

First aid for cats



A guide to basic health care

Routine health and safety care

This section provides a brief summary of routine health care with the emphasis on preventing problems. For more information refer to our Caring for Cats booklet

Registering with a vet

It's best to register your cat with a vet before a problem arises. This enables you to familiarise yourself with the surgery hours, likely fees and what telephone numbers to call in an emergency. All vets should provide a 24-hour service. Many specialise in pet animals and some may have a particular interest in cats; ask the receptionist if you are not sure. If you haven't been to a vet before ask friends and fellow cat owners for their personal recommendations.

If your cat has a particularly troublesome or puzzling problem your vet may suggest a referral to a specialist or a second opinion.

If, however, you wish to pursue this option yourself do consult your vet first. He or she may well be able to recommend a specialist appropriate for your cat's problem and in any case can then cooperate by making sure your cat's records are passed on. This ensures that no tests or treatment are unnecessarily duplicated and more importantly that nothing is done which may conflict with previous treatment and perhaps harm the cat. For these reasons vets are professionally bound to offer a second opinion when requested by the owner and not to treat a cat already under treatment without consulting the previous vet.



Photo: CP Photo Library



Transporting your cat

Your vet usually asks you to bring your cat to the surgery for treatment. Make sure you have access to a secure carrier – plastic or metal is best for easy disinfection. Cats Protection recommends a top-loading cat carrier for easy access. Cardboard boxes are not very secure, particularly if the cat soils them. Do not carry a cat in your arms he may become frightened when travelling or try to escape when meeting other animals in the surgery.

Diet

Cats are carnivores and must have meat in their diet. Problems can arise with dietary imbalance if too much of one type of food is fed.

Commercial diets are usually best as they contain a balance of all the nutrients your cat needs. Many foods are available both in tinned and dried form. Not all dried foods are suitable for feeding on their own. Clean water should always be available. Milk can

cause diarrhoea in some cats. If in doubt, ask your vet or veterinary nurse for advice. Also refer to our *Feeding Felines* booklet.

Hazards in the environment

Cats are great explorers and care must be taken with potential hazards in and around the home, particularly with young kittens. Watch out for hot surfaces and liquids in the kitchen, unguarded fires, electric cables, sewing pins and needles (especially with cotton attached) and open windows on upper stories. In the garden make sure that dustbins are secure as cats may scavenge and eat decayed food or cut themselves on tins or glass. Being inquisitive, cats may accidentally get shut in a shed or garage.

Cats often chew grass to help their digestion and will rarely eat poisonous plants except when no grass is available. If yours is an indoor cat provide some grass in a pot. Packets of cocksfoot grass seed

(which is particularly attractive to cats) can be obtained from CP Headquarters by sending a stamped addressed envelope.

Neutering

All cats not kept for breeding should be neutered to avoid the problem of unwanted kittens. Neutering reduces the risk of cats being involved in accidents or fights. Neutering can usually be carried out from five months of age or on the advice of your vet.



Photo: Gary Trotter

Confining your cat

Neutering does not of course prevent a cat from wandering and care must be taken, particularly with busy roads. If a front garden opens on to a road consider preventing the cat from going out that way or make the garden secure. Try and keep cats in at night – safe from accidents and theft.

Poisons

Examples of some common poisons

House	Garden/Sheds	Garage
Detergents	Herbicides	Engine oil
Disinfectants	Insecticides	Antifreeze
Bleach	Slug Bait	Paint remover
Medicines	Rodenticides	Wood preservatives

Some common plants poisonous to cats

Anemone	Buttercup	Clematis
Crocus	Delphinium	Dumb Cane
Foxglove	Holly	Hyacinth
Hydrangea	Impatiens	Lily of the Valley
Mistletoe	Philodendron	Poinsettia
Rhododendron	Snowdrop	Sweet Pea
Wisteria	Yew	

Vaccinations

Vaccination helps to prevent your cat contracting a number of potentially serious diseases. Vaccines are available against cat 'flu, infectious enteritis, feline leukaemia virus and chlamydiosis. Your vet can tell you which vaccines are advisable in your area. Cats normally need to be protected against 'flu and enteritis before being boarded. Vaccination starts at nine to ten weeks of age.

Parasites

All cats should be wormed routinely against roundworm and tapeworm every six months. Kittens under six months need to be wormed more frequently, depending on the preparation used. When grooming your cat watch out for the presence of tapeworm segments (which look like small grains of rice when dried out) stuck to the fur around the tail.

Fleas may cause irritation and skin disease and can spread tapeworms and some viral



Photo: CP Photo Library

infections. A variety of flea control products are available. Select one that is convenient for you and your pet. It is important to remember that fleas live in the house as well as on the cat. Any control measures must include the cat's environment to be effective. See our *Parasites* booklet or consult your vet for more details.

Grooming

Grooming your cat helps to keep the coat in good condition and free from tangles. In addition it reduces the risk of the cat ingesting fur balls when he grooms himself. This is most important in long-haired cats but short hairs also benefit. It is worth starting when the cat is young to get him used to the idea of being brushed and combed.

Routine cleaning

Check ears periodically. If necessary clean with a few drops of olive oil or a proprietary ear cleaner, wiping round afterwards with cotton wool on the end of a finger. Do not insert cotton buds in the ear. Eyes can be wiped clean with moistened cotton wool. Cats' teeth do frequently become covered in tartar and regular cleaning is beneficial if your cat cooperates. Use a very soft (baby's) brush and a mild salt solution. Proprietary brushes and toothpaste are available.

Sunburn

This is a very real problem for cats with white ears. The ultra-violet light causes damage to the unpigmented skin and eventually cancer may develop. Using a sunblock cream helps to prevent this. *Soltan* (from Boots) has been used successfully in cats with no reported adverse effects. Sunburn may also affect white noses and eyelids but it is less practical to apply cream to these areas.



Photo: Southport Branch

When a cat seems unwell

Just like humans, cats can have bad days, appearing off colour without showing any obvious signs. This may be nothing to worry about – the cat may just have a minor infection or he might have been upset by changes in his environment. However there is always a chance he could be developing a more serious illness.

Try examining the cat to see if there are any specific changes such as those listed below. The following advice may help. It is based on the sort of examination a vet might carry out. As you work through this section make a note of any problems you find.

Words in bold type refer to problems listed in the alphabetical section.

History

Before examining your cat think about what he has been doing –

- Q?** Has he been **missing** for any length of time? He may have been in an accident or shut in somewhere by mistake.
- Q?** When did he last **eat**? Has he refused food at all? Has his appetite changed recently? (See appetite changes, page 8.)
If he wants to eat but can't, there may be a mouth problem.
- Q?** Has he shown **increased thirst**?
- Q?** When did the cat last **pass faeces or urine**? (This may be difficult to assess if your cat toilets outside.)
If he has been straining and unable to pass anything this may indicate constipation or a urinary problem.



- Q?** Has there been any evidence of **diarrhoea**? Is the cat having trouble passing urine or passing it more frequently than normal? (See urinary problems, page 17).
- Q?** Has the cat been **vomiting**? Has he been coughing or sneezing? (See respiratory problems, page 15).
- Q?** Has there been any **weight loss**?

Physical examination

Now look at the cat itself. You may be able to see your cat has a problem straight away by the way he looks.

Posture

Try to see if he is sitting normally or whether he's weak and unable to sit up. (See collapse, page 10.) A cat which is unwell may continue to purr, even when in pain, but will often sit hunched up as though uncomfortable.

Breathing

Is the breathing unusually rapid (normal for a cat is 25 to 30 breaths per minute) or laboured? This might indicate a respiratory problem. Note, however, that rapid breathing may occur in hot weather or after exertion. If it slows down after rest there may be nothing to worry about.

Movement

If possible observe the cat moving about. Does he show signs of incoordination? Is he limping?

Eyes, ears and nose

Q? Check the cat's eyes: is there any discharge or signs of injury? Are the pupils dilated? (See eye problems, page 12.) Is there any discharge from the nose?

Q? Do the ears look dirty or seem to be troubling the cat? Is he shaking his head or holding it to one side? (See ear problems, page 11).

Q? Is the cat dribbling from his

mouth or having difficulty in eating? Does his breath smell? (See mouth problems, page 14.)

Q? Does the inside of the mouth and tongue look pale or bluish? (See respiratory problems, page 15.)

Body

Carefully run your hands over the body looking for signs of matted fur that might indicate a wound or abscess.

Q? Is there any abnormal swelling?

Q? Is there any hair loss or excessive shedding of coat? (See coat problems, page 10). Is there any foreign material in the coat that might be poisonous?

Q? Is the cat scratching or are there signs of skin irritation? (See skin problems, page 16.)

Q? Does the cat seem pot-bellied? Also look for damaged claws – an indication of a road accident.

The next step

If after examining the cat you can still find no particular problem it may be worth waiting another day to see if anything develops. Keep the cat in with a litter tray so you can observe his toilet habits and make sure that he is not eating food anywhere else.

If after this the cat still seems unwell or if you are worried in any way it is best to consult your vet. Cats are sensitive to a number of drugs used for other animals and humans, especially painkillers. Do not give a cat any medication not prescribed for him, except on veterinary advice.

Common problems

Problems in this section are listed in alphabetical order.



Photo: Chelmsford and District Branch

Abscess

An abscess is an accumulation of pus under the skin caused by infection, introduced usually through a bite or other wound. It may be seen as a (usually) painful swelling or after it has burst as a discharging wound. Common sites are around the head and neck and at the base of the tail. If the abscess has burst, clean the wound with a suitable antiseptic (see page 20) trying to express the pus by pressing gently around the wound. Consult your vet when convenient for antibiotic treatment, or immediately if the cat seems to be in pain.

Accidents

Road accidents are a common occurrence in cats. A cat that comes in limping, whose claws look torn, has wounds, particularly abrasions around the head and limbs, or is bleeding from an orifice may have been in an accident. Attempt to control bleeding if necessary. Consult a vet immediately if the cat is bleeding, if there are large wounds (bigger than 6mm), injury to the eyes, if his breathing is distressed or if he seems to be in pain. Minor wounds can be treated by bathing with antiseptic (see page 20). Be careful when handling your cat in this situation; a frightened cat in pain may try to scratch or bite. See advice on restraining and moving a cat (see page 21).

If you find a cat unable to move after an accident or in a collapsed state, move it carefully to a place of safety, being careful to avoid causing further damage (see page 21). If the cat is not breathing consider artificial respiration (see page 24). Control any obvious bleeding and consult a vet immediately.

Appetite changes

Reduced appetite is a feature of many diseases and illnesses. Make sure the food is palatable to the cat

and has not gone off (especially in hot weather). If the cat is showing no other signs of illness try keeping him indoors for a day or two under observation to make sure he is not being fed elsewhere. If the cat seems to want to eat but can't, this may indicate a mouth problem. If a cat's appetite is reduced for several days or if he refuses to eat for more than 24 hours, consult a vet.

Increased appetite may occur because the cat is recovering from a disease or after pregnancy. Young growing cats eat proportionately more than adults. Worms may cause a problem, particularly in kittens.

In older cats, if overeating is accompanied by weight loss there may be a glandular or metabolic problem eg an overactive thyroid gland. If the cat also has increased thirst this may indicate diabetes. Consider worming your cat if you have not done so recently. Consult a vet if the overeating continues for more than a couple of weeks or if there are other signs of illness.

Bad breath

See Mouth problems, page 14

Bites

See Wounds, page 19

Bleeding

Any bleeding is potentially serious and a matter for veterinary attention if it continues for more than a few seconds or if there are more than a few drops of blood. If there is an obvious wound, attempt

to control bleeding by using a bandage over a pad of gauze or proprietary dressing (not dry cotton wool which may stick to open wounds). Apply bandage firmly and evenly and consult a vet immediately. If it is not possible to use a bandage, applying firm pressure with a gauze swab, moistened cotton wool or similar, may help to control flow.

Bleeding from an orifice may be due to trauma, infection, tumours or foreign bodies. Bleeding from the nose accompanied by sneezing may indicate a foreign body. Bleeding from the penis or vulva may be due to a urinary problem. Sometimes cats may pass bloodstained urine after an accident, due to bleeding in the bladder. In any case consult a vet if bleeding is severe or prolonged.

Breathing problems

See Respiratory problems, page 15

Burns

Cool the area, preferably by placing under a running tap for several minutes. This won't be easy and the cat will need firm handling but it may well prevent serious injury from occurring if carried out promptly. If the skin appears damaged, apply petroleum jelly and consult a vet.

Choking

Food, fur or other foreign material obstructing the throat or upper airways causes choking. The cat

may look as though he is coughing or vomiting without bringing anything up. If there is an obstruction the cat quickly becomes distressed. Try opening the mouth to see if there is a foreign body that can be removed with the fingers or a pair of tweezers. If you cannot dislodge it and the cat is having difficulty in breathing, consider swinging the cat (see artificial respiration, page 24). Then seek veterinary advice.

Coat problems

Excessive loss of coat may occur after kitting and in old age. Also when cats are ill (particularly following any long-term illness) or fed a poor diet. Assuming any underlying disease has been treated and the diet is adequate, a vitamin supplement may be of help. Hair loss may also be a result of flea infestation, even in the absence of obvious skin irritation. If areas of baldness appear this may be due to ringworm, a fungal infection of the skin, or a hormonal problem. Consult your vet for advice. If hair loss is accompanied by excessive licking or scratching (see skin problems, page 16).

Matted hair may occur in long-haired cats and especially in older or sick cats that are not grooming themselves so well. Regular brushing helps to prevent this. Large mats that cannot be easily teased out may need to be cut. It is very easy to cut the skin so ask your vet or nurse to help if you are worried.

Collapse/coma

Possible causes include extreme old age, the terminal stages of many illnesses, exposure to extreme heat or cold, poisoning and trauma or bleeding, eg following an accident. Urgent veterinary attention must be sought.

Ensure the airway is clear by carefully wiping away any mucus, blood etc from the nose and mouth and pulling the tongue forward. Check for the presence of a pulse or heartbeat and administer artificial respiration if necessary (see page 24). Keep warm. Do not attempt to administer any liquids. Take to a vet immediately, moving carefully if trauma is suspected (see page 21).

Constipation

Constipation may be caused by dietary factors, particularly the ingestion of bones, and fur balls (more common in long-haired cats). Older cats may be more prone to constipation due to poor bowel function. Affected animals strain hard when defaecating, possibly passing only small amounts of hard stool, and may adopt a crouching position, becoming dull and disinterested in food. The signs can be very similar to urinary obstruction (see urinary problems, page 17) which is potentially very serious. If the cat strains repeatedly without passing either urine or faeces consult a vet immediately. Otherwise try dosing with olive oil or butter, or give a meal of oily fish and see the vet if the situation does

not improve. Cats that are prone to constipation may benefit from a change of diet. Alternatively bran or a bulking agent such as *Isoigel* (from pharmacists) or *Peridale* (from veterinary surgeons) can be added to the food.

Convulsions

Convulsions may be the result of epilepsy and a variety of other disease conditions. Cats may exhibit one or more of the following signs: behavioural changes, salivation/foaming at the mouth, prostration, rigidity or tremors of the muscles, paddling movements, incontinence and loss of consciousness. Often a fit will only last a few seconds but some last longer or there may be a series of fits. An animal may often appear disorientated for some time after a fit. If necessary, move a fitting cat to a safe place away from fires, sharp edges, etc. Otherwise avoid handling and keep as dark and as quiet as possible. Consult your vet for advice. Urgent attention may not be needed if the cat recovers quickly but an investigation needs to be made to determine the cause.

Cough

See Respiratory problems, page 15

Cystitis

See Urinary problems, page 17

Diarrhoea

Unfamiliar food, particularly a sudden change of diet, overfeeding,

especially of one type of food such as liver, scavenging and the feeding of milk to milk-intolerant cats may all cause diarrhoea. Infections and disease elsewhere in the body (eg liver or kidney disease) may also be responsible. If diarrhoea is profuse and watery accompanied by more than a few streaks of blood or if there are other signs such as vomiting, dullness or loss of appetite consult your vet for advice.

If the cat seems well in itself try starving it for 24 hours (12 hours if a kitten) and then feed small quantities of boiled white fish or chicken. Commercial recovery diets are available. It is helpful to confine the cat to monitor its faeces and make sure it is not getting any other food. If diarrhoea persists consult your vet.

Drinking

See Thirst, page 17

Ear problems

Swelling of the earflap (pinna): may be due to bleeding (haematoma) or infection. Take the cat to your vet to have it treated (urgently if the ear seems painful).

Ears may bleed profusely if injured. Applying firm pressure with a gauze dressing or wet cotton wool may stop the flow. Such wounds are often too small to suture but consult a vet if bleeding continues.

Discharge from ear canal:

Excessive amounts of dark wax may be due to ear mites. Drops to treat ear mites can be obtained from your

Photo: Wuzzacat by Linda Hunt



vet but you may need to take the cat in if he seems unduly troubled (eg if he is shaking his head or scratching a lot). Refer to our *Parasites* booklet.

A purulent or haemorrhagic discharge may be due to an infection or tumour in the ear canal. The cat may hold its head on one side, particularly if the middle ear is involved. Veterinary attention should be sought. Don't attempt to clear the ear yourself.

If the cat is scratching his ears but the ears themselves appear clean this may be an indication of a more generalised skin problem or fleas. Look for signs elsewhere in the coat.

Eating problems

See Mouth problems, page 14

Eye problems

Protrusion of the third eyelid, like a skin across the eye, is a common non-specific sign of illness in the cat. It may be associated with diarrhoea or worms as well as a variety of other problems. It may indicate a problem in the eye if

accompanied by other signs such as inflammation or discharge. If the cat seems well in itself do not worry unduly as the problem often looks worse than it is, but watch the cat carefully and consult your vet if any other signs develop.

Swelling of the eyeball or lids may be due to infection, trauma or tumours. This is potentially very painful and urgent veterinary attention should be sought.

Discharge from the eye may be due to irritation or infection. The membrane around the eye (the conjunctiva) will often look red and inflamed. If the discharge is thick and yellow or blood stained, or the cat is showing signs of pain, consult your vet immediately. Otherwise try bathing the eye with a proprietary eye cleaner or a simple saline solution (a quarter teaspoon of salt in a cup of cooled, boiled water) and seek advice if it does not improve.

If there are any other signs of problems, such as discolouration of the eyes, dilated or unequal pupils, inability to focus or apparent blindness, consult your vet, urgently if there are signs of pain.

Signs of pain in the eye include a watery discharge, pawing or rubbing at the eye, blinking/eye held half-closed and avoidance of bright light.

Fits

See Convulsions, page 11

Fur balls

A cat which is moulting heavily or grooming excessively (perhaps due

to a skin problem) may ingest fur which forms a solid ball in the stomach. The problem is commonest in long-haired cats but can also occur in those with short hair. Fur balls normally pass through the bowels or are vomited up. However sometimes they can cause an obstruction in the bowel, leading to signs such as inappetance, vomiting and constipation. If these signs develop you may need to see your vet. Otherwise try dosing with olive oil or butter, or give a meal of oily fish. Proprietary furball remedies, consisting of flavoured paraffin paste in a tube are also available (eg *Katalax* from vets). Such treatment should only be given for a few days at a time and is not suitable for long term use. If a cat seems prone to fur balls, groom more regularly to remove dead hair from the coat. Treat any underlying skin disease to help prevent the problem. The addition to the diet of bran or a bulking agent (see constipation, page 10) may be helpful as a preventive measure when the cat is moulting heavily.

Fur problems

See Coat problems, page 10

Hair loss

See Coat problems, page 10

Incoordination

Cats may walk with a swaying or staggering gait, circling or falling to one side, or have a head tilt. These signs may be seen in animals

recovering from a convulsion or after an accident or poisoning. They may be associated with vestibular disease – a disorder of the inner ear affecting balance – common in older cats, as well as a variety of other neurological and circulatory problems. If these signs develop in your cat there is no first aid treatment and it is best to seek veterinary advice.

Itching

See Skin problems, page 16

Limping/lameness

Common causes are injuries (including accidents), bites and other wounds. Arthritis may be encountered in older animals; usually this will be of gradual onset. Check for any abnormal swelling on the leg – it may indicate an infected bite (abscess), sprain or other injury. If the leg is held at an abnormal angle there may be a fracture or dislocation. Examine the feet for signs of any foreign material between the toes and see if the claws are damaged (this may suggest an accident). If there are obvious wounds these can be dressed if necessary.

If you suspect a fracture or dislocation or the cat seems in a lot of pain consult your vet immediately. If the signs are not too severe and the cat seems well in itself, it may be worth waiting for 24 hours to see if the lameness improves before contacting the vet. Never give a cat painkillers prescribed for humans or

other animals, except on veterinary advice. Some newer painkillers used in dogs are also used in cats.

Mouth problems

Signs of problems with the mouth and throat include difficulty in eating, dropping of food from the mouth when eating, pawing at or rubbing the mouth, excessive salivation and bad breath. The causes include inflammation and infection (including ulcers) of the mouth or throat, tooth problems, foreign bodies (eg bits of bone, sewing needles, fishhooks, etc) and tumours. Older cats with kidney failure may have a sore mouth and bad breath.

Try to open the mouth and look inside. This may be difficult if the gums are sore as the cat may resent the handling (see restraining a cat, page 21). If you can see a foreign body in the mouth it may be possible to remove it but often this can only be done under anaesthesia. If there is an infection it will need to be treated with



Photo: Truffles by Maureen and Wif Whitby

antibiotics. The teeth may also require attention so arrange a consultation with your vet.

Nose problems

The cat may be sneezing or have a discharge from the nose. This may be part of a more generalised respiratory problem. Look for other signs such as coughing or laboured breathing. Virus infections (cat 'flu) are the commonest problem and usually result in a watery or cloudy discharge. There may also be discharge from the eyes and a sore mouth. Vaccination should help to prevent cat flu. A thicker or bloodstained discharge may be seen in more severe cases as well as in fungal infections and tumours. Foreign bodies in the nasal passages and trauma (eg from an accident) may cause bleeding from the nose.

If the cat has been vaccinated and seems well in itself a watery discharge from the nose may not be of immediate concern. Occasional sneezing in the absence of a discharge and other signs is also unlikely to be serious. Consult the vet if the signs persist, if there is pus or blood present in the discharge or if other signs of illness develop.

Poisoning

Poisoning may be suspected if the cat is dribbling or foaming at the mouth, vomiting, in a state of collapse or having convulsions. However, it is very difficult to prove

unless there is known access to poisons (see page 4 for a list of common poisons). If you suspect poisoning do not attempt any first aid until you have spoken to the vet. The treatment given depends on the poison involved. Give any information you can to help your vet (eg packaging/leaflets with the substance, samples). If the substance is on the cat's coat, wash it off with soap or shampoo.



Photo: Mrs C Hatton

Pot-bellied

In kittens the abdomen may appear distended after feeding. If the kitten appears to be in poor condition as well it may be suffering with worms. A pot-bellied appearance is often due to the presence of fluid in the abdomen and this may occur with Feline Infectious Peritonitis. Other possible causes include circulatory, liver and kidney disorders. Consult your vet for advice.

Respiratory problems

Signs of respiratory problems

include coughing and laboured or rapid breathing. The cat may also be sneezing or have a discharge from the nose if there is an upper respiratory infection as well. Look in the mouth and observe the colour of the tongue and membranes of the mouth. These may appear bluish in colour (cyanosis) if the cat is having difficulty getting enough oxygen.

Coughing may be associated with the presence of a foreign body in the airway although this is relatively uncommon. The cat will probably be in considerable distress with little or no relief between bouts of coughing. Try to look in the mouth to see if there is a foreign body that can be removed with a pair of tweezers. If not, consult your vet immediately.

More commonly a cough is due to an infection or allergic reaction. The cat may bring up phlegm. Consult your vet, urgently if there are signs of cyanosis or distressed breathing.

Panting may be a normal reaction to stress or hot weather. It may also be caused by a chest infection or injury. If the cat is in pain the breathing may also be quite shallow. Consult your vet if the cat appears to be in pain, is cyanotic or if there are signs of infection such as a cough or nasal discharge. If there are no other signs of illness it may be worth waiting to see if the breathing slows down after the cat has been resting.

Laboured breathing is sometimes caused by an obstruction in the nose. The cat may be making obvious snorting noises. Any discharge can be cleaned away with

damp cotton wool but veterinary attention is required for the underlying problem. Other causes include infection in the chest and obstruction of the lungs and airways due to fluid or tumours. Veterinary treatment will be needed, urgently if the cat is in distress or cyanotic.

Shut in

Cats do occasionally get shut in a shed, garage or loft space when they have been exploring. Some have been known to survive for up to six weeks without food or water.

If you find such a cat in a collapsed state consult your vet immediately. If conscious, feed him small quantities of water. Then if he is able to drink and keep this down, follow up with glucose or honey in water or liquid foods such as *Lactol* or *Cimicat*. Depending on how long the cat has been shut in and how quickly he responds, light solid foods such as boiled chicken or white fish can be offered after a day or two.

Skin problems

Itching

The most likely cause is parasites such as fleas and ear mites, although other causes of allergies and infection may result in irritation of the skin. Cats may scratch around the head and neck or lick and chew at other parts of the body. In more severe allergic reactions there may be lots of small scabs and if the cat is licking excessively there may be areas of hair loss and

raw red patches of skin. It is not usually worth applying antiseptic cream to sore skin as the cat will invariably lick it off again. If you have access to an Elizabethan collar this can be used to prevent the cat further traumatising itself. However, most cases require veterinary attention.

For cats suffering from allergic skin problems, add an evening primrose oil supplement to their diet. This has been shown to reduce or prevent signs of disease.

Anal irritation

Irritation in this area may be the result of diarrhoea or worms. Occasionally it may be due to impaction of the anal glands. These can be emptied by a vet.

Sunburn

Sore bleeding areas on unpigmented (white) skin at the edge of the ears, the nose and around the eyes may be the result of sunburn damage. Consult your vet for advice.

Sneezing

See Nose problems, page 14

Stings

Cats usually get stung on their paws, although occasionally they can be stung on the mouth. The affected area swells up suddenly and the animal appears subdued. If the head or neck is swollen consult the vet straight away in case the cat's breathing is affected. If a sting is

visible, remove with tweezers and keep the cat under observation. The swelling often subsides after a few hours but consult your vet if it persists or the cat seems distressed.

Swellings

A swelling that appears suddenly could be due to a sting or abscess or could be the result of bruising from an injury or accident. Consult a vet immediately if you suspect an injury or the cat seems in pain. Other likely problems include cysts and tumours, however these usually come up gradually. Consult your vet when convenient. (See also ear problems, page 11.)

Ticks are sometimes mistaken for small tumours. They are greyish brown in colour and can be as big as a baked bean. On close examination the legs can be seen near the skin. They can be sprayed with an insecticide spray and left to drop out. Do not remove them unless you are experienced – it's easy to leave the mouthparts behind. Refer to our *Parasites* booklet.

Thirst

Cats can conserve water very effectively and may not drink much. This is particularly true if they are fed on tinned cat food which has a high water content. There is no cause for concern if a cat drinks less than usual as long as he is otherwise healthy. If there were a more serious problem, you would normally see other signs of disease first. Note, however, that low fluid



Photo: William by Cheryl Powell

intake may be a contributory factor to some urinary problems.

Excessive drinking may be a response to loss of fluid. This can happen in hot weather or in a disease that causes fluid loss, eg diarrhoea. Drinking can be a feature of specific disease conditions, eg diabetes and kidney disease. In these cases you will probably see other signs eg appetite changes and weight loss. Veterinary advice should be sought if excessive drinking continues for several days or if accompanied by other signs of illness. In this case it may be helpful to take a urine sample to your vet for analysis. If your cat uses a litter tray you can take a sample by substituting a sheet of newspaper for the cat litter and decanting from the tray.

Urinary problems

Urinary problems are frequently encountered in the cat. The

commonest disease is inflammation of the bladder (cystitis) and urethra, sometimes referred to as Feline Lower Urinary Tract Disease. Affected animals may pass urine more frequently or have difficulty in urinating and there may be blood in the urine. In male cats the urethra can become blocked by deposits, which form in the bladder. In this case the cat strains repeatedly, often adopting a crouching position but passing little or no urine. It may keep licking at the prepuce and the abdomen may look distended. The signs can be very similar to those of constipation. Seek veterinary advice immediately as this condition can be life threatening.

If there is no obstruction the situation is less urgent but the cat may still be very uncomfortable and you should seek advice as soon as possible. In most cases antibiotics help to resolve the problem but preventative measures may need to be taken, particularly if the condition recurs. The single most important step is to increase fluid intake. Cats may be encouraged to drink by offering milk (if the cat will tolerate it) or gravy for example. If tinned foods are fed, extra water can be mixed directly with the food. Most dried foods should be avoided although special prescription diets are available in both tinned and dried form and the vet may recommend one of these as an additional measure.

Incontinence may occur in older cats, particularly where there is

increased thirst and urine production. A urine sample may be helpful here (see under thirst, page 17) and veterinary advice should be sought.

Vomiting

Common causes are the eating of spoiled foodstuffs or inedible material (including furballs), infection (often accompanied by diarrhoea) and irritation of the stomach lining often caused by poisoning. The vomit may consist of partially digested foodstuff, any foreign matter eaten and/or mucus (frothy or slimy liquid) which may be stained with bile (yellow colour) or blood. It is helpful to note the contents and, if food is present, when the vomiting occurs in relation to feeding. Some cats may vomit at intervals to clear their stomach and may eat grass to aid the process.

Consult a vet if vomiting is prolonged or severe, if there is blood present or if there are any other signs of illness. If the cat seems well in himself withhold food for 24 hours and just give him small drinks of water. Then offer a small meal. Consult your vet if vomiting continues.

Regurgitation refers to the bringing up of food soon after eating. In this case the food is undigested and the cat may try to eat it again. It usually occurs if the cat overeats or eats too quickly and is only a cause for concern if it happens repeatedly.



Weight changes

Obesity is rarely a problem in cats but may occur especially when an unbalanced diet or lots of titbits are fed. It may be necessary to restrict your cat's food intake. Alternatively low calorie diets are available from veterinary surgeons. Loss of weight accompanies many chronic disease conditions and often other signs are apparent before it is noticed. If, however, your cat seems to be losing weight despite seeming well in himself seek veterinary advice.

Worms

Worms only rarely cause weight loss and digestive problems if there is a very heavy infestation. This is more likely to occur in kittens than in adult cats. Roundworms are rarely seen in the faeces but may occasionally be vomited up by a cat. Tapeworms can often be detected

by segments seen in the faeces or stuck to the hair underneath the tail. Sometimes they may cause an irritation in this area. Convenient single dose wormers can be obtained from your veterinary surgeon. For more information, refer to our *Parasites* leaflet.

Wounds

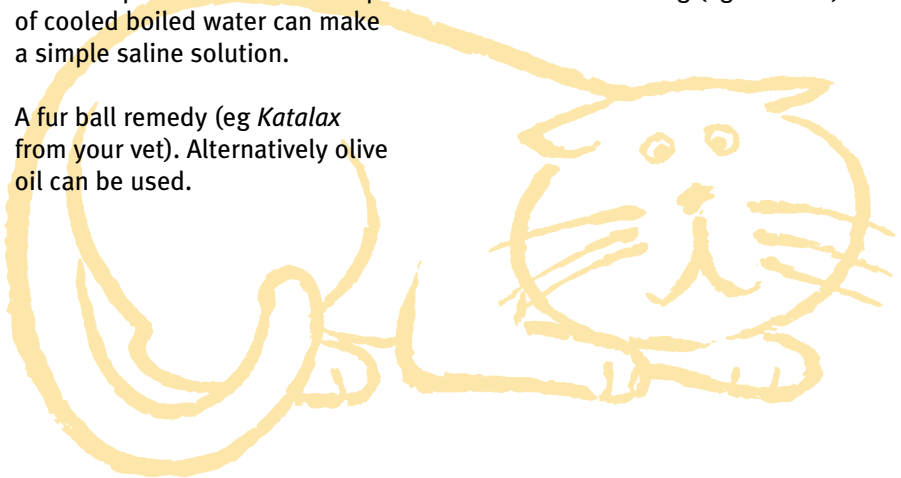
Wounds may come from broken glass or other sharp objects, but the commonest are bite wounds from other animals. If the skin is grazed but not broken, apply a suitable antiseptic ointment (see page 20). Consult a vet if pain or swelling develops or if the cat seems unduly bothered by the wound. If there is a cut more than about 6mm long or the wound is bleeding, seek veterinary attention. Smaller wounds can be treated with antiseptic as above. However, bite wounds can be very difficult to clean. It is advisable to consult your vet for antibiotic treatment to prevent an abscess developing.



Feline first aid kit

*It is worth keeping a basic first aid kit to deal with emergencies.
The following items are suggested.*

- ✓ A safe antiseptic solution and cream. Products based on chlorhexidine (eg *Hibitane*), cetrimide (*Savlon*) and povidone-iodine – NOT neat iodine – (*Betadine*) are all suitable. DO NOT use antiseptics based on phenol, cresol or related compounds as these are toxic to cats.
- ✓ Petroleum jelly (eg *Vaseline*)
- ✓ Ear drops for cleaning the ears from your veterinary surgeon. As a stop gap olive oil or almond oil obtained from a pharmacist can be used.
- ✓ Eye drops from your vet or pharmacist (human preparations are suitable for cats). In an emergency dissolving a quarter level teaspoonful of salt in a cup of cooled boiled water can make a simple saline solution.
- ✓ A fur ball remedy (eg *Katalax* from your vet). Alternatively olive oil can be used.
- ✓ Plain kaolin mixture (NOT kaolin and morphine). To treat stomach problems under veterinary supervision.
- ✓ Syringes (2ml and 5ml) for giving medicines and liquid feeding.
- ✓ Blunt-ended scissors
- ✓ Tweezers
- ✓ Stubby-bulbed thermometer
- ✓ Cotton wool
- ✓ Bandages – several of 2.5cm and 5cm width
- ✓ Adhesive plaster for securing dressings
- ✓ Gauze or proprietary non-adherent dressing (eg *Melonin*)



Restraining and moving a cat

It may be necessary to restrain a cat in order to examine him effectively or administer some medication. The following information is for when you are frightened or worried about picking up your cat in the normal way.



Picture 1: Take care when restraining a cat as he may try to scratch and bite

An injured or frightened cat may try to scratch and bite so take care when handling. See your doctor if you get bitten or scratched deeply as these wounds can quickly turn septic.

If you suspect the cat is injured then unnecessary handling should be avoided so as not to cause further pain or distress. If in doubt simply place in a secure container and consult your vet.

Restraining a cat

Sometimes simply holding a cat by the scruff and pressing down firmly is enough to control him. Alternatively wrap him in a large towel or blanket.

- 1** Spread the blanket out, placing the cat in the middle.
- 2** Wrap the blanket firmly round the body on either side.
- 3** Bring the front of the blanket up under the cat's neck, ensuring the front paws are kept down, and wrap round behind the neck, holding firmly with the cat's scruff (see picture 1).
- 4** It should now be possible to examine the cat's head and administer medication by mouth or to the eyes and ears (see page 23) as required. If necessary kneel down with the cat between the knees to stop him struggling.

Moving a conscious cat

If you can handle the cat grasp him by the scruff and lift him, supporting with the other hand under the rump (see picture 2). Place in carrying box.

If the cat is too frightened throw a coat or blanket over him and scoop him up quickly, trying to grasp him firmly by the scruff or round the shoulders, then transfer him to a carrying box.

Moving an unconscious cat

This should only be done when absolutely necessary (eg to move the cat from a road) or on veterinary advice. Place a rigid board or tray behind the cat. Gently slide both hands; palm uppermost, under the cat's shoulders and hindquarters and slide onto the board. Take care to avoid disturbing the cat's position in case of injury (see picture 3).



Picture 2: Moving a conscious cat



Picture 3: An unconscious cat should only be moved when absolutely necessary

Giving medicines



Tablets

If possible, try to give medication in food to avoid unduly stressing a sick cat. Ask your vet if tablets can be crushed (some may have a bitter centre and are best given whole) or if an alternative liquid preparation is available. If this is not possible use the following technique:

- 1 Having restrained the cat as described above, or with an assistant to hold the cat's front legs down, grasp the head firmly

from behind in one hand with the thumb at one corner of the mouth and the forefinger at the other.

- 2 Take the tablet between the thumb and forefinger of the other hand and with the second finger pull down the cat's lower jaw.
- 3 Pressing in with the thumb and finger of the hand holding the head will stop the cat from closing his jaw. If the head is held back it may be possible to drop the tablet over the back of the tongue first time. If not push it down with the forefinger whilst retaining pressure on the lower jaw to avoid being bitten (see photo). Watch to ensure that the cat swallows before releasing it.

Special pill-givers are available which can help you to administer tablets more safely.

Liquids

These are best given using a syringe. Hold the head as described above. It may be possible to introduce the syringe between the teeth without opening the mouth. Give only 1–2 ml at a time allowing the cat to swallow after each dose to avoid choking.

Some useful techniques

Taking a cat's temperature

This can be difficult and should not be attempted by the inexperienced. If necessary ask your vet or nurse to demonstrate. A helper should hold the cat to stop him struggling. The thermometer is inserted into the anus up to about a quarter of its length and held with gentle sideways pressure to keep it against the wall of the rectum for about a minute. A cat's temperature is normally about 101.5°F or 38.6°C. Variations of up to 1°F (0.5°C) are considered normal.

Taking a pulse

If you find a cat in a collapsed state you may want to check his pulse. This can usually be felt on the inside of the hind leg, close to where it joins the body. If you have difficulty you can check for a heart beat by feeling over the rib cage on the left side just behind the elbow.

Artificial respiration

First ensure the airways are clear: open the mouth, pull the tongue forward and remove any debris from

the mouth. If you suspect that the cat may have inhaled fluid, grasp the cat by the back legs and, holding well clear of the ground, swing downwards four to five times. CAUTION: this should only be undertaken if you are sure there are no serious injuries.

External method

This can be carried out if there are no injuries to the rib cage.

- 1 With the cat on his side, place the palm of one hand over the rib cage and press down firmly to expel air from the lungs.
- 2 Release immediately to allow the chest to expand and the lungs to fill with air.
- 3 Repeat every five seconds as necessary.

Mouth to mouth

Use this method if you suspect a chest injury.

- 1 Check for clear airway as above.
- 2 Place lips to cat's nostrils and blow for two to three seconds.
- 3 Repeat as above.

We are extremely grateful to Peter R Brown, B.Vet. Med., MRCVS for writing this leaflet.



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