

All About Pets

The national pet care information service

CARING FOR YOUR ELDERLY CAT



THE BLUE CROSS

Britain's pet charity

With improved nutrition and veterinary care, more cats are living to greater ages. Cats over ten years old are considered to be 'geriatric', although many live to 14 and beyond.

Effects of ageing

As with people, old age brings a number of changes to how a cat's body works.

- A reduction in muscle tone, which may effect a cat's ability to run, jump and climb. Lack of exercise contributes to the stiffening of joints.
- Lack of appetite as the senses of taste and smell deteriorate. Teeth problems are common and can discourage eating.
- Poor bowel function, causing problems such as a reduced ability to absorb food nutrients. This can lead to weight loss. Some elderly cats suffer from constipation.
- Decreased thirst and a risk of dehydration. This is particularly dangerous in cats with kidney problems.
- Older cats tend to sleep less heavily, but more frequently
- Poor coat condition, which may make the cat less resistant to the cold and wet





Preventive health care

Older cats benefit from regular health checks. Many veterinary surgeries have geriatric clinics specifically for this purpose where a thorough examination can be performed, checking for weight changes and teeth, thyroid, heart or other problems. Regular booster vaccinations are still advised in old cats to stimulate the immune system and help fight infections such as cat 'flu.

Insurance

Older cats may develop chronic illnesses that require long term medication. Many conditions can be treated successfully, but the cost can be prohibitive. If your cat is under eight to ten years old (depending on the insurance company) you may still be able to insure against these costs for the future. If you adopt a cat from The Blue Cross, you'll receive six weeks free insurance from Pet Plan and the opportunity to continue this policy regardless of the age of your cat.

Feeding tips

As older cats drink less, a tinned diet with a high water content is preferable along with easy access to fresh clean drinking water. In cats particularly fond of dry food, a few biscuits can also be offered. This may help to reduce the build up of tartar on the teeth.

Some medical problems can be managed by feeding prescription diets. For example, kidney failure is common in elderly cats and a diet restricted in protein and phosphorous may be recommended.

Creature comforts

While many cats age gracefully and do not need special treatment, most will appreciate a warm, comfortable bed in a quiet, draft-free area where they can sleep safely. Older cats often like to stretch out and bean bags and hammock beds on radiators are very popular. The cat may need help to jump onto chairs using cushions or stools as 'steps'.

Attention should be paid to the older cat's nails. These are less able to retract and more likely to get trapped in the carpet or, if overgrown, to stick painfully into the pad. Your vet can advise you on how to clip claws safely. With increasing age, cats are less able to groom themselves effectively and may need to be groomed by you. It may also be necessary to gently wipe away any discharge around the eyes, nose or anus using cotton wool moistened in warm water. Some older cats need help using the catflap – try tying the flap open. You might also want to provide a litter tray indoors.

Microchipping

Many domestic animals get lost every year and unless they have some form of identification, may never find their way home. Although it is possible to use a collar and disc to identify your cat, these can easily fall off. A better option is microchipping, which involves a tiny microchip about the size of a grain of rice being inserted under the skin between the shoulder blades. The chip has a unique number, which can be read by a special scanner and the number is registered on a national database. Microchip identification is a requirement if you intend to take advantage of the Pet Travel Scheme and travel abroad with your cat.



Common health problems

Kidney failure is one of the most frequently diagnosed conditions of the elderly cat. Other geriatric diseases include hormonal problems like hyperthyroidism (an overactive thyroid gland) and diabetes mellitus (sugar diabetes), hypertension (high blood pressure), cancer, periodontal disease (disease of the teeth and gums), arthritis and infections such as feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV).

Early recognition of disease and prompt treatment is important in the older cat so that a good quality of life can be maintained for as long as possible.

Medicines and the older cat

Liver and kidney disease can affect the older cat's ability to cope with medicine. Most drugs are broken down and eliminated from the body by the liver and kidneys, so diseases of these organs can result in accumulation of drugs in the bloodstream, potentially reaching toxic levels. This is especially a problem if the cat is dehydrated. For these reasons, the choice of drug and dose regime is affected when treating the geriatric patient.

Giving tablets to some cats can be traumatic or even impossible if they resent it. If this is the case, your veterinary surgeon may be able to provide an alternative method of treatment. Treatment is sometimes aimed at alleviating a condition rather than curing it. Such treatment should not be continued if it is causing unacceptable side effects or if dosing is upsetting the cat severely. Quality of life is the most important factor and once this is no longer maintained, euthanasia should be considered.



How old is your cat?

Your cat may still look youthful but may actually be getting on in years.

Cat age	Equivalent in human years	Cat age	Equivalent in human years
1	15	11	60
2	24	12	64
3	28	13	68
4	32	14	72
5	36	15	76
6	40	16	80
7	44	17	84
8	48	18	88
9	52	19	92
10	56	20	96

Further information

For further information and advice on caring for your pet or horse visit www.allaboutpets.org.uk, the national pet care information service. Alternatively, you can write to us at the address below to request a list of available leaflets.

All About Pets is provided by The Blue Cross, Britain's pet charity. We rely entirely on your support to enable us to continue our vital work. Any contribution would be most welcome. Thank you.



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