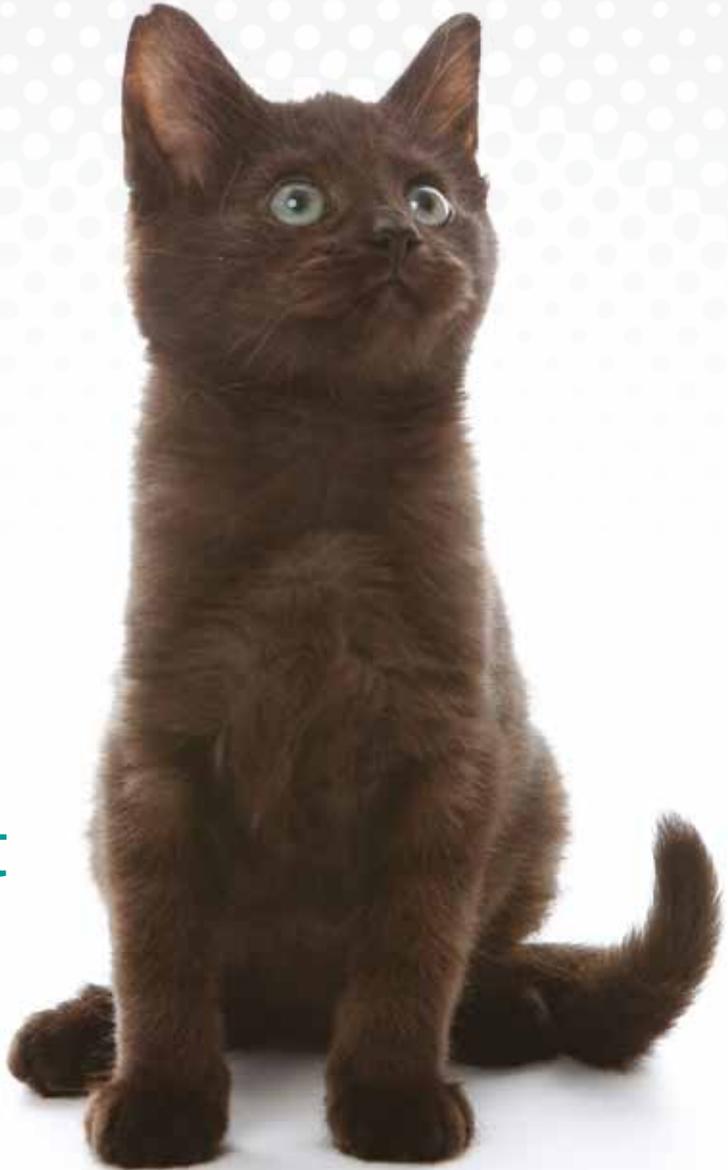


How to keep your cat healthy



Welcome

Making a new addition to your family can be a rewarding and fun experience. However, taking the decision to own a cat should not be taken lightly as it does come with significant responsibilities that last the lifetime of your pet. This booklet is aimed to be a guide to areas of responsibility commonly associated with veterinary care. It is by no means exhaustive and, if you are new to owning a cat, further reading around the subject is certainly advisable.

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Vaccination

Cats of all ages can and do become seriously ill or die from infectious diseases that could have been prevented through vaccination.

Vaccination offers the most effective way of protecting your cat against many of the most serious infectious diseases, including Cat flu, Feline Infectious Enteritis, Feline Leukaemia Virus and Chlamydia. Many of these diseases are commonly reported in the UK, and they represent a potentially significant threat to your pet's health.

PRIMARY VACCINATION

In the first few weeks of life, kittens are normally protected against disease by antibodies (immunity) from their mother's milk. This immunity decreases over time and has usually disappeared by approximately 12 weeks of age. Vaccination is then needed to protect your kitten against disease.

Kittens generally receive a course of two vaccinations, with an interval of 3 to 4 weeks between injections. This primary course ensures that your kitten's immune system has the best chance of mounting a strong protective response.

BOOSTER VACCINATION

The immunity generated by the kitten course of vaccinations does not last for life. Regular booster vaccinations are necessary to maintain the highest possible level of protection against serious infectious diseases.

These regular annual visits also allow the vet to give your cat a full clinical examination and check up, and spot the early signs of any disease conditions which may be developing.

Introduction to the household

The introduction to a new home can be very stressful for a kitten, so make sure you give plenty of reassurance and time to adjust to the new surroundings. Keep all the windows and doors closed, and make sure the kitten has a refuge or 'bolt hole' to escape to if necessary. This can be as simple as a cardboard box with some bedding, preferably in a quiet, warm part of the house. Other pets should be introduced gradually under controlled conditions to avoid conflict.

Training and behaviour

The independent nature of the cat leads most people to assume that there is little that they can do to bring their pet's behaviour under their control and you may not even have considered the issue of training. However, cats do need to learn how to behave and common examples of training include teaching kittens to use a litter tray or a cat flap.

LITTER TRAINING

Most kittens will have learnt how to use a litter tray by copying their mother, so it may be as easy as showing the kitten where it is and placing her on the tray after waking up after a nap or after eating. Make sure the tray is placed in a quiet area where the kitten is unlikely to be disturbed and not too close to food or water bowls.

GOING OUTSIDE

Kittens should not be allowed outside until at least a week after completing the primary vaccination course. On the first few trips outside, it's best to accompany your kitten to allow it to safely explore the outside environment. Once your kitten has become more independent, it will probably want to come and go as it pleases and installing a cat flap will allow this.

HUNTING AND PLAY

One very common misconception amongst cat owners is that feeding their cat more will prevent hunting behaviour. In fact the motivation to hunt has absolutely nothing to do with hunger and the cat's natural instinct is to catch prey when the opportunity presents itself. Play is a vital outlet for feline hunting behaviour and cats need to be offered small rapidly moving targets on which to practice their stalking and pouncing skills. Suspended toys which move erratically are suitable for this purpose and can be very rewarding for the cat and fun for you!

Grooming

Grooming can be an enjoyable experience for your cat and helps to develop the bond between cat and owner. Grooming removes dead and loose hair, helping to prevent furballs from developing. It also gives you a chance to carefully check your cat's coat, eyes, ears and claws regularly so you can spot any potential problems early. It's important to start grooming when your kitten is young, particularly if she has a long coat. Be as gentle as possible and try to make grooming a positive and rewarding experience.



Worming

Cats can be affected by about 8 different species of worm in UK, with the most common types being roundworms and tapeworms. Your cat could pick these up if they eat worm eggs passed by other infected pets, eat an infected flea during grooming, or if they eat a small rodent which carries tapeworm. Although symptoms are not always easy to spot, they can cause serious damage to their health if left untreated.

All cats require regular treatment to help keep them healthy, but some pets may require more frequent worming. Cats which are at higher risk include young kittens and cats which tend to hunt. Your vet can advise on the most appropriate treatment protocol for your cat. Regular treatment for fleas, which can carry tapeworm, will also help to reduce the risk.

Some types of cat worm (*Toxocara*) can also be transmitted to people with potentially serious results. Infection occurs when worm eggs are accidentally eaten and young children are particularly at risk. So if you have young children, it's even more important to ensure your cat is treated regularly.

Flea and tick prevention

Cats can be affected by external parasites from a very young age. Fleas, ticks and mites can cause more than just skin irritation and can transmit serious infectious diseases to your pet. Regular treatment is important and your vet can advise you on the most suitable products to use.

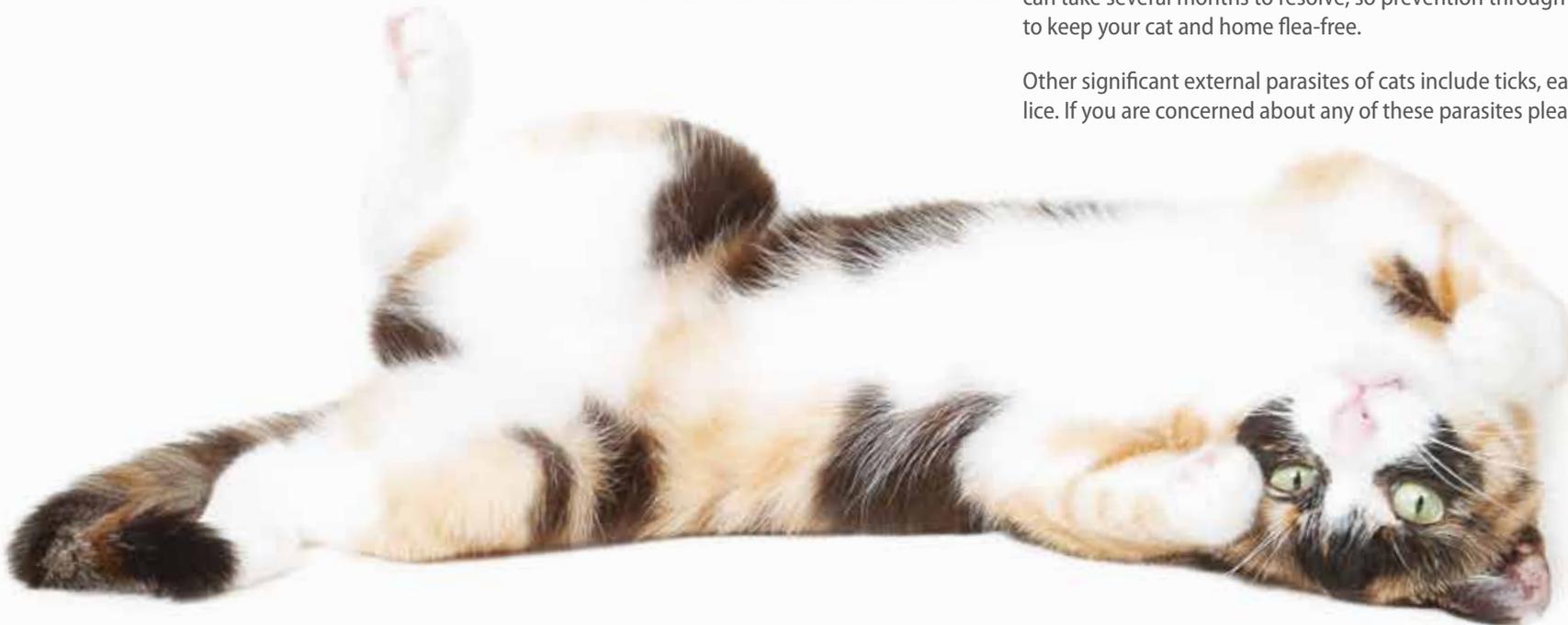
FLEAS

If left untreated heavy burdens of fleas can cause a loss of blood, which can result in anaemia and be potentially life threatening, particularly in kittens. Flea bites can also cause intense itching and scratching which can result in hairloss and discomfort. Flea saliva can also cause a very unpleasant skin allergy in sensitive cats known as Flea Allergy Dermatitis (FAD). Tapeworm and some other infectious diseases can also be transmitted by fleas.

When grooming, cats may eat fleas that they discover, making it difficult to find adult fleas in the coat. An itchy cat may be the only evidence of a flea infestation. Carefully grooming your cat with a fine-tooth comb may help to find fleas or flea dirt. If you're unsure what's making your cat itchy, contact your vet for advice.

Once fleas are seen on your pet, the home environment is also invariably infested; adult fleas on pets generally only represent 5% of the actual flea burden, with the remaining 95% hidden in the home as eggs, larvae and pupae. Once established, a flea infestation can take several months to resolve, so prevention through regular treatment is essential to keep your cat and home flea-free.

Other significant external parasites of cats include ticks, ear mites, harvest mites and lice. If you are concerned about any of these parasites please contact your vet.



Feeding

Cats' nutritional requirements change over time, and kittens, adults and senior cats all have different needs. The easiest way to meet these requirements is to use a good quality complete diet from a reputable manufacturer. These diets are formulated to ensure that the nutritional requirements of your cat are met as it progresses from kittenhood to adulthood. There is usually a choice between wet (tinned) food and dry biscuits. Dry food is more convenient to feed and is better for your cat's teeth.

Meat is an essential part of the cat's diet and cats have a requirement for certain amino acids only found in animal protein, such as taurine. A deficiency of taurine can lead to problems with the eyes and heart. Remember that cats are not small dogs, and dog food is not suitable for your cat!

Always make sure that there is a plentiful supply of fresh water for your cat, particularly if you are feeding a dry food diet.

The combination of a sedentary lifestyle and access to plenty of food can lead to excessive weight gain and obesity in some cats. Overweight cats are more prone to a wide variety of diseases, including diabetes. Feeding the correct quantities of food and monitoring your cat's weight are important to keep your cat healthy.

Neutering

Unless you plan to breed from your cat, neutering is the responsible thing to do. The routine operations in the male (castration) and female (spaying or ovariohysterectomy) are both performed under general anaesthetic. Your vet can advise you on the most appropriate age to have your cat neutered.

There are several advantages to having your cat neutered. In the male, castration can help to prevent unwanted behaviour, such as aggression, wandering to find a mate and spraying urine to mark their territory. In the female cat, spaying prevents the problem of unwanted litters, prevents the problem of uterine infections later in life and also stops her from coming into heat ('calling') at regular intervals.

Microchipping

Microchipping is a permanent and inexpensive way of identification. If your cat ever gets lost, there is a better chance of them being returned to you if they can be identified by a microchip.

A microchip is a tiny electronic device, about the size of a grain of rice, which can be injected under the loose skin at the back of the neck. Each chip has its own unique number, which is recorded along with your details on a central database. If your pet is found, the chip can be detected and read by an electronic scanner, and the chip number can then be found on the database.

Having a tag on your cat's collar stating that she has been chipped will highlight the fact that she can be identified. If you move home, make sure you inform the central database so your records are up to date.



Holidays and foreign travel

Preparing for a holiday needs to be done well in advance. If you are taking your pet with you, you need to ensure that your accommodation is 'cat friendly'. If your cat is staying at home, then she may need to be booked into a boarding cattery, in which case you need to check what the requirements are. Make sure you book the cattery well in advance, especially during the peak holiday season.

If you're going abroad, the Pet Travel Scheme (PETS) means that you can take your cat with you, provided certain requirements are met. However, it's important to remember that cats are generally poor travellers and feel vulnerable and stressed when away from their home territory. Before travelling, your pet needs to be microchipped, vaccinated against rabies and issued with a Pet Passport. The Scheme only applies to countries within the EU and certain other listed countries, so it's vital to check the requirements for your destination country before travelling. For full details, speak to your vet or visit the DEFRA website for the latest information.

If you do take your cat abroad, remember that there may be other diseases and pests which are not found in the UK. Make sure you talk to your vet about the steps you can take to minimise the risks to your cat.

Insurance

Cats are inquisitive creatures and this can occasionally get them into trouble, ending up in an unexpected trip to the vets. Pet insurance has become increasingly popular and can give you peace of mind that should your cat be injured or fall ill, the costs of treatment will be covered. Pet insurance can also help to cover other costs related to pet ownership, such as the cost of cattery fees if you are hospitalised.

Pet insurance policies vary greatly, so make sure you shop around and get advice. Watch out for exclusions (conditions which aren't covered) and check whether the cover for chronic conditions, such as diabetes or arthritis, is lifelong or whether the policy will stop paying out after a year.

Further reading

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| Merial Animal Health Ltd: | www.merial.co.uk |
| Pet Travel Scheme (DEFRA): | www.defra.gov.uk |
| Feline Advisory Bureau: | www.fabcats.org |
| Battersea Dogs & Cat Home: | www.battersea.org.uk |
| The Association of Pet Behaviour Counsellors: | www.apbc.org.uk |
| Petlog: | www.petlog.org.uk |
| NOAH Pet Health Information: | www.pethealthinfo.org.uk |
| Lost Dogs & Cats Line | 0901 477 8477 (calls cost 60p per minute from a BT landline, other networks may vary) Opening hours 8am–8pm, Mon–Sun |



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