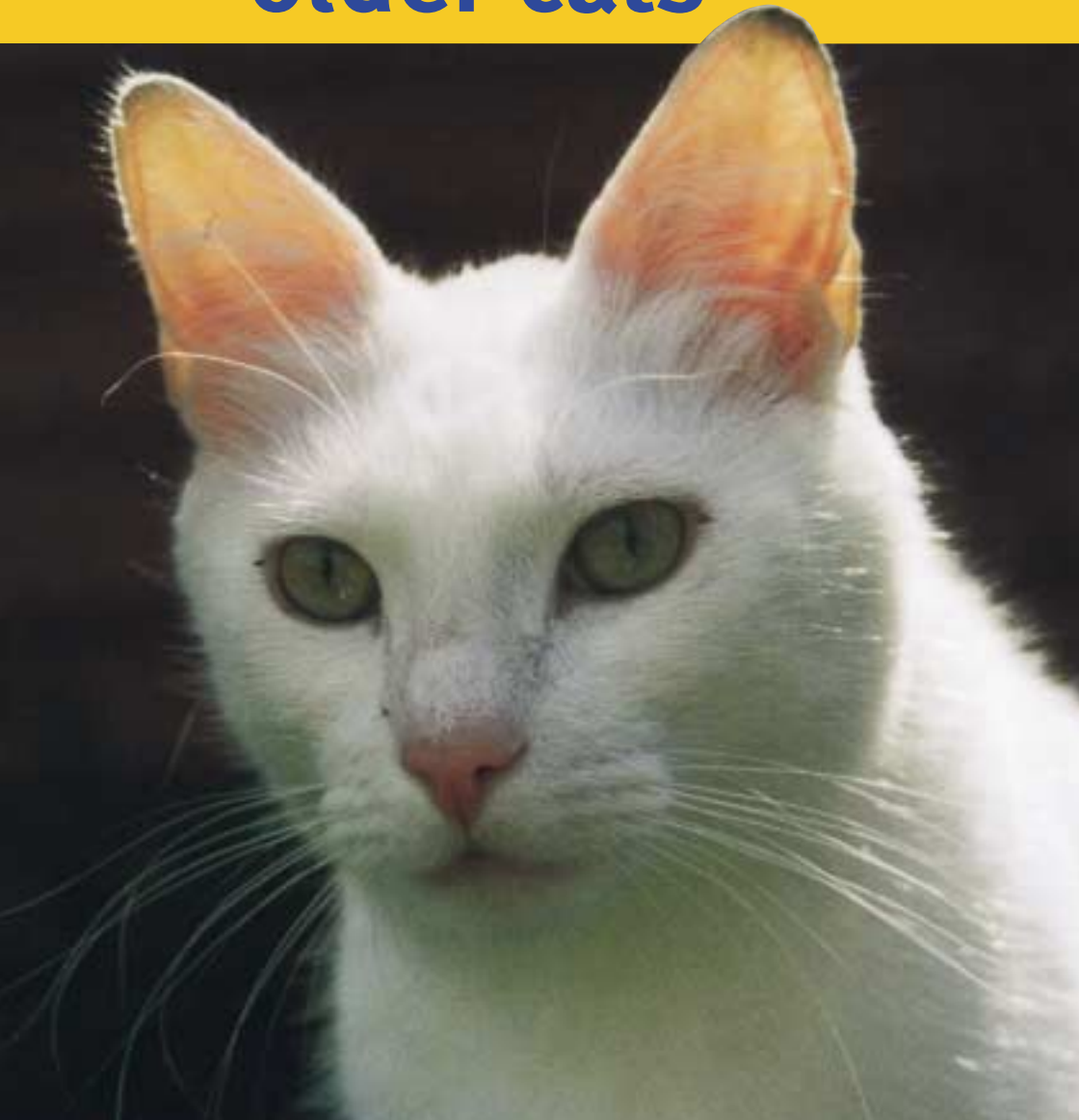


In praise of older cats



Adopting a mature cat

Nowadays, cats live much longer than in the past and the fact that some ailments are more common in older cats doesn't mean that your cat will develop them. A great many cats reach their teens and twenties with little or no sign of deterioration, gliding gracefully into old age by simply slowing down their pace of life.

Why adopt a mature cat?

Older cats are generally quieter and more sensible than kittens or young cats. They are usually used to household life – more likely to doze while leaving your furnishings intact – and know the ground rules of living with people. In general, they need less supervision.

Slowing down

The mature cat is more placid than a kitten and usually content to spend much of his time watching the world go by. He is more home-loving and settled, making an excellent companion. If you enjoy pampering your cats, an older cat enjoys the attention more than a kitten.

Although there is not much variation in size between cats, an older cat is fully grown and you can see what you are taking on: large, small, long-haired or short-haired. The cat's previous owner may also have provided details of the cat's character, allowing you to adopt a cat that suits your own personality and lifestyle. With adult and older cats, it is easier to find one that matches your needs.

These wonderful pets are used to human attention and enjoy the love and security that a caring cat owner can provide. The CP leaflets *Your New Cat or Kitten* and *Living in Harmony* provide guidelines on introducing a new cat into the household.



Wellington & Bollinger
by Lady Musker



Teddy by Christine Smith

A mature cat is more likely to doze while leaving your furnishings intact.

Feeding older cats

Some older cats also enjoy warm porridge or hot oat cereal on cold mornings!

As your cat reaches his senior years, his digestive system becomes less efficient. He requires several smaller meals a day rather than two main meals. Most cats enjoy a variety and occasional treats such as cooked meat or cooked fish are appreciated. The word 'complete' on cat food packaging indicates that the food provides a balanced diet for your cat. 'Complementary' food should be fed as a treat only.

See the CP leaflet *Feeding Felines*.

You may like to consider changing his food to one that is specifically formulated for the older cat. There are many complete foods readily available in pet shops and some supermarkets, which have been developed with the needs of an older cat in mind and to help maintain urinary tract health. However, unless your cat has problems digesting ordinary cat food, is developing pronounced middle-aged spread or is on a special diet prescribed by a vet, ordinary complete cat food accompanied by fresh drinking water is perfectly suitable.

Crunchy food

Many cats enjoy dry complete food and the crunchy texture may help to keep their teeth healthy. If you feed dried food regularly, ensure there is plenty of fresh drinking water available. However, as cats grow older they may experience dental problems making it difficult for them to eat crunchy food. See section *Teeth and gums*.

Extra roughage is sometimes needed in his diet, especially if he is overweight or constipated. Mashing one or two teaspoons of bran, porridge oats, cooked rice, pasta or mashed potato into tinned food helps to bulk up the diet. Some older cats also enjoy warm porridge or hot oat cereal on cold mornings, but this is not suitable for cats that are intolerant of milk.

Diet watch

There is some evidence that a cat's sense of smell deteriorates with age and this can lead to him becoming a finicky eater. Try not to be manipulated. It is not recommended that you prepare gourmet meals for your cat as this creates a risk of dietary imbalances.

Wildy by Miss A Biggs

A thin, dull coat and excessive moulting or dandruff, general thinness, vomiting, diarrhoea, yellow teeth and mouth odour are all signs of an unsuitable diet. A cat whose tummy wobbles when walking is probably receiving too much food for his level of activity.

Any cat which is experiencing difficulty in eating, has lost his appetite or has an excessive thirst should be examined by a vet in case there is an underlying problem.

Likewise, a sudden increased appetite, especially if the cat is losing weight at the same time, needs to be investigated.





General care

The CP leaflet *Caring for Cats* provides general guidelines on looking after your cat. While older cats are generally trouble-free pets, the following additional information will help you and your cat enjoy each other's company.

Grooming

Older cats are often less supple so may enjoy a helping hand with their grooming. Combing prevents the need for shaving or clipping later on and stops furballs forming. A fine-toothed flea comb also removes parasites from the skin.

If you have two companionable cats they may help to groom each other. As well as keeping the coat in good condition, grooming helps to establish a strong bond between cats and between cat and owner.

Very long-haired cats sometimes get messy around their rear ends. Some owners like to carefully trim the fur under the tail to stop faeces, cat litter and mud sticking. Applying unperfumed talcum powder to a 'knotty bottom' helps untangle the knots. This area may sometimes need a gentle wipe with a damp tissue or a pet wipe.

Cats rarely need to be bathed but, if your cat becomes very dirty, a bath may be necessary (most cat care books will tell you how to bathe a cat). Only use a specialist cat or kitten shampoo and ensure you rinse off thoroughly. Dry him off completely in a warm room before allowing him outdoors.

Sleeping habits

Position your cat's bed away from draughts. Older cats cannot withstand extremes of temperature as easily as youngsters. They may have less insulating fat than young cats and so need a cosy, draught-free bed. Placing your cat's bed beside a warm radiator at night ensures that he stays warm, especially in winter. A covered hot-water bottle, or a heated pad designed especially for pets, is useful if your cat feels the cold or is recovering from an illness.

An older cat usually snoozes through the colder times of year. Shake out his bedding frequently to keep it fresh, vacuum and treat regularly with an anti-flea preparation.

Some older cats call out at night when the house is quiet and they feel lonely or in need of reassurance. Placing the cat basket in your own bedroom may solve this. Alternatively, place a pullover that bears the owner's scent, in his bed or sleeping place. If he still needs reassurance, try leaving a radio playing at low volume to provide company.

An older cat usually snoozes through the colder times of year.

The great outdoors

Many older cats will happily potter about the garden with you. They are usually much more home-centred and less likely to wander off on long hunting expeditions than a younger cat. If your cat has poor sight or hearing, make sure he is in a safe place when you want to mow the lawn. The CP leaflet *Cats and Gardens* contains useful tips for those cats that like to spend time outdoors.

In all weathers

Most older cats enjoy sunbathing, whether outdoors, or indoors on a window sill. As well as warmth, sunshine provides Vitamin D. As a precaution against skin cancer, dab non-toxic sunblock cream on your cat's ears and nose, especially if these are white or pale-coloured. Bushes, or even an old open rabbit hutch, provides a shelter from the sun while allowing cats to remain out in the fresh air.

Although most older cats can learn to use a cat flap, a few find they lack the strength to push one open, particularly if it is stiff or heavy. If the cat flap causes problems, remove the flap section during the day and fasten a piece of cloth or light carpet in its place. Cats Protection recommends that cats are kept indoors at night (make sure you provide a litter tray) safe from traffic and theft. An indoor litter tray will also be welcomed in wet or cold weather even if your cat normally goes outdoors for his toilet during the daytime.

Most cats sit in such a way that any cold wind blows on to their kidneys, one of their most vulnerable areas. Therefore, it is preferable to keep an older cat indoors during bad weather. If the cat gets wet, dry him with a towel and keep him warm until completely dry.

A less active lifestyle

As cats grow older they often turn their attention from playing or hunting to spending time quietly with their owners although many cats carry on hunting well into old age. One advantage of homing an older cat as opposed to a kitten is that you already know if he is a hunting cat.

You may find that an older cat prefers to sit near you rather than on your lap. This is not a sign that he is snubbing your affection. Depleted fat stores mean that older cats often become bonier and simply find a human lap uncomfortable to sit on. Putting a cushion or folded blanket on your lap makes it more comfortable for him when he wants a cuddle!





Kiri by Kathryn M. Smith

Older cats are often more talkative than younger cats.

Middle-aged spread

Middle-aged spread (through overfeeding and under-exercising) eventually gives way to increased boniness. Older cats also find it harder to curl up in a tight ball and a larger cat bed may be necessary. Big beanbags mould themselves to a cat's shape and provide support while the polystyrene beads in a beanbag retain heat, helping to keep a cat warm and comfortable.

Since older cats may no longer indulge in claw-trimming activities such as tree climbing, their claws need frequent trimming for their own comfort and to prevent them snagging on carpets and furnishings. A vet can do this for you during the annual health check and possibly once more during the year. As an older cat's muscles become less efficient, his claws become more brittle and may not fully retract. A scratching post is still recommended, although an older cat may not use it as often as before.

Expressing themselves

Older cats are often more talkative than younger cats. As they spend less time in physical activities, they have more time to express their opinions. Some may simply be seeking reassurance, but others become remarkably chatty, taking a more vocal interest in their owner's activities.

As they grow older, most cats become more sociable, though a few can be described as cantankerous. Sudden mood changes can be a sign of illness. A cat who suddenly wants to be left alone or one who constantly seeks reassurance may be trying to tell you that he is unwell, so ask your vet to check him over.

Although the older cat may be confident with visitors, if you are having a noisy get-together or a party, put him in a warm, quiet room with his bed, food, water and litter tray. He may not appreciate all the noise and disturbance.

Cats can become lonely if left alone for longer periods and may decide to leave home to look for attention.

Going away on holiday

Since most mature cats are content to spend more time dozing, they will be quite happy if a neighbour pops in twice a day to feed and fuss over them while you take a short holiday. Cats can become lonely if left alone for longer periods and may decide to leave home to look for attention. So, if you are away for more than a week, you may want to find a cat-sitter (information available through CP) or use your regular cattery, informing them of any dietary preferences or behavioural quirks.

If you need to use a cattery for the first time, look for one which has been approved by the Feline Advisory Bureau (FAB), telephone 01747 871872. It is recommended that you pay an initial visit to the cattery of your choice to make sure you are happy with the standard of care. If boarding your cat you will need to produce an up-to-date vaccination certificate.

Health check

All adult cats in CP's care are neutered. However, if you have adopted an unneutered adult cat (or one has adopted you), we strongly recommend that he is neutered. See the CP leaflet *Neutering* for more details.

Vaccinations

It is important to keep vaccinations up to date, as a cat grows older. Some cats will have been previously vaccinated and only require annual booster shots. You can start vaccinations at any age and FeLV and chlamydia vaccinations are also available.

Teeth and gums

Older cats are more prone to dental problems such as loose teeth, build-up of tartar on teeth and sore gums (gingivitis). Difficulty in eating and trouble grooming indicates mouth problems. If possible, check your cat's teeth and gums regularly, looking for yellow or brown scale, inflamed gums and mouth ulcers. An annual dental check-up at vaccination time is advisable. After descaling of teeth or extraction of bad teeth, your cat's appetite and normal grooming will probably soon return.

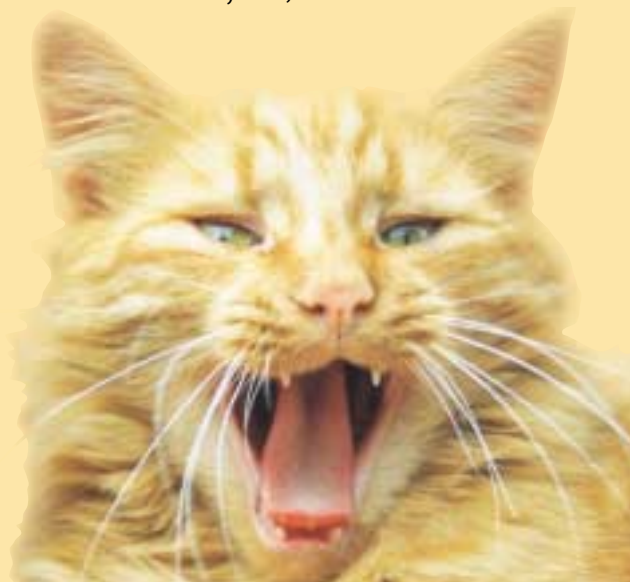
Dried food, fed as part of the cat's diet, has an abrasive action on teeth and helps to keep them clean.

Although general anaesthesia is a little more risky in older cats, this should not prevent any dental surgery (or other necessary surgery) being carried out. Modern anaesthetics have drastically reduced the risks and modern veterinary practices are well equipped and have suitably trained staff. Visit your vet when your cat first shows signs of mouth problems. Treatment may save your cat's teeth and prevent gum infections.

After a dental operation, your cat will probably need softer food while his gums heal. Some cats tuck into their favourite dried food within a few hours of going home which shows just how much better they feel, but most will feel a little sore afterwards.

Cats manage very well without teeth but, if you think he is having problems, tinned food can be mashed with gravy, tomato juice from a sardine can or warm water to give it a manageable consistency. Your vet can give you any tablets, eg. antibiotics, and relevant instructions on post-op check-ups.

An annual dental check-up at vaccination time is advisable.



Waterworks and bowels

Keep an eye on your cat's water bowls. Although older cats tend to drink more water anyway, dramatically increased thirst can indicate kidney problems or cystitis – both common complaints in older cats – as their kidneys work less efficiently. Cats with cystitis pass tiny amounts of urine, sometimes blood stained, more frequently. Cystitis causes discomfort and must be treated by a vet. Cats with kidney disease can be put on prescription diets if the problem is caught early enough.

Keep an eye on your cat's litter tray or toileting area and learn to recognise what is normal for your cat. Be alert for signs of worms, constipation, diarrhoea or bloodstained stools. Do not delay in seeing a vet if you spot anything abnormal.

Older cat clinics

As cats grow older, they become less resilient when it comes to illness or injury and so take longer to recover. They may develop stiff joints, but their more relaxed pace of life usually means that this does not worry them unduly. Many vets now run 'older cat clinics' and recommend that mature cats have a veterinary check-up every six to 12 months so that any problems can be treated early. You will also get the opportunity to meet other owners of mature cats and compare notes.

Old age and disability

As a cat ages, his sight and hearing may gradually deteriorate. The change is often so gradual that many owners don't notice anything until hearing or sight loss is total. A cat compensates by relying more on his remaining senses, especially smell, to guide him through his daily routine. Because older cats have a more relaxed approach to life, most appear unperturbed by failing hearing or sight. A caring owner can help with these problems.

Deaf cats

A deaf cat is easily startled because he won't be aware that you are approaching. He can learn to recognise hand signals or the flashing of a torch to call him in for meals or at night.

At close range, sharp hand claps or stamping on the floor (they can feel the vibrations) might still be sufficient to gain a partially-deaf cat's attention.

A cat compensates by relying more on his remaining senses, especially smell, to guide him through his daily routine.





Blind cats

A cat that bumps into things may be losing his sight.

A cat blind in one eye may be startled by sudden movements on his blind side. He will be easily disorientated and should not be allowed to roam. Keep him indoors or with access to a safely fenced garden.

He may enjoy walking in the garden using a harness and lead. These trips can be enjoyable for you both as you can observe what things attract the attention of your cat. Make sure he is wearing an elasticated collar or a CP SafeCat circler stating his address and disability in case he escapes and becomes lost.

Blind cats rely on scent and memory to find their way around, so keep furniture, food and litter trays in the same place. Don't leave obstacles in unexpected places where he could walk into them. Carrying a blind cat around will disorientate him, so if you have to move him, put him down somewhere familiar so he can get his bearings easily. Sound is very important to a blind cat and many enjoy playing with 'jingly' toys.

It is rare for a cat to lose both hearing and sight. Such cats are far safer indoors as they can become lost or hurt outdoors.

Strokes

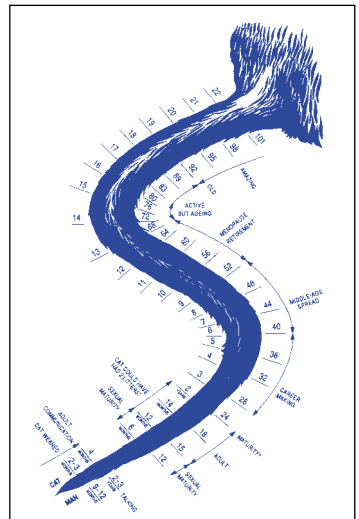
Strokes are not very common in cats and those that do have them usually recover faster and more completely than humans, though they may gain a slightly lopsided appearance. Many cats have lived very long, healthy, happy lives after suffering a stroke.

Growing old gracefully

The following signs are indications that your old cat is now a vintage cat and should be treated with the respect his advanced years have earned him.

- **becoming thinner with his spine and shoulders appearing more prominent**
- **rickety or unsteady on his back legs**
- **grey hair appearing around the muzzle and in his coat.**
- **senses becoming less acute and his pace of life slowing down.**

Popular belief has it that one year of a cat's life is equivalent to seven human years. In fact, kittens mature faster than human children and the rate of ageing slows down to one year equalling only four human years after only two years as the chart opposite shows.



This chart is produced with the kind permission of Smith Gryphon, publishers of *The Ultrafit Older Cat* by Claire Bessant and Bradley Viner; price £7.99.

When to visit the vet

Cats are generally healthy creatures and fairly problem free. However, when they are unwell they are adept at disguising symptoms of illness. The CP leaflet, *First Aid for Cats* and many cat care books contain information about ailments that can affect cats of all ages. Your vet should investigate the following symptoms in an older cat:

- **constipation or diarrhoea despite a balanced diet**
- **unexplained or frequent vomiting**
- **excessive thirst**
- **loss of appetite or excessive appetite**
- **sudden loss of weight**
- **frequent urination**
- **lumps and bumps on the cat's skin**
- **dental problems**
- **looking off-colour**
- **sudden collapse**

Don't delay in taking your cat to the vet if you are concerned about his health. Although the cause may turn out to be trivial, your vet would much rather declare your cat fit and healthy than have to tell you that an illness has progressed too far to be treatable. It is more effective to treat problems early ensuring a healthier, longer life.

Operations

Just like humans, cats sometimes need operations. If pre-anaesthetic blood tests show mild liver or kidney problems, your vet may suggest feeding an appropriate prescription food for a few weeks before the operation to further reduce any risks.

Your cat is given a pre-med injection before the operation. He is then anaesthetised by injection and kept under using gas anaesthetic. His pulse and breathing are monitored during the operation and he may be given intravenous fluids during, and after. Heated pads are used to keep him warm and he is given pain relief.

Once home, your cat probably needs to be kept warm and quiet for a few days and may want to sleep off the effects of the operation. Don't give him human painkillers because these are poisonous to cats. Your vet will give you detailed information on looking after your cat after the operation and post-op check ups. Your cat usually lets you know when he feels fully recovered but always follow your vet's advice and seek his help if you notice any problems.





Photo: Dave Waller

If you have read this leaflet with a view to giving a cat a home, we hope you will seriously consider taking on a mature cat. Cats Protection has many such cats that, through no fault of their own, find themselves with no one to take care of them. They do not ask for much, a warm fireside, a bowl of food and a little love; they give so much in return.

Please contact CP Headquarters for the address of your nearest Branch or Shelter.

We are grateful to Sarah Hartwell for writing this leaflet.

Donations towards printing and postage are always welcome