleas

Worms

Cats can become infected with various internal worms. Your vet will be able to advise you about how often to de-worm your cat and the most suitable, effective product to use. For more information go to cats.org.uk/worms

Dental care

Dental disease is common in cats, especially as they get older. You should get your cat's teeth regularly checked by your vet. Many cats don't show obvious discomfort, although signs of dental disease may include:

- reduced appetite
- bad breath
- dropping food or difficulty in eating
- blood-tinged saliva or drooling
- unusual face rubbing or pawing at the mouth
- behavioural changes, such as becoming quieter or more aggressive
- reduced grooming
- sneezing, nasal discharge or facial swelling

Dental disease can be painful and seriously affect your cat's health and welfare. Bacteria in the mouth can enter the cat's bloodstream and affect their heart and kidneys. Consult your vet for more advice.

For more information on your cat's mouth, see cats.org.uk/dental-care

Insurance

Pet insurance can be useful to cover veterinary costs for illness, accidents and emergencies. There are plenty of options available. Some policies won't insure older pets over a certain age, so check the small print. Remember that preventative treatment such as vaccination isn't covered. Neither is treatment for conditions which have occurred prior to the policy being taken out. It is worth taking the time to ensure you get the cover you require. Your vet may be able to offer some advice. See cats.org.uk/pet-insurance

The following vet-approved guides are available as PDF downloads from cats.org.uk/information-leaflets

Essential guides

- 1 Caring for your cat **84001**
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- 11 Heart murmurs and heart disease **83211**
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- 13 Feline asthma **83213**
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- 16 Cat flu **83216**
- 17 Infectious disease and vaccination **83217**

Veterinary guides

- 1 Arthritis **83201**
- 2 Feline lower urinary tract disease (FLUTD) **83202**
- 3 Diabetes **83203**
- 18 Digestive disorders: vomiting and diarrhoea **83218**
- 19 You and your vet **83219**
- 20 Cats and pregnant women: toxoplasmosis **83220**

**Making a better life for cats,
because life is better with cats**



For more information about Cats Protection or to find out how you can support us, go to **cats.org.uk**

Cats Protection is a registered charity 203644 (England and Wales), SC037711 (Scotland) and is listed as a Section 167 institution by the Charity Commission of Northern Ireland.

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