



Providing ramps for senior cats to access favored places can make their lives much easier.

SENIOR CATS

Cats are individuals and, like people, they experience advancing years in their own unique ways. Many cats begin to encounter age-related physical changes by ten years of age. The care of senior cats may require some modifications, including making sure the walls of the litter box are low enough for them to step over, adding ramps or steps to provide access to places they previously could jump to, grooming places on their bodies that they can no longer reach, and providing warm places for them to relax and rest their aging bodies.

The wisdom and experience of senior cats make them perfect companions in many situations, but it is important to realize that, like elderly people, they face an increased risk of several health problems, including chronic kidney disease, diabetes mellitus, dental disease, hyperthyroidism, and certain cancers. They may also experience behavioral changes similar to senility in people as they age. Elderly cats that undergo these types of changes may be more vocal, more emotionally needy, and may occasionally eliminate outside the litter box. While there are steps to mitigate the inconvenience of some of these age-associated behavioral changes, it is important that prospective owners know they are inevitable, just like changes that people undergo as they age. Please see our **Special Needs of the Senior Cat** brochure for more information on how to provide optimal care for your feline senior citizen.



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END OF LIFE MANAGEMENT

Since their lives are shorter than those of people, the decision to adopt a cat commonly results in difficult end-of-life decisions regarding quality of life and when to say goodbye. Veterinary professionals are well-trained to counsel owners about these issues, and about how to maintain a high quality of life through pain management, careful monitoring of physical and psychological well-being, and the consideration of euthanasia when the prognosis is not favorable. Hospice and end-of-life management are burgeoning fields in veterinary medicine, and working with a veterinarian experienced in these areas can provide vital support and comfort during what is inevitably a difficult time. Our **Grieving** brochure provides insight into the grieving process and information and resources to help cope with the loss of a beloved feline friend.

The Cornell Feline Health Center has produced a variety of educational brochures that address these and other issues related to feline (and owner) well-being. Please visit our website at: Vet.Cornell.edu/FHCBrochures for a listing of previewable brochure content and other valuable information. The bond between a loving owner and cat is irreplaceable, and we're so excited about the years of love and companionship you have ahead of you!



ABOUT THE CORNELL FELINE HEALTH CENTER

The Cornell Feline Health Center's mission is to improve the health and well-being of cats worldwide. Funded solely by the generous support of our donors, we provide up-to-date and expert information to cat lovers and veterinarians, support basic and applied research in cat health, and promote the training of veterinary professionals and researchers.

The Cornell Feline Health Center is a unit of the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, and our affiliation with this world-class institution of research and education promotes a unique collaborative environment that fosters innovation focused on improving the lives of all cats.

For more information about our programs
and to learn how you can help, visit:
www.vet.cornell.edu/fhc

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What to Expect When
Adopting a Feline
Friend



So, you’ve decided to adopt a cat.

That’s an exciting first step in making a thoughtful and caring commitment that can last a significant amount of time (10-15 years or more, depending upon the age of the cat!). Knowledge is power, and an important second step is educating yourself about cats’ natural behaviors, needs, and the responsibilities of cat ownership. In fact, a recent study found that cat owners who have an accurate understanding of feline behavior and who routinely address their cats’ unique environmental needs are less likely to report behavioral problems and form closer bonds with their cats. Familiarizing yourself with a few key points is the best way to maximize the years of companionship, entertainment, fun, and love that adopting a cat can provide to you and your new feline friend.



CAT BEHAVIOR

It’s important to understand that the unique evolution of cats can sometimes result in behaviors that can be perceived as problematic, but are often simply misunderstood. With appropriate intervention, these behaviors can be modified and any problems resolved in the vast majority of cases.



Most cats are solitary hunters in their natural setting, but given the right conditions, they can happily coexist with other cats, pets, and people. Kittens are socialized during the first seven to nine weeks of life, and exposure to

various stimuli, other animals, and people during this relatively brief period is vital to preventing them from becoming fearful. Socialization of adult cats is certainly possible, but cats that miss the opportunity for socialization when they are kittens may require special attention to overcome their hesitation to associate with others. Just as with humans, genetics also likely play a role in a cat’s demeanor.

Biting, chasing, and “playing roughly” are normal feline social learning behaviors that commonly occur between four and 14 weeks of age. These behaviors may be directed at other cats, pets, and people. Kittens also begin to play with objects during this time and may play by ambushing, licking, mouthing, pouncing, tail chasing, and leaping. Don’t be surprised if your new kitty playfully pounces on your unsuspecting foot or arm. This is referred to as ‘play aggression’ and is completely normal behavior, but it’s important to react correctly to encourage appropriate socialization. Please refer to our **Aggression** brochure for advice on how to properly manage this behavior.

Cats are naturally territorial, which can sometimes lead to conflicts over food, water, owners’ affection, and places to rest or eliminate. Our **Aggression** brochure also has information on how to address these types of conflicts, which can usually be addressed with some relatively simple behavioral interventions, should they arise.

Cats can develop preferences for where they eliminate and for the material they eliminate in. Some cats prefer finer litter while others seem to enjoy a coarser litter, and they will usually dig in the material before and after elimination to bury their waste. The location of litterboxes is very important. They should be placed in quiet, less-trafficked areas and shouldn’t be frequently moved. Another important thing to keep in mind is the quantity and cleanliness of litterboxes. A good general rule is that the number of litterboxes in your home should be equal to the number of cats you have plus one. So, if you have two cats in your home, you should have three litterboxes. Litterboxes should be cleaned at least once a day – you wouldn’t want to use a dirty bathroom, would you? In the event that your cat develops a preference for eliminating in inappropriate places, our **House Soiling** brochure

provides detailed information on why this may happen and strategies to get your kitty back on track with his elimination habits.

Scent strongly influences where cats eliminate, and they may mark their territory by spraying urine, leaving feces, and depositing secretions from their face and paws on surfaces. The latter behavior can also be applied to favored people in the home when cats rub against their legs and knead on their laps.

Cats also mark their territory by scratching. This behavior is beneficial to cats in that it helps them shed loose layers on the outside of their nails, may reduce stress, and provides an opportunity for them to stretch. Some cats prefer to scratch cloth while others prefer wood; some scratch horizontally, while others seek out vertical surfaces. It’s important for owners to realize that scratching is a completely normal behavior, and that cats are not being vindictive by partaking in this common, natural activity. Our **Destructive Behavior** brochure provides strategies to intervene if your cat begins scratching in inappropriate places in your home, including the provision of scratching posts, regular nail trimming, the use of nail caps, denial of access to sites that are inappropriately scratched, and a variety of behavioral modification techniques. It is crucial to stress that while declawing (onychectomy) is still legal in some places, this controversial practice has been outlawed in many countries/municipalities. Owners should pursue all other options to prevent inappropriate scratching before considering declawing, if they reside in an area that has not outlawed this procedure.

Cats are naturally crepuscular, meaning that they are more active during dawn and dusk. Depending upon the cat, this may mean that your kitty might wake you up to play in the middle of the night.

HUSBANDRY

Kittens should visit the veterinarian when they are six weeks of age, or sooner if there are signs of illness. They should return for regular examinations and vaccinations at approximately two to three-week intervals until they

complete their first series of core vaccines at approximately 16 weeks of age.

Adult cats should visit the veterinarian once yearly until they reach 10 years of age, when they become “seniors”, after which they should visit the veterinarian twice yearly. Our **Choosing and Caring for Your New Cat** brochure covers these and other important issues regarding how to keep your cat happy and healthy.

All cats should receive vaccination against feline panleukopenia (also called feline distemper or parvovirus), feline herpes virus, feline calicivirus, rabies virus, and feline leukemia virus (FeLV) as part of their first series of vaccines. All cats should then receive booster vaccines at regular intervals for all of these viral diseases except FeLV, for which the necessity for booster vaccines will depend on a cat’s potential exposure to FeLV-infected cats. Our **Feline Vaccines: Risks and Benefits** brochure provides more information on this crucial aspect of your cat’s health care plan.

All cats (and particularly kittens) should be tested for intestinal parasites via fecal analysis. Appropriate therapy for any identified intestinal parasites should be administered, followed up by a repeat fecal examination.

One important decision is whether to keep your cats indoors or to let them outside. Given the fact that most cats naturally yearn for the sights and sounds of the outdoors, it is understandable that owners may want to allow cats to roam around freely outside. Cats that are allowed outside without supervision, though, have a higher chance of exposure to infectious diseases and parasites, trauma due to cars and other accidents, and confrontations with other pets and wildlife, including various predators. Unsupervised outdoor cats can also negatively impact native ecosystems by preying on rodents, birds, and reptiles. For these reasons, we recommend keeping all cats indoors, or that owners construct outdoor enclosures if they wish to provide outdoor time. Alternatively, supervised walks using a leash and harness are another option for providing cats with safe outdoor activity.