RSPCA

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HOW TO TAKE CARE OF YOUR cat

Keeping your cat healthy and happy

www.rspca.org.uk/cats

HOW TO TAKE CARE OF YOUR

cat

Keeping your cat healthy and happy

Owning and caring for a cat be very rewarding, but it's a big responsibility and a long-term commitment in terms of care and cost. Typically, cats live for around fourteen years, but many may live for much longer.

Spay and snip – protect your cat because you care

To protect your girl cat from getting pregnant, she will need to go to the vet to have a simple operation, called spaying. She should be spayed before she is four months old. At around this age your cat will start to attract the attention of tomcats. This is why it is important to have her spayed before she is four months old to protect her from getting pregnant while she is still a kitten herself. You may have heard that it's good for cats to have a litter of kittens before they are spayed – but this isn't true. Once she has been spayed your kitten will be able to do all the things cats enjoy doing, like going outdoors, climbing trees and playing.

Your boy cat will need to have a simple operation, called the snip. This can help stop him spraying in your house to mark his territory, which can be very smelly and unpleasant, and getting nasty injuries from fights because he wants to mate. He will also be less likely to wander off and get run over, as cats that are snipped tend to stay closer to home. Check out www.rspca.org.uk/pets for more details.

There is no single 'perfect' way to care for all cats because every cat and every situation is different. Many cats are given outside access, whilst some may be kept as indoor-only pets. It's up to you how you look after your cat, but you must take reasonable steps to ensure that you meet all his/her needs.

Under the Animal Welfare Act, pet owners are legally obliged to provide for the following five basic welfare needs.

1. **A suitable place to live.**
2. **A healthy diet, including fresh clean water.**
3. **The ability to behave normally.**
4. **Appropriate company, including any need to be housed with, or apart from, other animals.**
5. **Protection from pain, suffering, injury and disease.**

This booklet will help you to find out more about what your cat needs to stay healthy and happy.

Joe Murphy, Angela Hampton/RSPCA Photolibrary

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Environment

MAKE SURE YOUR CAT HAS A SUITABLE PLACE TO LIVE

Cats are territorial animals and so prefer to stay around their familiar home. They are active animals so your cat will need regular opportunities to run, jump and climb – but they will often feel safest when high up. They can be frightened of unfamiliar places and smells so cats also need to have safe hiding places that they can go to if they are feeling scared.

Home comforts

Cats and kittens need a warm, dry place for snoozing, and your cat will need a comfortable, draught-free, clean and quiet place where he/she can rest undisturbed. Cats also need to be able to go to the toilet regularly – either in a suitable area outside or in a litter tray – well away from where they eat and sleep.

The litter tray must be kept clean and emptied at least once a day – otherwise, your cat will refuse to use it and may toilet on the floor instead. If you are housetraining a new kitten, it's a good idea to add a little of the old litter to the fresh litter when cleaning the tray – this will encourage them to use it until fully housetrained.

Don't use bleaches and disinfectants containing coal tar and carbolic derivatives to clean the tray – these are poisonous to cats. Strong-scented cleaning products may also upset your cat and some cats are even sensitive to certain types of cat litter and may not like to use their tray as a result. If a cat is ill, this may also affect how they use a litter tray. For example, cats with bladder

infections often experience pain when urinating. They may begin to associate the pain with the litter tray and so start using other areas of the house to toilet in. If your cat is not using his/her litter tray, ask your vet for advice.

If you have more than one cat, make sure you provide enough litter trays, toys, beds and hiding places for all of them, as well as enough space for them to get away from each other if they want to.

In and out

Cats should have access to the house at all times during the day and night.

A cat flap fitted into one of the external doors of the house is useful. Your cat will be able to get in and out easily. The doors are burglar proof if fitted correctly – out of reach of security locks. Many can be adjusted so that your cat can come in but not go out again – useful if you do not want them to go out at night to reduce the risk of traffic accidents.

Keeping cats indoors

Cats can adapt well to an indoor life if they are kept indoors from an early age, but cats that have been used to going outside may find it more difficult to adapt.

The RSPCA doesn't recommend keeping a cat that is used to going outside, as an 'indoor-only cat', unless it is for health reasons.

If your cat doesn't have the freedom to go outside, you still need to provide everything they need to stay healthy and happy. Make sure they have enough space to exercise, climb and play indoors and include a variety of resting places for them to use. Remember, cats are intelligent so can get bored if they don't have enough to do! Indoor cats need the same physical and mental stimulation as outdoor cats, so give your cat lots of care and attention every day.

»» If your cat doesn't go outside, please visit the RSPCA website for more tips on *Keeping cats indoors* at: www.rspca.org.uk/cats/environment/indoors

Andrew Forsyth/RSPCA Photolibrary, Perets, Julie Vader/istock

Environment

Holiday time

Cats become very attached to places so if you are going away, try to find a responsible person to care for, and meet all of your cat's welfare needs within his/her familiar home. Remember to leave them your vet's telephone number and clear instructions on how to care for your pet. If you are boarding your cat, check out the cattery in advance and make sure it is licensed. Good catteries will insist that all animals are fully vaccinated and will ask to see certificates. Also check that the cattery is never left unattended. Taking familiar items along when your cat goes into the cattery, e.g. your cat's bed and toys, can help them feel more 'at home'.

If you have to take your cat to a new location, use a secure cat carrier and introduce your cat to their new environment gradually. The carrier should be large enough for your cat to sit, turn around and lie down naturally in. Putting familiar smelling items in the carrier may also help them to feel at ease.

For tips on caring for your cat while you're away, go to www.rspca.org.uk/pets

On the move

If you move house, your cat may try to get back to their previous home so keep them indoors for at least two to three weeks after you move.

Make sure that your cat seems settled before letting him/her outside. You may want to supervise your cat for the first few times they venture out – this can be reassuring for both of you!

If you have to take your cat out in the car, make sure they are comfortable and safe at all times.

Check out our factsheet on how to transport your pets safely in the general pet care section of our website at www.rspca.org.uk/pets

Diet

MAKE SURE YOUR CAT HAS A HEALTHY DIET

Your cat needs a well-balanced diet to stay fit and healthy as well as access to clean drinking water at all times. How much your cat needs to eat will depend on things such as age, how active they are and their general health. If they eat more or less food than necessary, they will become overweight/underweight and may suffer.

Feeding time

Cats need a well-balanced, meat-based diet to stay fit and healthy so your cat would not be suited to a vegetarian diet. Some human foods, such as onions, are also poisonous to cats. Always ask your vet for advice on what, and how much, to feed your cat and, once you've found a balanced diet which suits them, then stick to it. There's a wide range of products now available, in either dry or wet form, but whatever prepared food you choose, always read the manufacturer's instructions.

Knape, Viktor Lugovskoy, Hagit Berkovich/istock

Diet

Place your cat's food and water well away from their litter tray (if you provide one).

Feed your cat every day, preferably splitting the daily ration into several small meals throughout the day (unless advised otherwise by your vet). If your cat's eating and drinking habits change, talk to your vet, as they could be ill.

Changing diets suddenly can lead to upset stomachs. Ask your vet for advice if you need to change your cat's diet due to their age or health problems.

Your cat also needs lots of fresh water every day. Do not give them milk – it can give kittens diarrhoea and sometimes causes stomach problems in adult cats.

Weight watch

There are a few simple regular checks you can make yourself to help check that your cat is a healthy weight:

- Make sure you can see and feel the outline of your cat's ribs without excess fat covering.
- Your cat's belly should be tucked up when viewed from the side.
- You should be able to see and feel your cat's waist and it should be clearly visible when viewed from above.

If you are in any doubt about your cat's weight, always talk your vet.

For further information about pet obesity visit the RSPCA website at: www.rspca.org.uk/pets

Behaviour

MAKE SURE YOUR CAT IS ABLE TO BEHAVE NORMALLY

Cats are active and need opportunities to exercise. They naturally spend a great deal of time around their home territory and may even hunt for food. They are also playful and often enjoy having fun with toys and with people.

The way a cat behaves depends on their age, personality and past experiences – frightening experiences and punishment can lead to behaviour problems.

Signs that a cat may be suffering from stress or fear can include high levels of grooming, hiding, sleeping hunched or altered feeding or toileting habits. Cats that are frightened or in pain may change their behaviour or develop unwanted habits such as aggression, spraying indoors, disappearing or avoiding people.

Andrew Forsyth, Mike Lane/RSPCA Photolibrary, Konradlew/Istock

Behaviour

STRESS BUSTERS

Make sure your cat can reach all the things that they need (bed, water, litter or outdoors) without having to pass by close to things or other animals that may scare them. Your cat will also need easy access to safe hiding places to escape to if they feel afraid.

Cats are intelligent and they need regular mental and physical stimulation. Make sure your cat has plenty of opportunities to exercise each day so they can stay fit and healthy.

If your cat doesn't go outside, you'll need to provide lots of suitable indoor activities to keep them active – see *Environment* section on page 5.

Play time!

Cats naturally use objects to scratch, to mark their territory, strengthen their muscles and sharpen their claws. Provide your cat with a sturdy scratching post which is tall enough for them to use fully stretched, especially if they don't go outdoors.

Safe toys and regular opportunities to play with friendly people and by him/herself will help keep your cat stress-free, healthy and happy. You could even try adding interest to meal times by hiding dried food or using a puzzle feeder.

Be observant. If your cat's behaviour changes or he/she shows regular signs of stress or fear, talk to your vet who may suggest referral to a clinical animal behaviourist. Never shout at or punish your cat, as they are very unlikely to understand and may become even more nervous or scared.

»» For further information on finding a qualified animal behaviourist, take a look at the RSPCA website at: www.rspca.org.uk/findabehaviourist.

Company

MAKE SURE YOUR CAT HAS APPROPRIATE COMPANY

Many cats enjoy and benefit from human company– if cats are treated well as kittens, they can learn to see people as friends and companions. If your cat is introduced to other animals, such as dogs, early in life, they are less likely to be scared of them as an adult.

Two's a crowd?

Most adult cats will only be friendly to cats who they have grown up with, particularly siblings, and may not accept new cats into their home. Cats who are friends will groom and rub against each other and may even choose to share the same bed.

Introducing a second cat may not be the best way to meet your cat's needs, as many cats are happier living without the associated anxiety of having to avoid other cats they don't like.

Cats who are unfriendly to each other don't like to share (e.g. food, water, litter, beds) or to pass by each other too closely – so think carefully before getting a second cat. If you do, ask your vet and/or a behaviourist for advice on the best way to introduce them.

If you already have cats who are not friends, make sure that they are able to avoid each other at all times and that they can access everything they need without having to interact at all. Don't force your cat to interact with people or animals that they don't like, and make sure they can avoid them.

Michelle Gibson/istock, Becky Murray, Chris Brignell/RSPCA Photolibrary

Health & welfare

MAKE SURE YOUR CAT IS PROTECTED FROM PAIN, SUFFERING, INJURY AND DISEASE

Individual cats show pain and suffering in different ways. A change in the way a cat behaves can be an early sign that they are ill or in pain. Cats who are insecure or stressed can also become unwell as a result.

Before deciding to buy/acquire a cat, always make sure you find out what health and behaviour problems they have, or may be prone to, for instance as a result of their breed, how they have been bred, and how they have been cared for. Always check with a vet if you are unsure about anything.

Think about taking out pet insurance. For just a few pounds a month, you'll be covered for unexpected vets' bills in the future and safeguard your pet's health.

Also consider having your cat microchipped. A tiny microchip is inserted under your cat's skin and can be scanned and matched to the registered owner's contact details. You must make sure the database you are registered with has your up-to-date contact details. A one-off payment for microchipping your cat means you are more likely to be quickly reunited if they go missing and they are more likely to receive prompt veterinary care if injured.

Health checklist

- Check your cat for signs of injury or illness every day, and make sure someone else does this if you are away. If you suspect that your cat is in pain, ill or injured, go and see your vet immediately.
- You will need to get your cat spayed or snipped – see page 2. This should be done before your kitten is four months old. Your vet will be able to explain what's involved and why it's a good idea.
- Take your cat for a routine health check with your vet at least once a year. It's a good chance to ask for advice about things you can do to protect your cat's health, such as essential vaccinations and treatments to control parasites (fleas and worms).

For detailed information visit: www.rspca.org.uk/pets

- Only use medicines that have been prescribed for your individual cat – human and dog medicines can be very dangerous to cats.
- Make sure your cat's coat is kept in good condition by regular grooming. Grooming is also a good way to bond with your cat if they enjoy it.

POISONING

It's every responsible owner's nightmare if their pet is poisoned. Make sure you're prepared for such an emergency. Preventing your cat from coming into contact with poisonous substances and treating any accidental poisonings quickly and appropriately is an important part of responsible pet ownership.

Never 'watch and wait' in any case of suspected poisoning. If you suspect your pet has been poisoned, act fast and contact your nearest vet for advice immediately.

Signs of poisoning include vomiting, diarrhoea, dehydration, hyperactivity, high temperature and blood pressure, abnormal heart rhythm and tremors.

You can check out our factsheet on some of the most common poisons that cat owners should be aware of. These include paracetamol, some houseplants such as lilies, ethylene glycol (the active ingredient in anti-freeze), some spot-on flea treatments for dogs, and some slug and snail baits.

Read RSPCA advice on what to do if you think your cat has been poisoned and how to prevent poisonings at: www.rspca.org.uk/poisoning

Angela Hampton, Joe Murphy/RSPCA Photolibrary

FIND OUT MORE...

Cats are amazing animals with complex needs that must be met if they are to be kept healthy and happy.

There's loads more to learn about cats on the RSPCA website – from our fascinating facts to detailed advice sheets on various aspects of cat care. So make sure you visit

www.rspca.org.uk/cats

Keeping your cats healthy and happy

Grass: Dimitrije Tanaskovic/istock

If you are thinking of taking on a cat or kitten, make sure that you've researched their welfare needs and you're committed to taking care of them for life. Please also think about giving a home to some of the many rescue cats available for adoption at RSPCA animal centres across England and Wales.

Some rescue cats prefer to live without other pets, while others are used to living with children and/or other animals so our staff take great care to make sure each cat is perfectly matched to the right owner. We advise neutering prior to rehoming to prevent unwanted pregnancies and health problems. All the cats we rehome are microchipped to give them the best chance of being identified if they get lost or stolen. Each cat is also vaccinated, flea-treated and wormed. Kittens have at least had their first vaccination.

www.rspca.org.uk/rehoming

This booklet will help you find out what cats need to stay healthy and happy.

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