



# CatWatch

Expert information on medicine, behavior and health from a world leader in veterinary medicine



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## IN THE NEWS ...

### An Abandoned Alley Cat Becomes a Guinness Star

If you want to understand how your cat can effortlessly leap on counters, you could study takeoff velocity (TOV) and hind-limb length. Or watch Alley, who made the 2015 Guinness World Records as the longest-jumping domestic cat. Her broad jump: six feet, with her TOV from a standstill.

Alley was named by Samantha Martin because she found the "frail, little kitty" in an alley. "To have her grow up so strong and then eventually become a Guinness World Record-holding cat is so exciting for us and for her because she had such difficult beginnings and now she's a star."

Martin began training Alley when she saw the cat liked to jump. Now she shines on YouTube and Martin's one-hour stage show, the Amazing Acro-Cats. The rescued and stray cats skateboard and walk tightropes. Also featured are the Rock Cats band on drums, guitar, keyboard and chimes. Martin's skill: clicker training. For Alley, hind-limb length probably helps, too. ♦

## The Many Reasons for the Cats' Meow

*It can express urgency for food or attention, as well as their nature to be active at dusk and dawn for the hunt*

Meowing can be endearing, but let's face it: When our cats meow to excess, it can sometimes drive us crazy. "The same sort of meowing that is not a problem at 6 p.m. can be a huge problem at 4 a.m. when the owner is trying to sleep," says behaviorist Katherine A. Houpt, VMD, Ph.D., professor emerita at Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine. "What cat



We unwittingly teach our cats to meow by responding when they do

owners consider excessive meowing in cats depends largely on what time of day it is."

**Common Complaint.** While frequent nighttime or early morning meowing is a fairly common complaint among cat owners, "Unlike excessive barking, it's rarely serious enough for an owner to pay a behaviorist to solve the problem," says Dr. Houpt. "In one of our studies, owners reported that only 10 out of 736 cat cases — or 1.4 percent

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## Looking Beyond the Ingredient Label

*It may take some sleuthing to determine what's in your cat's food, such as those secondary sources*

In our quest to eat healthy food, we often extend that enthusiasm to our cats. We evaluate their diets with the same scrupulous care we give our own, but commercial cat food can still remain somewhat of a mystery. We question if preservatives are safe. Should we avoid genetically modified ingredients? What about artificial coloring?

Nutritionist Joseph Wakshlag, DVM, Ph.D., at Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, weighs in on ingredient safety with this advice: You can be the most effective advocate for your cat's healthy diet. If you have questions after reading the label

on his food, he recommends that you call the manufacturer directly and ask. It may be the best way to get a grasp on what's really in it. Most manufacturers will disclose secondary sources if you call them.

"The big issue is about the sources that you don't know about," Dr. Wakshlag says. "If manufacturers don't add it themselves, that doesn't mean it isn't in there because sometimes it's in the ingredients they buy. If the manufacturer puts on the label that the dog food was preserved with rosemary, it doesn't mean that the product wasn't preserved with ethoxyquin [a preservative also licensed by

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# CatWatch

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## SHORT TAKES

### Annual Spending on Pets in the U.S. Tops \$55 Billion

While the U.S. economy grew only 1.9 percent last year, overall spending on pets increased 4.5 percent to reach a record \$55.72 billion. This year estimates are that the pet industry will continue to grow an estimated 4.9 percent to \$58.51 billion.

The main reasons: a stream of entrepreneurs introducing products and the investment in new and existing companies, the American Pet Products Association said in announcing the figures earlier this year. Its report covered food, supplies and over-the-counter medications, veterinary care, animal purchases and services such as grooming, boarding, training and pet sitting.

Food was the big winner, with an increase of 4.5 percent and sales of nearly \$22 billion, as owners' preferences followed trends in human food and diets. Veterinary care was second at \$14.37 billion, an increase of 5.1 percent. Pet services had the biggest percentage of growth at 6.1 percent, or \$4.41 billion.

"Both food and veterinary care are strongly influenced by consumers' growing interest in improved healthcare for their pets," said Bob Vetere, CEO of the association. "Health and wellness-related themes represent the most powerful trends across all segments of the industry and will continue to do so."

Vetere credited owners' continuing humanization of pets as one of the strongest forces behind spending. "People are pampering their pets more than ever, and manufacturers and businesses are offering new products, services and opportunities to meet their needs and wants, from interactive and innovative toys to pet-friendly hotels, restaurants and airlines."

### Addressing a Veterinary Shortage

The University of Arizona will open a veterinary medicine program in the fall of 2015, thanks to a \$9 million foundation grant. With only 30 veterinary schools and colleges across the U.S., gaining admission to veterinary schools can be difficult, especially at many out-of-state institutions that favor resident students.



Health and wellness emerge as a major reason for increased spending on pets.

The program at UA will help address the critical shortage of veterinarians in rural Arizona communities and tribal nations, benefit bioscience businesses and promote public health, the university said. The year-round program will allow students to receive their degrees more quickly, incur less loan debt and enter the workforce more rapidly.

Training partners will include private practices, federal and state animal health labs and regulators, the U.S. Border Patrol, Homeland Security, and animal shelter and rescue agencies.

### Toward Safer Surgery

A study at UC Davis will evaluate the cardiovascular effects of the drug MK-476 when given with dexmedetomidine for anesthesia or pre-sedation in cats. MK-476 (montelukast sodium) is now used to manage asthma in humans, among other conditions.

Bruno H. Pypendop, DrMedVet, Ph.D., is chief investigator for the project, sponsored by the Winn Feline Foundation and Davis' Center for Companion Animal Health. Dr. Pypendop, Professor of Surgical and Radiological Sciences, has an interest in the pharmacology of anesthetic and pain-relieving agents in animals, with a special emphasis on cats.

The sedative dexmedetomidine is often used in cats for its calming, pain-relieving effects. It also given before anesthesia, usually only to young, healthy cats because its side effects, such as lowered heart rate and decreased output of blood from the heart, could tax older cats. Administered simultaneously, the study will determine if MK-476 may be able prevent those effects and still preserve dexmedetomidine's benefits. MK-476 has been studied in dogs and sheep but, until now, not in cats. ♦



# They're Giving Kittens a Chance at Life

*Shelters launch nurseries to provide intensive care and prevent the spread of deadly diseases*

Of all the animals in shelters, young kittens are usually the most at risk. They're fragile, prone to infectious illnesses and have special care needs. While some are placed in foster homes to be hand-raised until they are old enough for adoption, many shelters euthanize them as soon as they are brought in because they don't have the infrastructure or staff to care for them.

To give the kittens a chance at life, some shelters are taking a new approach: They're operating kitten nurseries. "When the foster system is overwhelmed or when the needs go beyond the care that can be provided in individual homes, a kitten nursery provides a sort of intermediate or intensive care ward where these populations can be supported, treated and socialized," says Elizabeth A. Berliner, DVM, MS, ABVP, the Janet L. Swanson Director of Shelter Medicine at Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine.

**Growing Trend.** In a small but growing movement around the country, shelters, including the Neonatal Kitten Nursery Program at Austin's Pets Alive, are making a difference by expanding the number of kittens who can be cared for — as long as the shelters have adequate housing, staff and volunteer force, as well as careful medical oversight and protocols.

One of the efforts is a coalition comprising Jacksonville Humane Society, Jacksonville Animal Care and Protective Services and First Coast No More Homeless Pets. Together, they saved approximately 600 kittens during their first year of operation and doubled that number in their second year in 2013. "This year we're forecasting it will be 1,500 or 1,600," says JHS Executive Director Denise Deisler.

Caring for "bottle babies," the youngest, tiniest and most vulnerable kittens, is highly labor intensive. Their immune systems are not yet fully functional, they have specific nutritional needs, and they need close monitoring to ensure that they don't fall prey to deadly infectious diseases and low blood sugar, Dr. Berliner says. She adds that one of the best measures of kitten health is reliable weight gain, so kittens must be weighed daily to ensure that they are steadily putting on the ounces.



The Jacksonville Humane Society is part of a coalition that saved 600 cats when it opened the Kitten University in 2012. It expects to end this year with up to 1,600 lives saved. Volunteers work three shifts seven days a week caring for at-risk kittens.

Because of these special needs, Deisler and her staff decided that focusing on bottle babies was not the best use of the nursery facility. Instead, they farmed out the babies to foster homes and focused what they call Kitten University on youngsters who were already weaned.

"It worked out beautifully," she says. "Bottle babies need to be in the space longer, so if we fill up with bottle babies, we don't have room to take in the 3, 4 and 5-week-olds whose chance of surviving is much greater. It also made it easier for us to attract foster parents, because we could assure them that while bottle-feeding babies isn't a simple task, it was a very short task and we would bring the kittens into the

nursery as soon as they were weaned from the bottle."

**Close Monitoring.** The advantages of a kitten nursery are more centralized care procedures, a support system and the ability to closely monitor the populations, Dr. Berliner says. Those same advantages can have a downside, though: the possibility that illness can rapidly spread to all the kittens.

One of the most important factors in successfully running a kitten nursery is preventing the spread of disease. While having kittens in a centralized area makes it easier to care for them, it can also heighten the risk of infection. Staff members and volunteers working in the kitten nursery must have special training in disease prevention when working with these highly susceptible kittens and, sometimes, their mothers.

"It is critical that staff and volunteers working in a kitten nursery have training in basic biosecurity: hand-washing, fomite [objects that can be contaminated] control, and wearing of gloves and other personal protective equipment," Dr. Berliner says. "They should also have protocol-based systems for caring for and monitoring kitten health, as well as guidelines for play and socialization."

At JHS, kittens are housed in separate rooms grouped by age. That way, the kittens in a particular area are all provided the same level of care. They can also be isolated more easily if disease breaks out.

**Color Coding.** "We color-code each room," Deisler says. "In the purple room, for instance, the trashcan is purple, the broom is purple, the mop is purple, the laundry basket is purple, so we're not mixing cleaning or handling supplies between rooms."

A cadre of devoted volunteers is essential as well, not only to foster bottle

*(continued on bottom page 5)*



**INGREDIENTS...** *(continued from cover)*

the Environmental Protection Agency as a pesticide]. Consumers have to be a little bit inquisitive when looking at food labels because, from a packaging standpoint, there are a lot of ways to get around it.

**Q** *What do you think is the biggest consumer misconception about pet food ingredients?*

**A** That it's inferior to what you're eating, whereas it is species-appropriate. It may be better than what most of us are eating because of the balance of healthy ingredients and because they're routinely fed the same diet — with few trips to the fast-food drive-through.

**Q** *Consumers used to be worried about ethoxyquin. What is the current veterinary consensus about it? [While the Food and Drug Administration determined that ethoxyquin does not have any health consequences, its Center for Veterinary Medicine asked pet food manufacturers to limit its use voluntarily until there was more evidence that it was harmful to pets. The antioxidant is added to animal feed with the FDA stipulation that one of these statements be included on the product label: "Ethoxyquin, a preservative" or "Ethoxyquin added to retard the oxidative destruction" of carotene ... and vitamins A and E." The label helps ensure the safe use of ethoxyquin, since there are established tolerances and a maximum use rate for this food additive, the agency says.]*



**A** I can't say that ethoxyquin is bad. It's the amount of it that we need to look at. We know that ethoxyquin, which preserves fats and other vitamins that get oxidized, has negative potential consequences when it is in high concentrations, above 150 parts per million. That is partially why the Association of American Feed Control Officials decreased the acceptable amount of it in pet food.

**Q** *Are natural preservatives healthier than chemical ones?*

**A** Everyone is looking for all-natural food. Many companies have gone to natural preservatives like rosemary and vitamin E. However, there are products that may have chemical preservatives in them like BHA or BHT in fish meal or poultry fat. The manufacturer will tell you that the product is preserved with natural tocopherols for preservation (which are antioxidants at the same time) that they add, but they do not need to label that the fat they bought had chemical preservatives that end up in the food.

The reason some of these products have to be preserved chemically is that the natural preservatives do not work as well as chemical ones in general. Their shelf life might be shorter. Synthetic ones were made for a reason: They were more effective, you didn't have to use as much, and in the end they are less expensive because they are all used in the human market *ad nauseam*.

**Q** *Should we avoid genetically modified corn and soy?*

**A** In general there is not much to worry about. We have been genetically modifying corn since the days of Mendel. One of the major issues is genetically modified (GMO) corn and soy that is weed-killer resistant. GMO corn and soy will make a protein that is resistant to certain weed killers. The grower keeps

**Commercial cat food may be better than our diets** because of the balance of healthy ingredients and the consistency of our feeding it.

using them, and the corn and soy do not die and produce better yields.

Many initial studies said this is safe for consumption. But when researchers looked at what happens when 60 percent of a rat's diet is weed-killer resistant GMO corn fed in pellets, some studies say it's OK. Others say if you feed it to rats for their entire lives, they will get kidney lesions. But how many cats or humans are eating 60 percent GMO corn? Like everything else, it's all about quantity — dose makes the poison — so there is a lot of controversy around it.

**Q** *How long will preservatives keep cat foods fresh?*

**A** They are safe to eat within nine to 12 months from the day of manufacturing. A high-fat food will go rancid quicker, because those usually contain about 20 percent or more fat, and those usually become rancid from being stored in a hot warehouse before being shipped to the retailer.

**Q** *Is artificial coloring safe?*

**A** We don't have any evidence that it is detrimental. We just don't know enough. It's not in many foods. If we had enough cats eating red coloring, there is a good chance we would find something negative, but it's all in the quantity. Current toxicology studies suggest they are safe.

**Q** *Which by-products are OK and which are bad? How can you tell by reading the label?*

**A** It comes back to knowing your by-products. Good chicken meal is the whole chicken. Bad chicken meal is just the rib cages, necks and legs. To ascertain that, you have to call the manufacturers and ask how much ash [bone] is in their chicken meal, beef meal or bone meal. Some will have upward of 10, 12 or 16 percent. That's a lot of bone and very little meat. The appropriate range of ash is 6 percent or so in good quality chicken meal. ♦



# Reducing the Risk of Food-borne Illness

*Don't feed your cat in the kitchen and — good luck with this — make meal preparation off-limits*

**D**emystifying the ingredients in commercial food is only one step in providing a healthy diet for our cats. The ongoing challenge is preventing the spread of food-borne illness to animals and people in the household. At last count, manufacturers had recalled five of six dog and cat foods this year because of possible contamination with the bacteria salmonella. The sixth recalled food was suspected of containing the bacteria *Listeria monocytogenes* that can also cause serious infection in humans and animals.

Salmonella causes 1.2 million illnesses, 23,000 hospitalizations and 450 deaths in people in the U.S. annually, usually from eating undercooked meat, poultry, eggs and raw milk, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The bacteria is spread through exposure to human and animal feces, but owners can also be exposed to it by handling pet food and treats contaminated with salmonella and other organisms.

**Appearing Healthy.** Signs of salmonellosis in people include diarrhea, fever and abdominal cramps, developing up to three days after infection. Those most at risk are children under 5, the elderly, pregnant and immune-compromised. In cats the signs include lethargy, diarrhea, vomiting, dehydration, elevated heart rate, mucus in the stool, weight

loss, swollen lymph nodes and shock. A major concern is that pets who have eaten contaminated food can carry germs even if they appear healthy.

The best advice for safe pet-food handling is simple common sense. "Wash your hands for 20 seconds with water and soap right after handling pet food and treats, and especially before preparing, serving or eating food, drinks or preparing baby bottles," the CDC says. "Also, wash your hands after contact with animals, their food and their environments."

The agency also makes these recommendations that might entail adjustments in household routine:

- ◆ When possible, feed your cat in areas other than the kitchen to prevent germs in pet food from contaminating "people" food.
- ◆ Keep his food away from your food storage.
- ◆ Don't wash his food and water dishes in the kitchen sink or bathtub to prevent cross-contamination. "If there is no alternative, clean and disinfect the sink after washing pet food items," the CDC says.

And — good luck with this — keep pets away from food preparation areas. Actually, it's a smart idea because, as safety articles in *CatWatch* have pointed out, cats underfoot during meal prepa-



Owners can be exposed to salmonella by handling pet food and treats contaminated with the bacteria.

ration can also cause the cook to slip and fall, and put pets at risks for burns. The same advice on avoiding burns applies to cats' counter surfing.

The CDC and Food and Drug Administration offer this advice on buying and handling pet food:

- ◆ Buy products without dents, tears or other damage to the packaging.
- ◆ Wash pet food bowls, dishes and scooping utensils with soap and hot water after each use.
- ◆ Don't use the feeding bowl as a scoop. Use a clean, dedicated scoop or spoon.
- ◆ Dispose of old or spoiled pet food in securely tied plastic bags in a covered trash can.
- ◆ Promptly store leftover wet pet food in the refrigerator set at 40 degrees Fahrenheit. "Refrigerating foods quickly prevents the growth of most harmful bacteria," the CDC says. Store dry products in a dry place under 80 degrees.
- ◆ Keep dry food in its original bag in a clean, dedicated plastic container with a lid with the bag folded closed. ♦

## KITTENS... (continued from page 3)

babies but also to work in the nursery. Deisler aims to have two to four volunteers per shift at three shifts a day, seven days a week. If they run short of volunteers on a given day or shift, the staff works harder, but Deisler finds that publishing a Kitten University newsletter

and keeping the pantry well stocked with snacks helps keep volunteers coming in.

Once they reach 8 weeks of age or 2 pounds, the kittens can be spayed or neutered and put up for adoption. They are highly adoptable, thanks to the socialization and handling they receive in the nursery. Deisler notes, however, that sav-

ing more kittens also means planning to place more kittens. "We forged relationships with four new off-site venues so that we would have new avenues for adoption," she says. "We have an incredibly high adoption rate for at-risk kittens. Our live-release, or save, rate for them is about 94 percent, which is remarkable." ♦



**MEOWING...** *(continued from cover)*

of behavior problems — meowed excessively.”

Meows can express and evoke a sense of urgency for food or attention. “Initially, kittens meow to get their mothers’ attention,” Dr. Houpt says, “so it makes sense for pet cats, as adults, to meow a great deal when they want something from us, their surrogate mothers.”

Surprisingly, these same adult cats don’t generally meow to one another at all. They may caterwaul to one another, Dr. Houpt says, “but those are aggressive vocalizations, as compared to the pleading vocalizations they bestow upon their humans.”

And, she adds, “We humans unwittingly teach our cats to meow, simply by responding

positively to them when they do.”

If you prefer your cats on the quiet side, you may want to steer clear of the Oriental breeds who tend to be great talkers. By nature, Dr. Houpt says, “Siamese, Himalayans and Burmese cats tend to be more vocal than other breeds.”

*(continued on bottom page 7)*

**WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW**

Excessive meowing can be a sign of a physical problem — illness, pain, hunger, thirst or confusion. “If your cat vocalizes excessively or compulsively — especially if the hyper-vocalization has come on suddenly — a trip to the veterinarian is a good idea,” Dr. Houpt says.

“Excessive meowing is often a symptom of hyperthyroidism, particularly when accompanied by weight loss and hyperactivity,” she says. In an assessment, a veterinarian will consider the age of your cat. A 2-year-old is much less likely to have this disease than a 12-year-old. The good news, says Dr. Houpt, is that hyperthyroidism is treatable.

Another consideration: “Elderly cats are also prone to develop kidney disease and/or cognitive dysfunction — the feline equivalent of Alzheimer’s — which can also cause late-night yowling, possibly due to anxiety,” Dr. Houpt says. “A veterinarian may be able to prescribe medications that can help.”

**Some cats meow insistently to go out into the world.** The enclosed space of a catio allows them to enjoy the outdoors and still remain safe.



**Interactive games can mentally engage your cat** and give you the opportunity to play together, reducing meowing due to boredom. Put treats in the blocks while he watches to begin the MixMax Puzzle game.

**AFTER BASIC NEEDS ARE MET, PLAY WITH HIM TO BURN OFF HIS EXCESS ENERGY**

Don’t ignore your meowing cat without first checking whether something is amiss in his life. Is the water bowl empty? Is there easy access to the litter box? Is he inadvertently trapped in a room or closet?

Make sure your cat’s basic physical needs are met before assuming that he’s demanding attention. And resist the urge to shout at or punish him for excessive meowing. Any form of attention, even anger, is more likely to exacerbate rather than solve the problem behavior.

Instead, try playing with your cat in the evening to burn off excess energy, Dr. Houpt says. “Another technique is to feed cats their dinner later at night — for example, before you go to bed. This way, they will be satiated and less likely to awaken you due to hunger. If your cat sleeps in your bedroom and is not prone to gaining weight, try keeping a bowl of food in your bedroom so he can eat it when he awakens instead of waking you up. Or try confining them elsewhere in the house.”

When all else fails: A product called Ssscat provides a harmless burst of compressed air and may serve as an effective deterrent to keep your cats out of your bedroom, Dr. Houpt says. “Whatever you do, don’t reward bad behavior.”



## FIVE REASONS FOR THE BEHAVIOR AND TECHNIQUES TO CONTROL IT

Once physical and medical causes are ruled out, you may wish to consider some behavioral techniques to curb your cat's excessive meowing. First, it's important to determine the cause:

1. **Feeling lonely or bored:** If you're away from home for long hours, especially evening hours, see if you can arrange to spend more time at home. If not, consider having a friend, neighbor, family member or pet sitter stop by your house to visit and interact with your cat. Enhance the time you do have together by playing with your cat. Many prefer interactive play with a fishing pole-type toy or laser beam.
2. **Seeking attention:** Teach your cat that you'll offer attention he craves only when he's quiet. Wait for a moment of silence, and immediately reward him with treat and praise. Walk away if he begins meowing again, and return only when he's quiet. Repeat this process frequently. Your cat is bound to catch on.
3. **Asking to go out or come in.** Keeping cats indoors will better protect them from danger and disease, and provide them with a longer life. Consider transitioning outdoor cats to a life indoors. They may meow at windows and doors for a while but will eventually adjust. Another option is to build an outdoor cat enclosure — a catio — so your cat can spend time outdoors while both he and the local wildlife remain safe.
4. **Seeking food.** Feed your cat only at prescribed times so he understands that food will not be forthcoming at other times. You can also try one of the commercially available automatic cat feeders, which can be programmed to



open at specific times. At the very least, your cat's excessive meowing will be directed at the feeder and not at you. If you've recently placed your cat on a diet and suspect hunger-related meowing, ask his veterinarian about high-fiber diet foods that can help your cat feel satiated without consuming excess calories.

5. **Wanting to mate.** An unsprayed female cat may be in heat. Each episode can last 4 to 10 days, with the cycle repeating every 18 to 24 days throughout the breeding season. It can be eight months long in the Northern hemisphere and year-round for indoor cats. Similarly, an unneutered male cat may pace and meow relentlessly if he hears or smell a female in heat. In either case, spaying and neutering are the solution for this — and their general health.

The late Sophia Yin, DVM, MS, a pioneer in positive training, advocated following the golden rule in quieting what she described as a cacophonous cryer: "Reward the behavior you want, such as sitting quietly, and remove the reward for unwanted behavior — your attention. So when your cat yowls at you to give him what he wants, wait him out patiently and then pet and provide attention only when he sits quietly."

Success might take time, Dr. Yin said. "To speed up the process, first train the cat to sit for treats. Once he's learned a calm stationary position, you can start rewarding for quiet behavior." She once said that her cat, Dante, vocalized longer than the most diligently trained singer, but he learned that he didn't need to meow and scream whenever he wanted something."

(continued from page 6)

**Wakeup Calls.** It's also important to understand that cats are "crepuscular" creatures. "Their nature is to hunt at dawn and dusk," Dr. Houpt says. "They awaken naturally at dawn and they want company. Besides meowing loudly, they may jump on their favorite sleeping humans, tap us with their paws or even knock things off shelves. Owners often make matters worse by

Oriental cats like **Burmese**, along with Siamese and Himalayans, tend to be more vocal than other breeds.

leaping out of bed as soon as the cat wakes them up and then feeding him, which serves only to reinforce the problem behavior."

Excessive crepuscular meowing often becomes a couple's problem. "The wife may not mind it, but the husband

does — or vice versa," Dr. Houpt says. "Unfortunately, as I tell these couples, I don't do marriage counseling!"

However, she did find a good solution in her own situation. "Before I got married, my cat slept with me, but my husband preferred him to sleep elsewhere," she says. "We compromised by having the cat sleep on a bench alongside the bed." ♦





Elizabeth

Elizabeth is thankful for the assistance of **Bruce G. Kornreich, DVM, Ph.D., ACVIM**, Associate Director of the Cornell Feline Health Center, in providing the answer on this page.

### PLEASE SHARE YOUR QUESTIONS

We welcome questions on health, medicine and behavior, but regret that we cannot comment on prior diagnoses and specific products. Please write CatWatch Editor, 535 Connecticut Ave., Norwalk, CT 06854-1713 or email [catwatcheditor@cornell.edu](mailto:catwatcheditor@cornell.edu).

### COMING UP ...

❖  
ADVANCES  
IN ANESTHESIA

❖  
CATFIGHTS

❖  
HEMOPHILIA

❖  
HOME HOSPICE  
CARE

## What Causes Mats in Her Cats With Mid-length Hair?

**Q** I have two cats, a 15-year-old, 6-pound domestic calico with mid-length hair and a 7-year-old, 8-pound part-Himalayan, also with mid-length hair. Both have developed matted hair on both sides of their hindquarters. I was able to shave the calico's off and the hair grew back OK. The big cat won't let me shave him. What causes these mats?

**A** Thank you for writing about this common problem. It can not only be annoying but can also predispose to certain skin diseases that may, in some cases, be an indication that something is not right with a kitty. Perhaps a discussion of the normal anatomy and cycle of hair growth would be a good place to start.

Cats, like all mammals, have hair that grows from follicles found in the skin. Hair comes in different forms, including the undercoat, or down, which is the softer, fluffier layer that provides warmth, and the guard hairs, which are generally longer than the undercoat. The guard hairs usually determine the color of a cat and provide a barrier of protection from water, ultraviolet light and trauma. Whiskers are another type of long, thick hair that extends from the face and legs of a cat and provide tactile information about a cat's environment, allowing him to gauge the size of openings, navigate in the dark and perhaps even smell things. (That's cool!)

Cats normally shed their hair in the spring and early fall in temperate zones, although they may also shed in response to artificial changes in temperature and the amount of light. Some degree of shedding may be normal year-round. Cats are fastidious groomers, and this grooming helps keep the hairs healthy and removes hairs that are shed. While grooming, cats often ingest hair that is shed, sometimes

predisposing them to hairballs, or trichobezoars, which may cause problems in some cats.

Mats usually form when shed hairs become tangled with non-shed hairs and dirt, environmental moisture, excessive oil from oil glands in the skin, and, in some cases, urine and/or feces. Sometimes the undercoat is involved, and mats may form in non-shed hairs. The formation of mats may indicate that a cat is not grooming well, either because of illness that may alter his behavior (lethargy/weakness) or because of restricted access to areas of the body, as may be seen with obese cats who cannot reach their hind ends. An unkempt appearance resulting from failure to groom is often an indication of a medical problem, and cats with this appearance should be seen by a veterinarian. Mats may predispose cats to skin infections and external parasites such as fleas, so they should be dealt with promptly when observed.

Mats can be prevented in most cats by regular brushing. Once formed, they may require significant work with a brush and/or fine comb to remove. Consultation with a veterinarian and/or groomer can be very helpful if mats are advanced, and they may need to be removed by shaving. Caution is advised if the latter is the case, as it is common for the skin to be damaged during this process, and this may predispose a kitty to skin infections. In rare, extremely advanced cases of matting, cats may need to be sedated or even anesthetized to remove mats safely and efficiently.

I hope that this is helpful, and that your kitties are doing well. If matting continues to be a problem, please consult with your veterinarian, who is always the best source of advice for issues regarding your kitties' health. We cats always want to look our best, and mats can be both unsightly and an indication of a problem or a predisposing factor to problems that we all wish to avoid.

—Best regards, Elizabeth ❖

#### CORRESPONDENCE

The Editor  
CatWatch  
535 Connecticut Ave.  
Norwalk, CT 06854-1713  
[catwatcheditor@cornell.edu](mailto:catwatcheditor@cornell.edu)

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