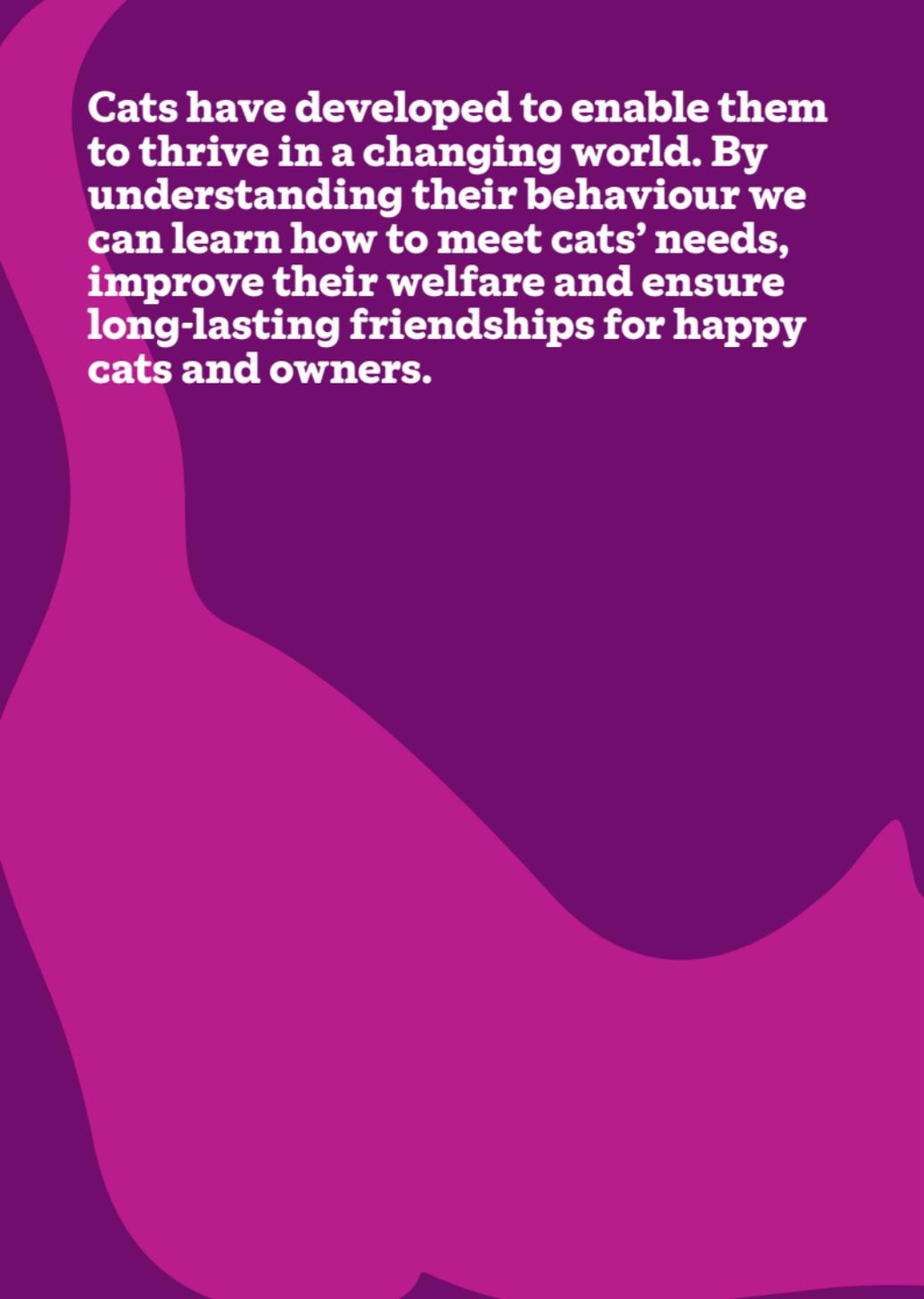


# Understanding your cat's behaviour

[cats.org.uk](https://cats.org.uk)





**Cats have developed to enable them to thrive in a changing world. By understanding their behaviour we can learn how to meet cats' needs, improve their welfare and ensure long-lasting friendships for happy cats and owners.**

This guide explains the normal behaviour of cats, their needs and motivation.

We also suggest some approaches to manage the issues that may arise. If you are concerned by any aspect of your cat's behaviour, you can find more helpful advice at [\*\*cats.org.uk/managing-cat-behaviour\*\*](https://cats.org.uk/managing-cat-behaviour)

## Wild ancestors

In order to understand today's pet cat, we first need to explore their wild origins. The domestic cat shares common ancestry with the African wildcat originating in the Middle East. They have many physical and behavioural similarities with our domestic cat and are still thriving today.

The African wildcat lives a solitary lifestyle in a harsh terrain. There is only a small concentration of rodent prey, so the cats are dispersed over a wide area. Each wildcat maintains a large territory but they exhibit many of their normal everyday behaviours in a safe, core area within this territory.

They are most active at dusk and dawn when their prey is active. Hunting is frequent and tiring. Not every attempt is successful, so they have learned to hunt before they become hungry. Each 'catch' is taken back to the core area where the cat can eat without threat from larger predators or rivals.

They don't use many facial expressions to communicate, instead leaving a scent profile to mark their territory and communicate with other cats. This means they don't have to come into contact with them which reduces the risk of fighting and injuries.

When faced with a stressful situation, they prefer to make an escape, after which their stress levels return to normal.

The African wildcat needs a lot of sleep because of the energy used during hunting. They will usually choose a safe, elevated sleeping spot within their core territory. They will often scratch to maintain their claws when they wake up.

A wildcat learns to dig and bury their poo at a young age, to conceal their location from predators. They will choose a safe, quiet and private area towards the edge of their territory. It will be away from sites of eating and drinking to avoid contamination. Where possible, they avoid drinking from stagnant pools and will choose a drinking source separate from where they eat and toilet.

Females call when they are ready to mate, and because they have large territories males will often travel long distances to find the females. The number of kittens born in a litter reflects the food availability. When food sources are low, fewer kittens are born. Following birth, kittens need to quickly learn what is safe and normal in their environment. Once old enough, surviving kittens will find their own territory with enough food and water.

## Domestic cats

This may all sound very familiar. Our own domestic cats share many similarities with the African wildcat. All cats share some natural and basic needs. However, each cat is an individual where both genetics and previous experience will also play a great part in shaping their behaviour.

## Sociability

Perhaps one of the most striking differences between individual cats is their sociability to people. Fundamentally, the domestic cat is not born liking or in need of human companionship. It is through the socialisation process with people that this develops. Between the ages of two to seven weeks, kittens can learn to enjoy human contact, forming a bond and becoming great pets. Cats that have had some degree of socialisation will vary in how confident they are around people.

Feral cats are not adequately socialised to humans and the home environment. They will behave as wild cats and will thrive best living away from people. Better socialised cats will be more confident. Genetics also play a significant role in how confident, or not, a cat is around people, other animals or new situations.

Find out more: [cats.org.uk/kitten-socialisation](https://cats.org.uk/kitten-socialisation)

## Feral cats

Many feral cats will remain solitary but occasionally some live together in groups, called colonies.

The make-up of these colonies is quite particular and does not reflect how cats cope in domestic multi-cat households. Feral cats within a colony live in harmony with one another if they recognise the shared group scent and they are able to find sufficient essentials such as food, water, toileting and sleeping areas. Colonies are usually made up of a few generations of related females and some males.

They engage in social interactions such as mutual grooming and rubbing. These activities keep the 'group scent' topped up, allowing recognition.

Despite living as a group, they will continue to hunt and eat alone, and aren't dependent upon one another. Feral cats within a colony tend to see off any 'stranger' cats intruding in the territory.

Find out more: [cats.org.uk/feral-cat](https://cats.org.uk/feral-cat)

## **Cats as companion animals**

It is important to remember that a cat's requirements are not human-based. It's incredibly rewarding to see the world from their point of view to make a positive change in their welfare. Cats need a stimulating and safe home. They need to be able to express their natural behaviours.

### **Solitary by nature**

Cats have a complicated social behaviour. They usually prefer to live independently from other cats. In some instances they can form social bonds with other cats. To successfully live with others the cats need to perceive each other to be in the same social group. They also need enough essential items, such as food and water bowls, bedding and litter trays so there is no competition.

The more cats that share a space, the less likely they will all be socially bonded. As a result this will significantly increase stress and diminish the wellbeing of each cat involved.

Cats can be identified as being in the same social group if they sleep touching one another and spend time rubbing and grooming each other. Cats in one social group should be provided with separate essential items such as food, water, litter trays and resting areas, away from those of cats in a different social group, even if they all live in the same house.

Even if the cats are not being obviously unfriendly towards each other, this doesn't mean that they are bonded. The mere presence of another cat can cause stress.

Introducing a new cat should be done very slowly. This way they will hopefully see each other as part of the same social group. Or at least they can live together peacefully because they have been provided with separate essential items to avoid conflict and competition. Each new relationship is dependent on the individual cats and how their early encounters were managed.

Just because a cat has lived happily with another cat before, it doesn't mean that they will take to a new cat. Unfortunately there is no guarantee, even with careful management, that the introduction of unfamiliar cats will work out. There are some cats that are unlikely to ever perceive other cats as anything but a threat and may prefer to live on their own. Find out more: [cats.org.uk/introducing-cats](https://cats.org.uk/introducing-cats)

## Hunters

Domestic cats still need to hunt and, like the African wildcat, this activity isn't directly linked to hunger. Each part of the hunting activity, the stalk, pounce, play and kill, releases feel-good hormones called endorphins.

Cats need to have frequent successful 'kills' to avoid frustration and are most likely to hunt at dawn and dusk. Some cats are prolific hunters, while others catch nothing at all, it varies from cat to cat. Like their wild ancestors, those which do hunt will often bring their prey back to their home, or core area.

Find out more: [cats.org.uk/garden-and-outdoors](https://cats.org.uk/garden-and-outdoors)

Play is an excellent outlet for cats to exhibit this natural behaviour. Rest assured that play will not increase the likelihood of your cat hunting, play may actually reduce it.

Cats in the wild spend a lot of their time on frequent hunting expeditions, catching up to 12 small rodents per day. In comparison, we give our cats bowls of food, so a meal doesn't take long to eat or make use of their powerful senses. You can create interest at mealtimes and reduce boredom by hiding food around the house for your cat to search out. Make a pyramid out of cardboard toilet roll tubes and hide food in the tubes or use a puzzle feeder. Find out more: [cats.org.uk/cats-and-play](https://cats.org.uk/cats-and-play)

Do not encourage your cat to play with your fingers or toes as this will cause them to associate hands and feet with play. Find out more: [cats.org.uk/managing-cat-behaviour](https://cats.org.uk/managing-cat-behaviour)

## How do cats communicate?

Cats are known for having limited facial expressions. This makes them difficult to read. Instead, they rely on scent communication. They mark their territory leaving distant scent signals that last for some time. This allows them to communicate to other cats as well as leave signals and warnings for themselves.

Cats will rub against items in the home to lay their scent which helps them feel safe and secure. Consider your cat when you're cleaning your home. If they have just newly arrived into your home or have recently had a stressful experience, temporarily avoid deep cleaning while their scent profile builds up. With modern cleaning we may be constantly removing this scent from their environment. This can cause some anxiety and disorientation. Modern lifestyles also mean we bring new scents into the environment.

Cats will often spray the edges of their territory with their pee. Usually this is outdoors, but they may spray indoors, often at entry or exit points, such as windows or doorways. Spraying indoors indicates that something is wrong. They spray as a warning reminder to themselves. This behaviour can be seen in any cat, male or female, whether neutered or not. Find out more: [cats.org.uk/spraying](https://cats.org.uk/spraying)

## Scratching

Domestic cats scratch to keep their claws in good condition and to mark their territory. Cats like to stretch and scratch after they wake up, so try placing their scratching post near their bed. A scratching post will provide exercise, claw maintenance and a focal point for your cat to express this natural behaviour. It will also help protect your furniture.

A good scratching post has the following features:

- a strong sturdy base so 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

Find out more: [cats.org.uk/scratching](https://cats.org.uk/scratching)

## Coping with stress and conflict

Cats are all individuals and some may be more affected by stress than others. Your cat needs the opportunity to run, hide and climb when stressed. Cats will often find appropriate places at home such as in a cupboard or underneath the bed. Make sure they aren't disturbed when in their 'safe' areas. This will allow their stress levels to come down.

Cats will only fight if there is no other option available, or if previous experiences of fighting have had a positive outcome for them.

Every cat needs an easily accessible place to hide which will help to make them feel safe and secure. Many things can cause your cat to feel anxious or scared:

- fireworks
- building work in the house
- unfamiliar visitors
- conflict with other cats

A hiding place can be something as simple as a cardboard box on its side, or upside down, with large holes for access. Or you could buy an igloo-style cat bed.

Find out more: [cats.org.uk/cats-hiding](https://cats.org.uk/cats-hiding)

Cats like to be up high. It allows them to view their surroundings from a safe height. Give them access to higher spaces where they can relax such as shelves or the top of a wardrobe. Putting a stool nearby can help them climb up more easily. Give extra thought to elderly cats who may not be agile.

Find out more: [cats.org.uk/elderly-cats](https://cats.org.uk/elderly-cats)

## Sleep

Cats usually sleep for about 16 hours a day, on and off, and often change their chosen sleeping area. Cats need access to a variety of sleeping areas and shouldn't be expected to remain in one particular bed. Options work well, a cat may sometimes feel the need to rest in a secure, covered bed while other times they may want to lie sprawled out. Cats will often seek space to sleep off the ground. There are a number of factors that may affect where a cat chooses to sleep and they may often choose different bed areas dependent on time of day or temperature for example.

Find out more: [cats.org.uk/cats-and-sleep](https://cats.org.uk/cats-and-sleep)

## Toileting

Tips for creating the perfect cat toilet:

- have one litter tray per cat, plus one extra, all in different quiet locations, especially if your cats are kept indoors
- place litter trays away from where your cat eats and drinks, in a private area away from other cats
- provide a good-sized litter tray, the bigger the better

- use an unscented litter. Cats learn to associate toileting with the material used when they were a kitten. Generally they prefer to use a fine grain litter
- make the litter 3cm deep so they can dig and bury their poo
- scoop the tray at least once a day and replace the litter completely once a week
- always have a litter tray available inside even if your cat prefers to toilet outdoors
- do not flush cat poo down the toilet, place in a biodegradable bag and into the household waste bin

#### Tips for the perfect outdoor cat toilet:

- give them their own toilet area in your garden as near to the house as possible (their core territory)
- choose a secluded, sheltered area with well-dug, fine soil
- add some cat litter which will encourage them to toilet there
- dig it over regularly to remain hygienic and allow the soiled material to decompose naturally

Being creatures of habit, once a cat has a preferred toileting site, they will continue to use it unless something causes them to reject it. A lack of privacy and problems with access or cleanliness will cause them to look for another place.

Find out more: [cats.org.uk/toileting](https://cats.org.uk/toileting)

## Drinking

You should make sure your cat has a source of clean, fresh water all the time (even if they do sometimes prefer drinking from puddles).

Tips:

- keep their water bowls away from their food and litter tray
- use a wide bowl as cats like to drink without anything touching their whiskers
- use a ceramic, metal or glass bowl as plastic can taint the water and put your cat off drinking
- give them more than one bowl of water, in different places
- some cats prefer moving water. Special bowls designed to keep the water moving are available or you can turn a tap on for them (you might want to supervise them if they like drinking from taps)

- offer them filtered water as some cats are sensitive to the chlorine in tap water
- make sure your cat's shadow doesn't block their view of the surface of the water, as it might put them off
- if your cat likes drinking from your glasses of water, provide some 'cat only' glasses around the house. Just make sure your cat can't knock the glass over

Find out more: [cats.org.uk/cats-and-drinking](https://cats.org.uk/cats-and-drinking)

## Reproduction

Cats can become sexually active from four months of age. Females will call when they are ready to mate and males will travel long distances to find them. Cats are prolific breeders. A female can have up to five litters a year. We recommend neutering by around four months of age to prevent unwanted litters.

Find out more: [cats.org.uk/neutering](https://cats.org.uk/neutering)

Any kittens born need to experience as many positive experiences as possible during their first two to seven weeks of age for them to consider these safe and normal in future. This will enable them to become happy pets.

# Individuals

Every cat has their own character and this is part of their appeal. Their differences are due to a number of factors and are influenced by:

- genetics
- stress levels of the mother when pregnant
- socialisation. A lack of which can affect how they respond to people, handling and household sounds
- later learning experiences, including:
  - a cat developing an association between their own behaviour and the consequence of that behaviour. For example, miaowing leads to their owner letting them in, so they will miaow when they want to be let in
- medical conditions
- current environment

## **The indoor life**

Many cats will enjoy going outside for part of the day. It gives them the opportunity to investigate new things and make use of their fantastic senses. It also provides mental stimulation and reduces stress. If you are keeping cats indoors, extra care is needed to avoid boredom, frustration or the development of behaviour problems.

Find out more: [cats.org.uk/indoor-cats](https://cats.org.uk/indoor-cats)

## **How to interact with your cat and read their body language**

Cats like brief, low intensity but frequent interactions. When cats that get along greet each other, it tends to be a brief head rub. Unfortunately, humans are the opposite! Our interactions are generally less frequent, but when we have them, they are generally of high intensity and prolonged. This can sometimes be a source of confusion between cats and their owners.

Cats can get quite stimulated or excited when they are playing or in 'hunting mode'. It's generally not advisable to touch any cat in this state.

Even when touching a calm, relaxed cat, there are many places on the body that are quite vulnerable or sensitive.

While there are always exceptions, as a general rule, many cats don't like to be touched in these places:

- belly. For some cats this can include their sides and chest
- paws
- legs, under their legs, their armpits
- bottom half of back; particularly if stiff or painful
- base of tail
- genital area

When stroking your cat, always move your hand in the direction of their fur.

Learning to understand your cat's body language is a fascinating part of owning a cat and it can improve the relationship between you. Cats can be very subtle in their body language and can be difficult to 'read'. They haven't evolved the many visual communication signals that are seen in social species, like dogs. Spend time watching your cat. See how they move and interact with their environment, their facial expressions, body postures and vocalisations in different situations. You can start to build a picture of how your cat is feeling.

Find out more: [cats.org.uk/cat-body-language](https://cats.org.uk/cat-body-language)

Here are a few common body postures to give you clues about your cat's mood:

<b>Body language</b>	<b>Cat's mood</b>	<b>How to interact with your cat</b>
Tail up and relaxed, ears facing forwards, often walking towards you.	Relaxed, friendly cat showing greeting behaviour.	Let them sniff your hand and if you are familiar with the cat, you may want to stroke their head and along their back.
Tail up, rubbing their head and side of their body around your legs and sometimes rolling over onto their side to show their belly.	Relaxed, friendly cat showing greeting behaviour, often seen after a period of separation.	Cats that roll onto their side or back and expose their belly are showing that they feel relaxed enough in your presence to expose such a vulnerable area. The best response is to verbally acknowledge the cat's greeting, rather than stroke or tickle their tummy.

<b>Body language</b>	<b>Cat's mood</b>	<b>How to interact with your cat</b>
<p>Lying outstretched on their side with their paws stretched out in front of them, often with a sleepy look on their face as their eyes may be half closed or blinking.</p>	<p>Relaxed and contented cat. Some cats may sleep in this position, especially if they have found a sunny spot!</p>	<p>If they are awake, let them sniff your hand and then give them a brief rub on the head. If they look sleepy, then leave them to get some rest.</p>
<p>In a crouched position with tail tucked around or under their body and muscles tense. Their eyes may be darting about and ears back or moving listening to sounds around them.</p>	<p>Anxious cat. They may be looking for a place to hide, to run away and get up high.</p>	<p>Make sure they have an escape route and somewhere that they can hide and get up high if they want to. It is best to leave them alone and not try to interact with them.</p>
<p>Arched back, bushy tail and fur standing up to make themselves look bigger. Their eyes look big as their pupils are dilated and ears are flattened against their head.</p>	<p>Fearful cat. They may feel threatened or trapped. They may hiss or spit as a warning to stay back. Be careful as they may attack defensively as a last resort.</p>	<p>Make sure they have an escape route and a hiding place or a high spot to retreat to. Do not approach or touch a cat that is feeling fearful.</p>

The following vet-approved guides are available as PDF downloads from [cats.org.uk/information-leaflets](https://cats.org.uk/information-leaflets)

## Essential guides

- 1 Caring for your cat **84001**
- 2 Welcome home **84002**
- 3 Moving home **84003**
- 4 Feeding and obesity **84004**
- 5 Keeping your cat safe **84005**
- 6 Neutering **84006**
- 7 When to let go **84007**
- 8 Microchipping **84008**
- 9 Understanding your cat's behaviour **84009**
- 10 Managing your cat's behaviour **84010**
- 11 Cats living together **84011**
- 12 Indoor and outdoor cats **84012**
- 13 Cats and the law **84013**
- 14 Cats and people **84014**
- 15 Caring for your kitten **84015**
- 16 Elderly cats **84016**
- 17 Feral cats **84017**
- 18 Pregnant cats, birth and care of young kittens **84018**
- 4 Itchy cats and skin disorders **83204**
- 5 Feline parvovirus (FPV) **83205**
- 6 Kidney or renal disease **83206**
- 7 Cats with disabilities **83207**
- 8 Hypertension **83208**
- 9 Feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV) and feline leukaemia virus (FeLV) **83209**
- 10 Feline coronavirus (FCoV) and feline infectious peritonitis (FIP) **83210**
- 11 Heart murmurs and heart disease **83211**
- 12 Hyperthyroidism **83212**
- 13 Feline asthma **83213**
- 14 Teeth and oral health **83214**
- 15 Fleas and other parasites **83215**
- 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](https://cats.org.uk)**

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