

© THIS JUST IN

Health-Monitoring Litter

What you need to know

We are always looking for the best and easiest ways to monitor cat health. And, since urinary problems are high on the list of things to watch, an “indicator” litter is attractive. Indicator litters are appropriate for everyday use.

These litters are made of silica. It doesn't clump but has little dust and efficiently reduces odors. Silica gels are white, making them good for adding colorimatic substances to indicate health problems. Standard colors are orange for an acidic urine, blue for a basic pH urine, red for blood in the urine, and yellow for a neutral pH urine.

Normal cat urine should be somewhat acidic at around 6.6 (neutral is 7). Depending on what your cat ate most recently, though, her urine might be slightly basic in pH. Urine pH is just one factor that your veterinarian uses to determine if a cat has a urinary problem.

Blood in the urine is more likely to indicate a problem than a minor pH change. Monitoring litters generally rely on the red color of blood itself (clearly visible against the white litter) rather than on a chemical reaction that causes a color change.

Health-monitoring litters can provide some benefits in helping identify early indicators of disease in some cases, but they should be used in close consultation with a veterinary professional. ■

cen.acs.org/business/consumer-products/health-monitoring-cat-litter/100/i24

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

COVID From Person to Cat to Person	2
Cats Help Catnip Release Natural Insect Repellent ..	2
Are You Seeing Urine Spots?	3
Cat-Food Label Short Course	4
Your Cat Can Love Grooming	6
The Senior Cat with Dementia	7
Persistent Wool Sucking	8

Pain, Stress, and Gabapentin

It's like a magic chill pill for your feline friend

Pain management is an integral aspect of health care. Uncontrolled chronic pain is more than just physical pain, as it often causes significant emotional and psychological damage. Managing all these repercussions of chronic pain is imperative for your cat's quality of life—and yours. A cat battling chronic pain may act out with unacceptable behaviors, like urinating and defecating around the house, self-trauma, or redirected aggression with you potentially being the target. It's a stressful situation, but the drug gabapentin may help, and more veterinarians are prescribing it.

Until recently, effective pain management was hampered by limitations on medications that could be used in cats. The way cats metabolize certain drugs, like the original non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) used in dogs, make these medications potentially toxic to cats. Thankfully, times have changed. Newer generation NSAIDs that are safe for use in cats are available, and there are several opioid pain relievers, too. Gabapentin, however, is unique.

What Is Gabapentin?

Gabapentin is pharmaceutically classified as an anticonvulsant (anti-seizure) medication. It works by blocking the transmission of certain signals that set off seizures in the central nervous system. Recent research showed that some of these same transmitters are involved in pain perception, which is what spearheaded the idea of using gabapentin for pain control.

While gabapentin is best known for managing neuropathic (nerve) pain, it is proving useful for other painful conditions. Gabapentin works especially well in combination with other medications, like NSAIDs or opioids, when these are necessary for severe or unrelenting pain.

Stress Relief

Now let's talk about stress. Managing a stressed cat is no picnic for you or your veterinarian. Gabapentin, though, has a useful side effect: sedation. Veterinarians can take full advantage of this side effect to help our furry felines handle their stress.

Safety

Gabapentin's safe dosage range is relatively wide, with the most common side effect being sedation (if your cat has kidney issues, your veterinarian likely will recommend a lower dose). Gabapentin can be given two to three times a day for pain.



A cat that is painful or stressed is unhappy.

Gabapentin's effects can help:

- ▶ Arthritis
- ▶ Dental pain
- ▶ Pancreatitis
- ▶ Cancer
- ▶ Post-op pain
- ▶ Stress

“The use of gabapentin in cats for hospital visits has vastly improved the experience of my feline patients and their owners,” says Dr. Andrea Lee, Cornell Class of 2002, and small animal practitioner in Syracuse, N.Y. “The mild sedation helps with transport to my office, the exam, and any procedures that need to be done.”

(continues on page 2, bottom)

COVID From Person to Cat to Person

Cat was infected by person but asymptomatic

The SARS-CoV-2 virus that causes COVID-19 is likely here to stay, and we must accept it. However, there are a lot of rumors regarding cats and the SARS-CoV-2 virus floating around, so we want to keep you well informed.

In a very unusual situation, a suspected (and perhaps first documented) case of cat-to-human transmission of the SARS-CoV-2 virus was recently published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

In this case, two humans with COVID-19 were taken to the hospital in Thailand and their cat rode in the ambulance with them. The cat was then transferred to the local university animal hospital where she was examined and found to be clinically normal.

Unfortunately, the cat sneezed into the face of one of her examining veterinarians. The veterinarian was wearing an N95 respirator mask, but did not have on eye goggles or a face shield. The cat never showed signs of illness, but three days later, the veterinarian became ill. She was admitted to the same hospital as the owners of the cat. Genetic testing showed that the owners, the cat, and the veterinarian had been infected by identical SARS-CoV2 viral strains.

Since the veterinarian had never met the owners nor the cat prior to this event, and given the timing of the individual infections in this group, it is most likely that the cat was infected by her family and then transferred it to the veterinarian with the sneeze.

What this tells us: While exceedingly rare (likely due, in part, to the short amount of time that infected cats shed SARS-CoV-2 virus), infected cats may serve as sources of SARS-CoV-2 infection for people that have close contact with them. Owners should refrain from allowing cats to lick and/or sneeze in their faces. If you are diagnosed with COVID-19, have someone else take care of your cats if you can. Finally, if you suspect you are handling or caring for a cat with COVID-19, consider using eye protection or a face shield in addition to your mask to protect against SARS-CoV-2 spread, and wash your hands carefully after interacting with them (this is likely a good idea when interacting with all pets). ■

Cats Help Catnip Release Natural Insect Repellent

When cats damage the plant, higher concentrations are released

Researchers in Japan found that when cats damage catnip, higher amounts of strong insect repellents are released. Catnip and silvaine are believed to have feline-intoxicating properties, and the leaves contain the compounds nepetalactol and nepetalactone, which protect the plants from pests. The researchers found that the physical damage of silvaine by the cats promoted the immediate release of these compounds in high concentration and that the broken leaves encouraged the cats to continue to play with (damage) the leaves of the plant. The researchers state that these compounds effectively repel some types of mosquitoes. ■

Reiko Uenoyama, Tamako Miyazaki, Masaatsu Adachi, Toshio Nishikawa, Jane L. Hurst, Masao Miyazaki.

Domestic cat damage to plant leaves containing iridoids enhances chemical repellency to pests. *iScience*, 2022; 104455
DOI: 10.1016/j.isci.2022.104455. *Science Daily*.

(Gabapentin, continued from page 1)

Gabapentin can be a magical chill pill for cats in this scenario. At the correct dosage, gabapentin calms and relaxes most cats, even the super scared ones, making a veterinary visit much more pleasant for you, your cat, and your veterinarian.

The dose recommended by your veterinarian is usually given one to 1½ hours before you need to leave for your appointment. If your cat is still difficult to get into the carrier using this protocol, your veterinarian may recommend having you give a dose at bedtime the night before with a second dose before the visit.

Examples of other stressful events for which gabapentin may be useful include bathing/grooming, parties at your house, and weekend guests with dogs. The decision about whether this is right for your cat must be made with your veterinarian. ■

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Are You Seeing Urine Spots?

Wet spots could be due to a lack of control or a voluntary action

Urinary incontinence is an involuntary leakage of urine. Most often, an incontinent cat is not aware that this leakage is happening. If you think your cat is experiencing this problem, it is extremely important that it is differentiated from inappropriate urination. With inappropriate urination, a cat voluntarily urinates in an undesirable manner or place. Your cat choosing to leave waste in an inappropriate spot is a common behavior problem, while urinary incontinence is relatively rare in cats.

“Urinary incontinence is not a common problem in cats,” says Dr. Suzanne Losito, Cornell Veterinary Class of 1988 and a practicing veterinarian at Fairmount Animal Hospital in Syracuse, N.Y. “This is a good thing, as these cases are often difficult to manage and devastating to the pet owner.”

To determine if the cause is incontinence, a cat acting out, or another disease, your veterinarian needs to see your cat.

Causes

The most common cause of urinary incontinence in cats is trauma to the pelvic area and tail, usually caused by getting hit by a car. Nerve damage to the lower spinal cord and/or peripheral nerves supplying the bladder can cause urinary incontinence.

A similar common trauma, called a “tail-pull” injury, happens when a car tire runs over the tail of a cat that is scampering across the road. The cat’s body keeps going, but the tail is trapped momentarily, resulting in separation of the nerves that run from the spinal cord to the pelvic area and tail.

The good news about tail-pull injuries is that some of these cats will regain urinary control over time, as the damaged nerves can regenerate. This healing can take many months, however, and it may be necessary for you to learn how to manually empty your cat’s bladder in the meantime.

If your cat has been incontinent since birth, a congenital defect is the most likely cause. These types of congenital defects are rare. A notable

exception is Manx cats, who can suffer congenital urinary incontinence due to their unusual spinal conformation and associated neurologic deficits.

Chronic, unresolved inflammation of the bladder (cystitis), whether due to FLUTD (see below), bacterial infection, or irritation from bladder stones, can result in urinary incontinence by causing abnormal thickening of the bladder wall. This thickening can either make the bladder muscle stiff, so it can’t relax normally to allow for bladder filling, or it can make the muscle irritable, resulting in overactive spasm, either of which can contribute to incontinence.

Additional possible causes include ectopic ureters (a birth defect in which the tubes draining urine from the kidneys to the bladder attach in the wrong place in the urinary



First, you need to be very sure the culprit was the cat.

Making the Diagnosis

Your veterinarian will ask you questions to help determine whether your cat is truly incontinent. You need to be observant at home and know the answers to these questions before you bring the cat in to the veterinary office:

- ▶ Can your cat urinate normally when she or he wants to?
- ▶ Does he or she posture normally to urinate?
- ▶ Does it seem comfortable?
- ▶ Is there a good, steady stream coming out (or does it start and stop)?

If the answer to any of these questions is no, your veterinarian may pursue the possibility of feline lower urinary tract disease (FLUTD) as an underlying disorder before calling your cat truly incontinent. FLUTD is a complex, multi-factorial, and common urinary tract disorder in cats that can result in secondary incontinence.

- ▶ Is the volume of urine your cat is producing more than it used to be? If yes, your veterinarian may pursue causes of excessive urine production (called “polyuria”) before calling your cat incontinent. Some cats, especially older cats, with polyuria may have trouble holding their urine. Diabetes, kidney disease, and hyperthyroidism are common causes of polyuria in cats.

If your cat is diagnosed as incontinent, your veterinarian will ask additional questions to localize the problem and determine treatment and prognosis:

- ▶ Does it seem worse when the bladder is full or when the bladder is empty?
- ▶ Is the dribbling constant or intermittent?
- ▶ Is the dribbling only when laying down, or does it leak while your cat is walking?
- ▶ Does your cat seem to notice it is happening or does he seem unaware?
- ▶ At what age did the problem start?
- ▶ Did it start prior to or after spay/neuter?
- ▶ Has your cat been tested for feline leukemia virus (FeLV)?

tract) and urethral hypoplasia (short or missing urethra).

Cats who have suffered a urinary obstruction that caused the bladder to become over-distended sometimes can end up with incontinence due to disruption of the muscle (called the “detrusor” muscle) fibers within the bladder wall. This is called “detrusor atony.” These cats may regain normal urinary function in a few weeks if the bladder is kept continually decompressed, which sometimes requires hospitalization and the placement of an indwelling, temporary urinary catheter.

Urethral sphincter mechanism incontinence is a common disorder in spayed female dogs in which the sphincter that normally holds the urine in the bladder until it is released no longer functions properly can happen in cats as well.

Spinal cord disease can cause urinary incontinence. Affected cats will typically have other symptoms like weakness or incoordination of the hind limbs and possibly fecal incontinence. While there are medications that may improve bladder function, unfortunately, many cats with urinary incontinence due to spinal cord disease don’t respond to therapy very favorably.

If your geriatric cat becomes incontinent, cancer may be the culprit. Tumors of the spinal cord can cause neurologic deficits that result in urinary incontinence. Tumors of the bladder and/or urethra can interfere with both filling and emptying of the bladder.

Feline leukemia virus (FeLV) has been linked to urinary incontinence. If you have an incontinent young cat, or an incontinent cat who goes outdoors, be sure to ask for an FeLV test.

Diagnostic testing for urinary incontinence usually includes physical exam (including neurologic and orthopedic exam), urinalysis, urine culture, abdominal and spinal x-rays, abdominal ultrasound, and bloodwork. Treatment and prognosis varies, depending on the diagnosis.

Some cases of feline urinary incontinence may be temporary and reversible. The incontinence may be secondary to something else, in which case correcting the underlying issue may resolve the problem.

Beyond that, however, the prognosis for return to normal function in many cases of feline urinary incontinence is guarded to poor. ■

Cat-Food Label Short Course

Choosing the right cat food is quite simple

You want to do the best by your cat, including feeding her top-quality foods, but when you look at canned-food labels, you feel a bit overwhelmed. You know to read labels with a skeptical eye because much of what you see on a can is marketing, not science. What should you focus on?

Protein, fats, and calories, says Joseph Wakshlag, DVM, PhD, professor, section chief of nutrition at Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine. It’s really that simple, unless your cat has a specific dietary need.

Protein

A meat protein source should be the first ingredient in your cat’s food. Cats are obligate carnivores, which means they must eat meat or fish to thrive. Which protein source depends upon your cat’s preferences. (Sorry, kitties, while “mouse in a can” is not available yet, it may come to pass.) Luckily, even prescription diets now offer a wide range of protein sources in their foods.

Unfortunately, while proteins lead the taste-test results for your cat, they are also the ingredients most likely to be associated with food allergies and intolerances. If your cat has red and inflamed ears, rubs and scratches her face, or has chronic vomiting and diarrhea you may need to switch to different protein for her meals. (If that doesn’t work, you may need to undertake a feeding trial).

Ruling out a food allergy requires systematic dietary elimination trials during which novel dietary protein sources (i.e., different than those being offered previously) are fed for a minimum of eight weeks, with close monitoring to see whether the elimination of specific protein sources is associated with improvements in itchiness.

If switching to a novel protein source eliminates itching, this suggests that an allergy to the eliminated protein was the cause of the itching. In some cases, feeding “hydrolyzed diets,” which contain proteins that have been enzymatically “chopped up” into smaller pieces, hopefully to the extent that they no longer cause an allergic reaction, can be attempted if novel protein source food trials are not successful.

What You Should Do

- ▶ Check that the first ingredient is meat or fish.
- ▶ Find the manufacturer’s contact information and lot number on the label.
- ▶ Look for the AAFCO statement of nutritional adequacy.
- ▶ Determine if the food is appropriate for your cat’s life stage.
- ▶ Check for calorie content, especially if your cat is overweight.
- ▶ Make sure weight loss is very gradual for overweight kitties.
- ▶ Consult with your veterinarian regarding nutritional choices.

Fat

Fat is important for cats as an energy source. Most fats provide 2.5 times the energy that a similar amount of protein would on a per weight basis. Dietary fat helps cats to absorb the fat-soluble vitamins (such as vitamin A and vitamin D) that they need to stay healthy. Essential fatty acids such as omega 3 and omega 6 are important for fighting inflammation and keeping immune problems at bay. Many skin conditions respond well to fatty acids. Fats also contribute to palatability (they taste good). And, let’s face it, the “best” food in the world is no good if your cat doesn’t like it and won’t eat it.

Who Decides What a Cat Needs in Food?

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has recommendations for pet-food labels, although some states rely on the Association of American Feed Control Officials (AAFCO) to make their decisions. AAFCO is a non-profit agency that sets quality and safety requirements for livestock and pet foods. It’s a voluntary organization of state officials.

Calories

Calories matter because so many cats are overweight or obese. Many pet-food manufacturers are responding to this by putting the calories right on the food label, albeit in tiny type. For the ones that don't, contact the manufacturer to find out. If they don't know, you may want to consider a different food.

If you find two foods your cat likes, but one is lower in calories, that should be your choice. If your cat is a thin, picky eater, you may want to feed the one with higher calories.

Estimating the number of calories is done simply online. You can use a calculator such as the one provided by Ohio State University at tinyurl.com/OSUcalories or the Pet Nutrition Alliance at tinyurl.com/PNACalories. If you're not interested in an internet calculator, just ask your veterinarian, who will be more than happy to advise you.

Reminder: It can make your cat seriously ill if you cause her to lose weight too quickly. It's called fatty liver disease, or "hepatic lipidosis." Make weight loss gradual. Cats can safely lose 0.5 to 2 percent of their body weight weekly, which is about 3.2 ounces per week for a 10-pound cat.

Be aware that even plugging in the data for your cat only gives you a standard recommendation. Just as with the feeding directions, you may need to adjust up or down depending on your cat and her activity and metabolic rate. Weigh your cat weekly to watch her weight loss.

A useful free tool designed by the Cornell Feline Health Center to help cats

lose weight is the Cornell Vet Purrfect Weight app for Apple devices (available as a free download in the App Store).

More Label Info

The first thing to check when selecting a food is the "AAFCO nutritional adequacy statement." If the food label contains that statement—usually in tiny type—the manufacturer is saying that the food meets the nutritional requirements determined by AAFCO for a complete and balanced food appropriate for your cat's life stage, such as for "All Life Stages" or "Adult Maintenance."

When you feed a complete and balanced food to a healthy cat, you do not need to add any dietary supplements. You also don't have to worry about whether the food contains adequate amounts of protein and other nutrients. To include the AAFCO statement, the food must meet the AAFCO nutritional profile for cats or have been through thorough AAFCO protocol feeding trials. If your food does not include this statement, you may want to consider a different food. Note: AAFCO does not test, approve, or regulate foods. They simply set the standards that manufacturers can use for designing their foods. Any regulating is done at state and federal levels.

Weight: Look for how much food is in the bag or can, i.e., 4 lbs. or 7 oz.

Contact Information: The

manufacturer's phone and/or website should be included. That, along with any lot numbers, is important information in case there is a recall.

Ingredients: The product name can give you some clues as to what is in it. If the label says, "Tuna Cat Food," then 95% of the contents should be tuna (not counting the water used for processing), according to the FDA.

The ingredient list starts with the largest ingredient by weight and works its way down to micro ingredients, like some minerals and vitamins. The ingredient list should make sense for cats with a meat or fish as the first ingredient.

The guaranteed analysis tells you the minimum percentages of crude protein and crude fat, and the maximum percentages of crude fiber and moisture. Many cat foods also include the maximum amount of ash (minerals) as well as a guaranteed amount of taurine and magnesium.

Bottom Line

Label feeding directions are a guide, not a directive. Each cat is an individual, and metabolic rates can vary greatly between cats. Spayed and neutered cats generally need less food than intact cats, growing kittens, or queens. Start with the feeding directions as your base, then add or subtract based on how your cat maintains her ideal weight. ■

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Many veterinary nutritionists recommend canned versus dry food for cats, if possible, but cats don't always listen. The added water in canned food helps with hydration, which can be important with kidney problems. Whether your cat eats wet or dry food, be sure to have plenty of fresh, clean water available to encourage drinking.

Lightswitch/istock

Your Cat Can Love Grooming

Cat expert grooming tips from the team at Cornell

Is your normally gorgeous cat looking more like an alley cat these days? For the most part, our feline friends keep themselves neat and tidy on their own. But longhaired, senior, obese, and sick cats often need extra help to keep their coats shiny and clean.

Start Young

“Start grooming your cat when they are young,” says Brittany Papa, Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine Class of 2023. Older cats can be taught to enjoy grooming, too, but starting while your cat is a kitten allows you to make grooming a regular part of her routine so that she is used to it well before it becomes a necessity. Plus, grooming your cat can be a wonderful bonding opportunity.

Find Tools Your Cat Likes

“Different cats like different types of brushes, so experiment to find one your cat likes best!” says Kelly Hume, DVM, board-certified oncologist and professor of oncology at Cornell University’s College of Veterinary Medicine.

There are lots of options:

- ▶ Combs in a variety of materials
- ▶ Nylon bristle brushes
- ▶ Rubber grooming gloves
- ▶ Slicker brushes with metal tines
- ▶ Wooden-bristle brushes

Senior cats may prefer gentler wooden-bristle brushes, while combs may be most helpful for longhaired cats. Try borrowing a variety of tools to decide what your cat likes before you buy one, if you can.

Short Sessions

“Keep sessions short, especially at first,” says Amy Chase, LVT, former veterinary technician at Cornell University’s College of Veterinary Medicine. Work on your cat’s coat just a little bit and quit while she is still happy about the attention. Better to leave your cat wanting more than to overdo it. This might mean just doing one or two passes with the brush at a time. You can repeat these small sessions throughout the day or week.

Use Rewards

Many cats come to enjoy grooming, but some extra incentive doesn’t



Make grooming easier by finding a tool your cat enjoys feeling on her coat.

hurt. “It’s important to keep these experiences positive and to give positive reinforcement with calming words of praise and/or treats for good behavior if first starting to groom a cat,” says Bruce Kornreich, DVM, PhD, board-certified veterinary cardiologist at Cornell University’s College of Veterinary Medicine and director of the Cornell Feline Health Center.

Give your cat treats during grooming sessions or break out a favorite toy. You can also groom your cat a little while she eats. And don’t forget the power of praise. All these strategies help to make grooming a positive activity, so your cat thinks of treats, toys, and attention when she sees the brush.

Skip Baths

“Don’t bathe your cat too often,” says Dr. Kornreich. Most cats do not require regular baths, and bathing too much can dry out their skin and affect coat health. Save bath time for when your cat really needs it, such as after a bout of diarrhea that stains the fur.

Start Good Habits

Getting your cat used to having her entire body groomed gradually and then grooming a little bit on a regular basis will pay off in the long run. “I had a longhaired cat once who was very prone to hair mat formation if I didn’t keep her brushed daily,” says James Flanders, DVM, board-certified surgeon and

professor emeritus of surgery at Cornell University’s College of Veterinary Medicine. “She enjoyed the back brushes but wasn’t keen on getting her thighs brushed. I’d wished that I had started out brushing her daily when she was a kitten so that she was more cooperative. So, my recommendation is to start early in life with full-body brushing (even the belly) if you want to keep your long-haired cat well-coiffed.”

Brushing daily, even just a little, will both keep your cat’s coat in good condition and keep her accustomed to grooming being part of your routine.

This goes for nail trimming too. Trimming your cat’s nails every other week or once a month while she is young and active will set you up for success if she has trouble wearing down her nails in her senior years. When starting out, just clip one or two nails at a time before rewarding her and/or taking a break.

Be Patient

“Work with what the cat gives you,” says Jon Doheny, DVM, Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine Class of 2019. “I have two adult brother littermates at home (they were Cornell teaching cats he adopted), one of them I either distract or wait until he’s sleeping to cut his nails. The other brother is too wary to sneak around or distract but responds well to light restraint. The personality/preferences of the cat matters when deciding upon the approach.”

The “less-is-more” strategy works for many cats. Others respond well to being wrapped in a towel for maintenance grooming such as nail trims, ear cleaning, or sanitary grooming on the back end. Do what makes your cat happy.

No Scissors

“If a mat comes up, please don’t use scissors to cut it out. So many cats end up with lacerations in their skin due to owners grooming with scissors,” says Dana Muir-Preston, DVM, Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine Class of 2012. If you must cut out a mat, slide a comb between the cat’s skin and the beginning of the mat to avoid the scissors touching the skin.

Shaving clippers are the best choice, however, and the least likely to damage your cat’s delicate skin. For severely matted cats, a full-body shave by a groomer may be in order. This gives both you and your cat a clean slate, and you can work on setting good grooming

The Senior Cat with Dementia

Her new mental state is just as frustrating for her

It can break your heart when your senior cat wanders the house, meowing pitifully and clearly lost. We know cats can suffer from senile dementia, and it's up to us to help them continue with a good quality of life.

The first step is to work with your veterinarian to rule out medical problems that may mimic dementia, such as vision loss, deafness, and arthritis. Once you have isolated any medical problems and instituted treatment for those, then you need to consider cognitive health issues.

If your cat has been an indoor and outdoor cat, she needs to be kept strictly indoors now for her own safety, with outdoor ventures only with harness and leash. This is not the time to teach your cat to walk with you on a leash, but you can follow her as she wanders.

Adding a catio may help with your cat's desire to be outdoors while keeping her safe. Hopefully, she is microchipped in case she does get out and wander off. Some owners have tried feline GPS trackers for use in the house in case their elderly cat is hiding.

Reduce Stress

Katherine Houpt, VMD, PhD, professor emeritus, section of behavior medicine at the Cornell University's College of Veterinary Medicine, recommends not changing things in the cat's environment. Changes are stressful to cats at any life



There's no pressure, but bringing out a cat puzzle for her to play with can do a lot for keeping her brain active.

stage. This is not the time to rearrange the furniture.

Make the litterbox easier. Be sure the litterbox is easily accessible, with a short side for your cat to step in. Don't put the litterbox in a place that requires your cat to go up or down stairs to use it.

Give her a lift. Consider adding a step stool, pet staircase, or ramp to help your cat reach her favorite windowsill or spot on the couch. She may need to be enticed to try this the first couple of times with a tasty treat.

Light the way. Put night lights around the house to help your cat see at night.

aids," says William H. Miller Jr., VMD, board-certified veterinary dermatologist and professor emeritus of medicine at Cornell University's College of Veterinary Medicine. "If the grooming is introduced at a very young age and is gradually built up in time and intensity things usually go well. Slow and steady wins the race with kittens but may not be true with the rescue cat you get."

If things go awry, take a break so everyone can calm down. Then do something basic with your cat, such as running the brush across her back once, so that you can praise and reward her and end the session on a positive note. Next time, try a different approach or proceed more slowly.

And save the bourbon for after you finish grooming. ■

Block the stairs. Block off stairwells. **Confine her.** Some cats do best confined to a single room, especially at night. Be sure there is a litterbox available and plenty of fresh water if you do so. Consider using pheromones such as Feliway in that room to help her settle.

Stick to a schedule. That means meals on a standard time frame and normal play times.

No new pets. This is not the time to add a new pet. There are rare cats who seem rejuvenated by a kitten's antics, but most are not. Be sure she's not being bullied or run over by other pets or being kept from the food, water, or litterbox.

Keep her brain active. While your cat can't work on crosswords to keep her mind sharp, she can enjoy some food puzzles. Ask her to do tricks you may have already taught her. Encourage her to stay active with gentle play.

Nutrition

It's important to be sure your cat is eating and drinking. Just 24 to 48 hours without food can make her sick. If you think her appetite is decreased, entice her with some "smelly" things like juice from a can of tuna on her regular diet.

Talk to your veterinarian about possibly supplementing vitamin B12 or vitamin E. Adding antioxidants like omega 3 fatty acids to your cat's diet may help, although controlled studies verifying these supplements are lacking.

While we wish there was a magic substance to turn the clock of aging around, one hasn't been found yet. For dogs with cognitive dysfunction, the medication selegiline (Anipryl) has shown some benefit. Dr. Houpt has used this drug off-label (off-label use is when your veterinarian chooses to use an approved drug for an unapproved use) and says she has found that close to 50% of the cats treated show some subjective improvement in their mental status.

The herb ginkgo is sometimes used to help with memory problems in people and is believed to help some cats with the excessive vocalization that is often seen with dementia. You should discuss this with your veterinarian before giving it to your cat.

We know that managing a senior cat with dementia can be challenging, but it's important to stay positive and patient. The changes your senior cat is facing are confusing and frustrating to her, too. Sometimes just quietly holding her on your lap will settle you both down. ■

(Grooming, continued from page 6)

habits as the hair grows back to prevent future mats from forming.

Teeth Too

"Getting your cat used to having their teeth brushed can help improve oral health tremendously and lead to fewer dental problems down the line," says Elizabeth Klueber, DVM, Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine Class of 2019. Start by letting your cat lick cat-friendly toothpaste off a toothbrush every day, then gradually work up to brushing her mouth. This process can take several months.

A Sense of Humor

"Chain mail gloves, bourbon, and band

Persistent Wool Sucking

A guide to causes and management

Q We have an 8-month-old male RagaMuffin kitten that suckles on either my skin or clothing. If I remove him, he suckles on blankets or the sheets on our bed. He purrs intensely while doing this. If we move him, he jumps right back up. This goes on for 30 minutes or until we can distract him with a toy or food. The reprieve usually lasts two to three hours before he starts again.

It is inconvenient, but we are also afraid that he will ingest fabric strands that would be harmful to him. We contacted our breeder, and she says he wasn't weaned too early and suggested he would grow out of it. In the meantime, we want to be sure that we aren't making things worse. We want to avoid punishment of any sort and try to make him feel safe. During the day, this isn't a problem. Do you have any suggestions?

A Thanks for getting in touch, and I am very sorry to hear of this kitty's behavioral issue. What you are describing sounds like wool sucking, a compulsive-type behavior that is not uncommon in cats. While the cause of feline wool sucking has yet to be clearly identified, perhaps a few points would be helpful.

The first thing is to make sure he does not suffer from any medical conditions that may be contributory. If none are identified, a reasonable approach might be to let him continue with this behavior as long as you can devise a plan to make it tolerable for you and prevent him from ingesting something dangerous (like string or other foreign bodies). The latter can be achieved by providing him with an appropriate toy or material that does not fray, is not toxic, and has no small pieces.



The breathtaking RagaMuffin cat is known for its soft, dense coat and expressive eyes. These cats have a sweet personality and easily bond with their families, according to the Cat Fanciers Association.

As I mentioned, we don't know the cause of this behavior, but there are some correlations between wool sucking and other factors that may ultimately help determine the cause and identify therapies to treat it.

Perhaps most interesting among these is that wool sucking appears to be more prevalent in Siamese, Burmese, and Birman cats, suggesting a genetically mediated mechanism. If specific genes that cause this condition can be identified, it raises the possibility of identifying its molecular mechanism and specific therapies to address it. This would be exciting and impactful to cats and possibly to the management of obsessive behaviors in other species, including humans.

Wool sucking has been reported more commonly in kittens that are separated from their queens too early and in cats that come from smaller litter sizes. It sounds like the former is not the case for your cat, but it might be interesting to inquire about litter size. This would not

alter how you manage your cat; it's just an interesting point to consider.

Stress and boredom have been implicated as causes of this behavior in some cats, and preventing and/or minimizing these issues can be helpful. Common sources of stress may include inter-cat (or cat-dog) aggression/territoriality, new pets or people moving into the home, moving, the loss of a pet or beloved person, undertaking renovations in the home, and prolonged periods of time spent alone.

Strategies to address stress/boredom include spending dedicated play time with cat-safe toys each day to allow him to partake in his natural stalking and hunting behaviors, using food puzzles to make him think creatively, providing cat trees/perches in your home, building a catio so that he can enjoy the stimulation of the outside world safely, taking him for supervised

walks on a leash with harness, and placing a bird feeder near a window so he can be stimulated by visiting birds.

It helps that you seem to know the times he is most likely to take part in this behavior, as you can consistently anticipate it and distract him with a safe toy or other activity before he starts and then reward him for carrying out the acceptable behavior. This can be a very successful strategy. You are correct in stating that negative reinforcement/punishment is not appropriate and will not work. With cats, behavioral modification is all about distracting with an acceptable behavior and rewarding for carrying out the acceptable behavior.

In some cases, consultation with a veterinary behaviorist can help, as can anti-anxiety medication, but the latter is usually reserved for extreme cases for which all other management strategies are not successful.

I hope this is helpful, and please send us an update when you can. ■



Do You Have a Health Concern?

Send your health questions to Bruce Kornreich, DVM, PhD, DACVIM, Director of the Cornell Feline Health Center and Editor-in-Chief of CatWatch. Email to catwatcheditor@cornell.edu or send by regular mail to CatWatch, 535 Connecticut Ave., Norwalk, CT 06854-1713.



Scan this code for more information on the Cornell Feline Health Center.

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- ▶ *Dandruff, Shedding, and Skin Annoyances*
- ▶ *Feline Periodontal Disease*
- ▶ *Cats and Prey Animals in One Household*
- ▶ *The Heartbreaking Decision to Rehome a Cat*