



# Cat Watch

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

## THIS JUST IN

### Feline Coronavirus Med

Cat drug may help people too

**A** drug used to treat a coronavirus in cats may work for humans to block the replication and spread of the virus causing COVID-19.

Researchers at the University of Alberta, Canada, say two dipeptide-based protein inhibitors (GC376 and GC373) that may be useful in fighting feline coronaviruses in some cases have the potential to slow or stop the replication of the COVID-19 in humans. Of the 20 cats tested using these drugs, 19 recovered.

"Some parts of the viral genome are highly conserved (unchanged through evolution) among different subgroups of coronaviruses," says Joanne Lemieux, professor of biochemistry at the University of Alberta. "It is not surprising that a feline drug could be used to treat COVID-19, especially since this drug targets the main protease of the virus, which is highly conserved."

An application was submitted to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration by manufacturer Anivive. "They are pursuing clinical trials in the U.S.,"

Lemieux says. "We were recently awarded a grant to start trials here in Canada, pending approval." ■

<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-020-18096-2>



RENEE HAYES/ISTOCK/ALAMY

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## Feline Arthritis Pain Checklist

North Carolina State researchers suggest six questions

**A**s any cat owner knows, cats do not show signs of pain the way people or dogs or nearly any other living being does. They usually don't limp, and they aren't going to be vocal about it, whining like a dog or crying like a toddler usually is not in their repertoire. Owners are often left guessing what's going on with their cat, wondering if the cat is simply getting older or something's amiss, unsure of how to decide.

With that in mind, researchers at North Carolina State University's College of Veterinary Medicine set out to simplify detecting degenerative joint disease, or feline arthritis, a disease that 90% of cats over age 10 battle in some way through a list of questions.

"It really comes down to understanding what pain looks like in cats," says Margaret Gruen, assistant professor of behavioral medicine at NC State, in a news release. "People tend to assume that their cat will vocalize or show their pain in the same way a dog might, but chronic pain in cats doesn't show itself that way. Instead, behaviors that owners might attribute to 'getting old' or 'slowing down' can often be signs of joint pain or disease."

Chronic pain in cats is usually noticed when the owner sees an odd thing, such as a cat missing when trying to jump up on the bed or hiding more than usual. "Unless you're paying attention and know what to look for, it can be easy to miss these signs," Gruen says.

Since feline arthritis is both common and underdiagnosed, Gruen and her team created a simple checklist for cat owners to use to describe these early signs of degenerative joint disease to their veterinarian.

The checklist is simpler than most diagnostic questionnaires, using six yes-or-no questions for owners to answer:

▶ Does your cat jump up normally?



If she'd normally jump up into the middle of what you were doing and now she's just looking, you might want to take notice.

- ▶ Does your cat jump down normally?
- ▶ Does your cat climb up stairs normally?
- ▶ Does your cat climb down stairs normally?
- ▶ Does your cat run normally?
- ▶ Does your cat chase moving objects (toys, prey, etc.)?

"We look at this as a way to start the diagnostic conversation with a veterinarian—the checklist was designed to be reasonable in both specificity and sensitivity, but also user-friendly for owners without overgeneralizing," Gruen says. Owners can bring the answers to their own veterinarian.

"This practical tool is based on robust data we collected from over 300 cats with and without joint pain," Lascelles says. "Following diagnosis, other 'scoring' systems are used to monitor treatment efficacy, but identifying (arthritis) cats in the first place is very much facilitated by this checklist."

The researchers hope that their simpler checklist helps increase owner awareness and communication with their veterinarians about this common but treatable disease. They published a paper on this topic in the March 2020 issue of the *Journal of Feline Medicine and Surgery*. ■

North Carolina State University  
News; <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1098612X20907424>

## Genetic Susceptibility to Ringworm

Researchers found a difference in DNA of severely affected cats

The fungal disease ringworm (dermatophytosis) is a zoonotic disease, meaning it can spread not only from pet to pet, but from pets to people. A ringworm infection is no fun. Treatment is involved: Clipping the cat's hair coat, medicated baths, oral medications, and treating the environment until the infection is controlled. It's a lot of work, and having a cat that is prone to ringworm can be stressful.

Researchers from Texas A&M University decided to look for a genetic locus or marker related to severe skin fungal infections in Persian cats. They analyzed DNA from 34 Persian cats and found a difference in those with severe fungal disease. The region of DNA they looked at contains a cluster of genes called S100 genes. S100 genes allow for the creation of S100 proteins that have been shown to exhibit antifungal properties in other species and are present in feline skin. A genetic test could aid breeders in reducing the number of cats with this mutation. It could also help shelters and rescue groups when placing Persians to alert new owners to the need to be aware of this propensity.

A second goal of the study was to look at the fungal mycobiome (population of fungi) of Persian cats (both healthy and those with ringworm) and compare it to healthy longhair cats of other breeds or mixes. The study did not detect any asymptomatic Persian carriers. They also found no difference in the mycobiomes of healthy Persian cats and healthy domestic longhair cats. Normal beneficial fungal colonies did not appear to protect cats against infection with pathogenic fungi. Further studies will evaluate whether normal skin bacteria help to control fungal infections. ■

<http://www.winnfelinefoundation.org/docs/default-source/grant-progress-reports/mt16-015-susceptibility-to-dermatophytes-in-persian-cats-final-report-summary.pdf?sfvrsn=0>



## Peace in a "Mixed" Household

Feliway Friends and Adaptil may help owners, study finds

A recent study from the United Kingdom looked at the efficacy of pheromones to help calm the waters, using the commercial products Feliway Friends and Adaptil. Both products contain synthetic appeasement pheromones that can help signal a safe environment to cats and dogs, respectively.

A six-week period of testing was done with 17 participants in two groups, with each group using one of the pheromone products. Owners did not know which product they were using and were asked to report weekly on the frequency of 10 specific undesirable interactions and seven specific desirable interactions.

The 10 undesirable interactions were: cat blocking dog's path, dog chasing cat/cat running away (not in play), dog growling at cat, cat hiding from dog or up high, staring, cat swiping at dog, dog barking at cat, cat hissing at dog, dog interrupting fuss over (attention toward) the cat (i.e., causing disruption when the owners fuss over the cat), and cat interrupting fuss of dog. The seven desirable interactions were: playing (pets enjoying play together), sleeping near each other, dog grooming cat, friendly greeting, cat grooming dog, sharing a bed, and both relaxed in the same room.

At the end of the study, the researchers determined that both pheromone products worked, with no major differences in effectiveness between the two. Both were associated with a decrease in dog chasing cat/cat runs away, cat hiding from dog, cat/dog staring at the other, and dog barking at cat. Adaptil also appeared to increase friendly greetings and time spent relaxed in the same room. The least successful situations had multiple cats, which may have been a confounding variable. ■

<https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fvets.2020.00399/full>



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Send Ask Dr. K questions  
and letters to the editor:  
CatWatch\*

535 Connecticut Ave.  
Norwalk, CT 06854-1713  
catwatcheditor@cornell.edu

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# Living with a Terminal Diagnosis

## Things to consider when you receive bad news

The worst part of owning and loving a cat is that their lives are so much shorter than ours. For many of us, there will come a point when our veterinarian delivers the devastating news that our beloved cat has an illness that cannot be treated and is likely to lead to her demise. In this article, we discuss some things to consider when deciding how to make the most of the remainder of your cat's life.

### Comfort

"Owners and their veterinarians should make sure to manage pain, nausea, appetite, and hydration," says Leni K. Kaplan, MS, DVM, of the Small Animal Community Practice Service at Cornell University. Keeping your cat comfortable will help to make her final days as good as possible.

A variety of medications can help control pain and nausea and stimulate your cat's appetite. Your veterinarian will consider your cat's case to determine the best medication choices, but don't hesitate to bring up any concerns you have and to clarify your priorities. For example, many non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs can be hard on the liver and kidneys, so for a cat with kidney disease, you may need to choose between pain control and prolonging your cat's kidney function.

Nausea can be difficult to assess in cats, so bring up any odd symptoms or behaviors that your cat shows at home to give your veterinarian a complete picture. The decisions and medications that are best for one cat may be completely different from those for another.

Making sure that your cat is eating and drinking will promote her overall well-being. If she has been on a special diet for one or more of her health conditions, you may need to choose between the diet that is healthiest for her and one that she is willing and able to eat. Sometimes a middle ground can be found with a diet that both addresses some of her unique needs and is palatable to her. Add water to her food to increase water intake, or flavor her water with some low-sodium chicken broth or a little bit of tuna juice.

### Treatment Decisions



Trying to find balance between stress and comfort can be difficult.

"Considerations focus on the cat's quality of life," says Dr. Kaplan. "Our goal in caring for these terminal patients is to minimize suffering, and clients and veterinarians need to make sure that most (if not all) of their efforts are focused on what is in the cat's best interest. Owners should decide what lines they will draw regarding stopping treatment as the patient approaches the end of their life. Major considerations include how much and what the cat will tolerate (we do not want to push therapies on the patient if these treatments are a source of stress for the pet) and how much or what is the owner willing and able to do (we do not want to cause stress for the owner)."

Try to find a balance between keeping your cat happy and prolonging her life. For example, some cats with kidney disease tolerate subcutaneous fluids well, making it an option for either at home or in the hospital. Other cats get upset and try to get away. For cats in the latter group, the stress of giving fluids may not be worth the benefit of the fluids.

It is important to consider your feelings and limitations. Dr. Kaplan says, "Owners should be aware of and discuss with their veterinarians whether or not they are feeling guilty about stopping treatment or resentful of their pets. Understandably, owners will get frustrated with repeated episodes of house soiling or cleaning up vomit, and new discussions and decisions should be made at these times."

How you are feeling about your cat and her health status ties into her quality of life—if you are stressed and overwhelmed with the treatments or

managing her condition, she will likely be more stressed as well.

### Environmental Management

It may be necessary to change some things around at home to make your cat's routine easier. "Some of these pets may be weaker," says Dr. Kaplan. "Make sure they have easy access to food, water, and litter boxes. Owners may need to invest in new, shorter litter boxes to facilitate cats getting in and out of the box. If their cats have a favorite place in which they like to sleep or spend time, consider getting small stepping stools or ramps, as many of these patients do not have the strength, balance, or mobility to jump."

If you have multiple pets, monitor how the healthier animals treat your ill cat. If she is being pushed around, she may need to be kept separate from the others to prevent injury. Make sure she gets some special one-on-one time with you each day so she doesn't feel left out.

### Alternative Therapies

Dr. Kaplan recommends a few alternative therapies that may be beneficial for a cat with a terminal illness. She says, "I recommend owners consider acupuncture if their veterinarians are comfortable with it. Acupuncture is another modality that can sometimes be helpful in managing pain and making pets feel better/more comfortable/less nauseous overall."

### The Last Goodbye

How you handle the end of your cat's life is personal. Feel free to ask your veterinarian questions about euthanasia if you are uncertain about the process. If you are unsure about when it is time, keep track of your cat's good days and bad days. When her bad days outnumber the good, her quality of life is decreasing. It is a difficult decision to make, but a peaceful death is one of the greatest gifts we can give our beloved pets when they are suffering and we have no more treatments to offer.

Grieving the loss of a beloved cat is a natural process, and while most people progress through and emerge from this grief naturally and on their own, others may require the support of family, friends, and sometimes health care professionals to see them through. The Cornell Feline Health Center offers an informational brochure on the grieving process that can be helpful in this regard: <http://tiny.cc/CornellCatGrief>. ■

# Steroids Can Give You Control

*But they usually don't cure the underlying disease*

Corticosteroids, commonly called steroids, can quickly alleviate many symptoms, making both the cat and the owner feel better. For example, they have anti-inflammatory properties and can stop most seasonal itching, whether from grasses, flea bites, or bee stings. They also can effectively control more serious symptoms, such as internal swelling from irritable bowel disease or an autoimmune disease.

In 2017, an interesting study published in the *Journal of Feline Medicine and Surgery Open Reports* discussed a 6-month-old cat with bilateral quadriceps contracture, a disease caused by fibrous adhesions in the muscles. After several failed conventional treatments, the Australian researchers tried supplementary corticosteroid (prednisolone) treatment and got immediate and sustained clinical improvement and long-term resolution.

But corticosteroids have two drawbacks: They usually only treat symptoms, and long-term use can cause side effects.

Of course, they're usually only prescribed long-term when the benefit outweighs the risk. A cat with Addison's disease (in which the adrenal glands don't

produce enough natural corticosteroid) needs life-long corticosteroid therapy to remain healthy.

Cats with some autoimmune conditions such as pemphigus, stomatitis, autoimmune hemolytic anemia, and asthma also may require long-term steroids. While other immunomodulating medications may be used, corticosteroids are often the easiest, safest, and least expensive option for many cat owners.

## Concerns

The most common steroid side effect is increased drinking and urination. Many cats also have an increased appetite, sometimes breaking into cupboards to raid the food. Rarely, cats might show gastrointestinal upset, with some vomiting or diarrhea. These side effects usually subside once your cat is off the medication.

It's important to realize that controlled inflammation is a good thing, as it plays a vital role in the immune system's response bacterial, viral, and fungal infections. When steroids decrease inflammation, therefore, there is an increased risk of infections by these microscopic organisms. This risk increases with long term use of steroids.

Cats on long-term steroids tend to gain weight from the increased appetite and may lose muscle mass. Hair coats may become thin, and some cats will develop thin, fragile skin.

A study published in the *American Journal of Veterinary Research* showed that giving cats methylprednisolone (a steroid) for up to 24 days can cause changes in blood

## What You Should Do

- ▶ Be sure to tell your veterinarian about all medications and supplements your cat is taking. For example, it may not be appropriate to administer corticosteroids at the same time as other drugs in the nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory category.
- ▶ Make all environmental changes necessary to help your allergic cat avoid the long-term use of these drugs.
- ▶ Discuss the pros and cons of corticosteroid administration with your veterinarian and keep your cat's comfort levels at the forefront.
- ▶ If your cat is on long-term corticosteroids, be diligent about recommended regular veterinary checkups and monitoring.

glucose values and plasma volume. These changes in hemodynamics may predispose cats to diabetes and congestive heart failure, although the latter is controversial.

## Lab Results

Steroids can cause changes in blood chemistry panels and blood counts, sometimes complicating interpretation of these tests. Cats on long-term steroids may develop an increased white blood cell count, and blood glucose levels tend to go up in cats on steroids, which can make it difficult to distinguish between true diabetes and drug effects. Liver enzymes, cholesterol, and amylase levels may increase.

Thyroid levels, which are commonly checked in senior cats, can be affected by long-term steroid use.

"Chronic steroid usage effects most endocrine assays. Cortisol is the one most often thought of, but total T3 and total T4 are also affected. Potentially hyperthyroid cats receiving chronic steroids should be tested using free T4 by dialysis," says Barb Schanbacher DVM, Animal Health Diagnostic Center, Department of Population Medicine and Diagnostic Sciences, Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine. "Free T4 is less affected by long-term steroid use. If a cat is being weaned off steroids, it is recommended to have a two-week

*Steroids can help get control of symptoms, like obsessive scratching.*



## What Are Steroids?

Corticosteroids, also known as steroids or cortisol, are naturally occurring hormones produced by the adrenal glands, a pair of glands located near the kidneys. Steroids are vital for a multitude of normal functions, from reproduction and brain development to regulation of the immune response.

Two types of steroids are produced by the adrenal glands, glucocorticoids, which affect nutritional metabolism, and mineralocorticoids, which influence electrolyte levels and body fluid volume.

## A Note About UTIs

Diagnosing urinary tract infections (UTIs) can be tricky in cats on steroids. Their urine is often dilute, and it can be difficult to differentiate between increased urination as a direct side effect versus increased urination from an infection. The steroid may also reduce irritation of the urinary tract, so your cat may not show the typical straining and discomfort of a UTI.

‘wash-out’ period after steroids have been discontinued before testing.”

The diagnosis of Addison’s and Cushing’s diseases, characterized by decreased and increased natural corticosteroid production, respectively, can be complicated by steroid administration as well.

Urinalysis also can be affected by steroid usage. Many cats will have a glucose “spillover” into the urine, which can predispose to urinary tract infections.

### What to Do

The first step in avoiding long-term side effects from corticosteroids is to avoid the long-term repository versions, such as methylprednisolone, if possible. Shorter acting, oral medications can be gradually tapered while still retaining their beneficial effects.

For conditions like asthma, switching to a nebulized, inhalant version of corticosteroids will reduce some of the risks associated with systemic drug administration. Cats can usually be easily conditioned to use the face masks required for the delivery of nebulized medications.

Your veterinarian may be aware of alternatives to steroids that can be used (some of them off label) to keep your allergic or arthritic cat comfortable. Joint and skin supplements can reduce the need for steroids, sometimes to just a short time of the year or intermittently. These medications may include some immunosuppressive drugs with side effects of their own, however, so caution may be required with them too.

The reality is that some cats will need long-term corticosteroids to manage severe, chronic illnesses. In these cats, owners need to balance the risk of possible side effects with quality of life, working in close collaboration with their veterinarian. ■

# Unique Cat Behaviors

*Some feline activities are rarely found in other species*

**1 Burying urine and feces.** Cats are believed to have evolved to bury their eliminations to keep their presence hidden from predators. Those that leave stool uncovered either in the box or outside of it or that spray urine may be staking out a territory, but these behaviors can also be signs of health problems. A cat that suddenly avoids the litterbox should be examined by a veterinarian promptly.

**2 Kneading.** Kittens will knead on their mother’s abdomen as they nurse to stimulate milk production. Cats that were weaned at a young age may intermittently knead as adults, and this is believed to release pheromones from the sweat glands in their paws. No matter the reason, though, kneading is considered a sign of a contented cat.

**3 Scratching.** While scratching can be destructive, it is important to realize that it is a natural feline behavior. Cats scratch to help remove the old outer sheaths on their nails and to mark territory by leaving traces of pheromones on the scratched object. Trimming your cat’s nails will help to control this behavior, but you still need to provide a variety of acceptable scratching options in the form of scratching posts. Some cats prefer wood, some prefer certain types of fabric. Some cats love to stretch and scratch on a horizontal surface while others only use vertical surfaces, so try to provide your cat with a couple of options and see what she prefers.



*Sometimes you just want to ask your cat, “Why on earth did you do that?”*

**4 Hiding in small spaces.** Cats seem to naturally gravitate to small spaces to hide out, whether for a restful break from the world or as “launching pads” for sneak play attacks on unwary passersby. Provide your cat with some private hiding places, and she would also enjoy a cardboard box or paper bag to play in.

**5 Bringing you dead animals.** Gifts of dead prey don’t bring joy to most cat owners, but they should. Your cat may share prey with you as a gift, or she may feel that you are incapable of hunting on your own. Either way, try to accept these “gifts” in the spirit that they are given. ■

## © BEHAVIOR

### Feline Social Head Rubbing

*Your cat is leaving his scent on you*

It’s a feline thing: Rubbing against you leg or other objects. “Head rubbing is a normal social behavior,” says Leni Kaplan, DVM, MS, behavior resident at Cornell. “Head rubbing is one way cats can deposit their scent on objects, which signifies comfort and familiarity and is a way to communicate.” When a cat rubs his face on an object, a human, or another cat, he’s leaving his scent behind. ■



# Lumpy, Bumpy, Clumpy Coats

*Your cat might need help with maintenance grooming*

**Y**ou're petting your cat and you realize that her silky coat is not so silky anymore. Whether your attention has been grabbed by small knots, large deep-seated mats, or thick patches throughout the coat, your cat's coat requires some human intervention to get it back up to snuff.

Mats and tangles are problematic for three reasons:

- ▶ They are painful when they tug on your cat's skin.
- ▶ They trap moisture and bacteria next to the skin, providing the ideal environment for a skin infection to develop.
- ▶ Poor grooming habits can be a sign of a larger health problem.

## Longhaired Cats

If your cat has a long, luxurious coat, check him at least once a week for developing knots. A brush or comb is often sufficient to brush out small knots and areas where the dead hair has clumped together, or you can very carefully trim knots with scissors (go slowly, as it's easy to cut skin, too, especially if the mat is close to the skin). Catching knots early will prevent them

from developing into full mats, which are more difficult to remove. Some cats may need to be inspected more often.

"A longhaired cat can get mats despite its best grooming efforts at any time, but especially around the yearly shed periods. Since the head and neck aren't accessible to the tongue, this is where mats often are seen first," says William Miller, VMD, DACVD, Professor Emeritus of Medicine, Section of Dermatology.

Shorthaired cats can get clumps and mats, too. If you notice a thick spot when petting your cat, make a note to monitor that area on a regular basis.

If your cat's bad hair day seems to be a bit more than a mild grooming issue, consider other potential reasons. "Although people talk of the lazy groomer, those cats seem to be very uncommon, so one needs to look for the reason why the cat isn't grooming as well or at all," Dr. Miller says.

## Topical Concerns

"Are any topicals (shampoos, flea and tick products, etc.) being applied?" asks Dr. Miller. "These items have a taste, and the cat may not like them." You can give your cat a bath to help remove the bad taste (unless of course the shampoo was the problem) or brush your cat daily for a few days until he starts grooming himself again.

## Check the Mouth

"Next, the mouth needs a good look. Any significant degree of gingivitis or glossitis (inflammation of the tongue) can make grooming uncomfortable," says Dr. Miller. Red gums are a sure sign of dental health issues, along with calculus buildup and bad breath. Calicivirus is a feline respiratory disease known for causing ulcers on the tongue that you may be able to see when your cat opens his mouth. In addition

to not wanting to groom, cats with oral discomfort may also eat less, chew abnormally, or drool when eating.

## Internal Disease

Any systemic illness that causes your cat to feel ill can result in poor grooming habits. Think about when you are sick—do you go through your normal routine of brushing and styling your hair? Nope. Cats are the same way and don't expend energy on grooming when they are feeling poorly.

If your cat has a persistently unkempt coat, it is time to visit the veterinarian. A wide range of conditions can cause your cat to have a poor coat or not feel well. Dr. Miller says, "The internal disease can be something simple like intestinal parasites or hairballs or something very serious like diabetes or cancer."

Your veterinarian will start by doing a physical exam, checking the skin in the problematic areas for indications of parasites, and the mouth for signs of dental issues. Between the exam and the health and behavior history that you provide, your vet will narrow down possible causes. The next step might include bloodwork to check for metabolic abnormalities, a fecal exam to check for parasites, and/or radiographs (x-rays) to check for hairballs, an obstruction, or tumors.

## Coat Management

Your cat's veterinary team likely will get him cleaned up before you head home, but maintaining his coat until he is adequately grooming himself is up to you. Mats will be shaved as needed and smaller tangles combed out if your cat allows. For severe clumping and matting, a full-body shave (often called a "lion" shave) may be recommended to give your cat a clean slate.

Back at home, monitor your cat's coat on a regular basis. When petting him, run your fingers through the hair behind his ears and on his belly and hind end, as these are common problem areas for mats and tangles to start. Brush him a little bit at least once a day until he is used to being brushed. Pay special attention to those problem areas to keep the hair smooth and untangled.

If your cat does not tolerate being brushed, a shave-down may be the best option. His hair will still be able to clump and mat when it grows back in, but he will have some quality time before the next shave. ■

## Obesity and Grooming



Overweight cats are unable to groom much of their bodies because they can't bend and reach their hind end. If you have an overweight kitty whose coat is starting to get greasy and clumpy on his back, brush him at least a little bit every day to help maintain his skin and coat health. Talk with your vet to come up with a safe weight loss plan to allow your cat to get back to a healthier lifestyle.

# Decisions About Diagnostics

## How to weigh the value of tests and imaging

**T**he ability of veterinarians to diagnose your cat has increased at an amazing rate over the past few decades.

Technical advances in imaging and other diagnostic tests allow your veterinarian to obtain the vital information needed to treat your cat and help him live a long, healthy life. Obviously, this is a good thing. The downside, of course, is the cost of all of this technology.

Whether or not your cat needs an extensive diagnostic workup depends at least in part on the problem. If your cat is itchy in his anal region and you see whitish segments there, in most cases, your veterinarian will suspect tapeworms and dispense an appropriate dewormer. That's simple. On the other hand, if your cat is itching extensively and there is no evidence of fleas, recommended diagnostic tests may range from skin scrapes to intradermal injections as part of allergy testing.

When your veterinarian looks at a cat, he or she considers the history, presenting symptoms, and what is detected upon initial physical examination to determine the best next diagnostic steps. If the 6-month-old stray kitten you adopted two weeks ago has diarrhea, a fecal analysis will likely be the first diagnostic test recommended. On the other hand, if your 14-year-old house cat has diarrhea, she may need radiographs, an ultrasound, or even an intestinal biopsy for your veterinarian to know what is wrong.

### When Things Get Tough

Choosing appropriate diagnostic tests can be challenging when there is no definitive test for a specific disease or when the only options are expensive. For example, there is no specific test for epilepsy. Veterinarians may perform various diagnostic tests to rule out possible



*Diagnostic imaging is a vital aspect of veterinary medicine.*

causes of seizures in your cat and, if all of them come back negative, a presumptive diagnosis of idiopathic (of undetermined origin) epilepsy is made. However, while an MRI is a legitimate diagnostic test to rule out some causes of seizures, it can be expensive. In some cases, owners and veterinarians may decide to forego additional tests initially and treat presumptively for idiopathic epilepsy to see if such therapy is effective, thereby supporting the presumptive diagnosis.

You may discuss setting other types of limits for diagnostics with your veterinarian. With an easily stressed cat, an owner may decide, for example, to limit diagnostics to noninvasive procedures. In some cases, a hospital stay overnight for a biopsy might be challenging for an elderly, frail, and nervous cat, and this concern should be discussed with the veterinary team.

The information you gain along the way through recommended tests can be a factor in your decision, as well. If you approve an MRI for your seizing cat, for example, and it shows brain cancer, what should you do from there? If your

### You Should Know

Veterinary costs continue to rise as technological advances are made, making pet health insurance worth consideration.

Choose a policy that considers actual cost of the veterinary care. A "fee schedule" policy is a pre-determined payment that could come up short.

Know the different coverages: Drug coverage (medicines), continual coverage (chronic conditions like cancer or diabetes for the cat's life), accident coverage (accidents only), wellness coverage (priced, but covers routine care).

Read more in our November 2019 issue "Smart Pet-Insurance Decisions"

cat is 14 years old and you cannot afford brain surgery, you may choose to pass on pursuing this procedure, which is understandable and acceptable.

In some cases, a diagnostic test may clarify what's happening but doesn't give you a diagnosis. This is the case, for example, in tests that help to stage or grade cancers. You may know your cat has cancer, but additional testing may guide treatment options and give you a more accurate prognosis for your cat, which may or may not be of value to you.

### Decisions

Expense is a legitimate factor. Pet health insurance relieves some of the pressure on your finances, but not all plans cover all diagnostics and/or diseases. For example, a plan might cover one blood chemistry panel per year, but not the repeated ones necessary for your cat with kidney failure, leaving you relying on the veterinarian's guidance.

With any health problem, your veterinarian usually will provide options as to diagnosis and treatment. If finances are critical, therapy may become more important than a definitive diagnosis. Proceed based on your veterinarian's experience and the likelihood of your cat having a certain problem.

A frank discussion with your veterinarian regarding what tests are likely to provide the best diagnostic return for their expense and the best options for your cat based on his overall health and age is important. ■

### Feline Health Center's Camuti Consultation Service

A vital aspect of the Cornell Feline Health Center's operations is the Dr. Louis J. Camuti Memorial Feline Consultation Service, which provides callers with current information on feline health care. This service is, to our knowledge, the only one of its kind, and has helped many cat owners, breeders, and veterinarians. This fee-based phone service puts you in contact with one of their outstanding veterinary consultants, who will discuss your cat's condition and/or care with you. Go to <https://tinyurl.com/CornellCatConsult> to learn more.

# When Kitty Won't Scratch

Watching nail growth becomes extremely important

**Q** Thanks for the recent article on getting cats to stop scratching (June 2020). I have the opposite problem: I need to encourage a cat to scratch!

She has multiple options at her paw-tips (the usual old furniture, cardboard scratch blocks in a variety of shapes and sizes, numerous scratching posts, and a couple of cat trees), but just about the only thing she'll scratch is a concrete patio block (part of a bookcase) and not sufficiently to dull her claws or remove old sheathings.

I've tried to bait some of the sites with catnip (leaf and spray), to no avail. And she has three other family members she can watch and learn the ropes from, as it were. She gets a pet and some kind words whenever she uses the concrete block. But, without any overt signs of pain, her claws eventually curl around and dig into her pads, and it's off to the veterinarian we go again.

Do you have any suggestions on how to get her to scratch again?

**A** Thanks very much for getting in touch, and I understand your concern for your kitty's nails and paws. In my experience, it can be a challenge to get some cats to use scratching posts if they are not so inclined, but perhaps a few thoughts on this issue will be helpful.



Some cats prefer to stretch when they scratch, so an upright post works best for them.

Some cats are picky with respect to the type of material they prefer to scratch on. Trying things like sisal, carpet, corrugated cardboard (if you haven't tried this already), and wood (branches) is a good first step. Since she seems to like the concrete block, perhaps you can find a concrete/cinderblock that has a more abrasive surface that she will use.

The orientation of scratching posts is also important. Some cats prefer to scratch horizontally, while others prefer a vertical orientation. With some kitties, they like to have a scratching surface that is elevated off of the ground, so hanging a scratching post on a wall off of the floor can be enticing to them. I have even

heard of cats that prefer to have elevated scratching posts, but only like them on the corners of walls (i.e., where two walls in a room meet), so it may take some experimentation in this regard.

I'd suggest that you start by trying these new ideas in close proximity to the concrete block on which she currently occasionally scratches. It may ultimately turn out that trying other spots in your house will be successful. The positive reinforcement that you are currently practicing is a great idea, and I think it's important that you keep this up. It may also be worth trying to reward her with a small treat when she scratches, but make sure that you don't feed her too many, as this can predispose her to gaining too much weight.

Despite your best efforts, though, it may be that she will not scratch very much on her own, and if this is the case, it is important that you monitor her nail length closely to prevent them from getting too long. I'd suggest that you learn how to trim her nails, as most owners can do this with a little patience and perseverance. The Cornell Feline Health Center hosts video instructions on how to do this at <https://tinyurl.com/CornellNailTrim>.

I hope this is helpful, and best of luck with this experimentation. I know that it can be frustrating to find the right combination of material, orientation, and location for scratching posts, but hang in there. If all else fails, learning to trim her nails may turn out to be the best solution so you avoid nail overgrowth. Please send us an update when you can. ■



Elizabeth's popular column is being continued by Bruce Kornreich, DVM, PhD, DACVIM, Director of the Cornell Feline Health Center and Editor-in-Chief

CatWatch. You can write to Dr. Kornreich at [catwatcheditor@cornell.edu](mailto:catwatcheditor@cornell.edu) or CatWatch, 535 Connecticut Ave., Norwalk, CT 06854. We welcome digital photos of your cat to consider for use with your question.

### Coming Up ...

- ▶ The Importance of Whiskers
- ▶ End-of-Life Guidelines
- ▶ Feline Mycobacteriosis on the Rise
- ▶ 2020 CatWatch Annual Index

### © HAPPENING NOW...

**One Cat at a Time**—Missy Pruitt Chastain gets to know homeless cats, learns their likes and dislikes, then finds them a good home with a good owner. Over the past three years, the cat matchmaker has found homes for over 700 cats. Many were adopted out through her La Gattara Cat Cafe in the East Valley (Ariz.), says AZfamily.com. However, the pandemic forced the cafe to close. Despite the setback, Chastain still goes out, rescues cats, cares for them, and then adopts them out. To help with her expenses, a friend went to the local CBS 5 News Pay It Forward program to help the kind cat lady. They responded, surprising Chastain with a \$500 gift card.

**Cat Shoe Burglar**—Jordan the cat lives in Altoona, Pa., and steals shoes, reports ABC27.com. He's traveled up to seven miles on his evening journeys, collecting shoes left outside and bringing them home. He has over 50 and most are in pairs, reports his owner BJ Ross. Ross says if he brings only one shoe back, the next night he'll go get the other. Ross put a GPS tracker on Jordan's collar,



installed a camera in her backyard, and created a Facebook group with over 2,000 people following Jordan's collecting. ■