# Responsible cat ownership

## Training course

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# Section 1: Rights and responsibilities of cat owners

## 1.1 Course overview

This course is designed to give you some basic information about your legal responsibilities as a cat owner. It is important to remember that all cat owners must take care of their cat and ensure that their cat is not a nuisance to other members of the community.

The training is broken down into three separate sections:

Section 1: Rights and responsibilities

Section 2: Cat welfare and management

Section 3: Cat behaviours

More information about cat ownership can be found on the Department of Economic Development, Jobs, Transport and Resources (DEDJTR) website, at www.vic.gov.au/pets.

## 1.2 Course objectives

By the end of this course you will:

• know how to be a more responsible cat owner

• understand the legal responsibilities in owning a cat.

Introductory activity

Write down what you want to achieve from doing this training.

## 1.3 Owning a cat

Cats make great pets. They are quiet, clean and they don’t need a lot of space or exercise. Compared to dogs, cats cope better with being left alone when owners are at work. Cats provide excellent company. They can be playful and affectionate, yet can still be very independent.

Cat ownership teaches children responsibility and helps them develop their social and nurturing skills. and studies have shown that owning a cat can have positive health benefits.

There are more than 300,000 households in Victoria that have a cat. But there are also an estimated half a million unowned cats in Victoria.

Cats are prolific breeders, but they can be safely desexed from a young age (animal welfare shelters routinely desex cats as early as six to eight weeks old). Semi-owned, unowned, feral and nuisance owned cats pose a significant risk to wildlife and other pets in the community. Desexing and confining cats is key to responsible cat ownership.

Responsible cat ownership includes caring for your pet’s welfare needs, registration, microchipping and complying with local requirements for keeping cats on your property, and desexing cats that are not being kept for breeding purposes. This course also provides information on how to keep your cat safe and provide it with a great quality of life.

Activity

Make a list of your legal responsibilities as a cat owner; list any specific laws you are aware of.

## 1.4 Legal responsibilities of owning a cat

In Victoria we have the RIGHT to own a cat but with RIGHTS come RESPONSIBILITIES.

As a cat owner you have responsibilities toward:

• your cat

• members of the community

• other animals

• your local council.

In Victoria there are two sets of legislation that must be complied with if you want to keep cats:

• The Domestic Animals Act 1994

• The Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1986.

These laws aim to protect animals from neglect and cruelty and to protect the community from animals becoming a nuisance or danger.

If you don’t comply with these laws, you can be fined, given a jail term, and/or lose your right to own a cat.

In addition to the requirements set out in these laws, your local council can impose additional laws, specific to their municipality, regarding the ownership of cats, such as cat curfews.

### Why do these laws exist?

Animal management laws exist to protect you, your cat and the general public. Your neighbours have a right to live without disturbance from your cat, including caterwauling, faeces and trespassing. In addition, wildlife and other pets in the community have a RIGHT to be safe from your cat. You have a responsibility to ensure your cat does not pose a risk to other animals or a nuisance to people around you.

The regulations that detail your legal obligations in owning a cat are in place to protect:

• you

• your cat

• your community.

Prevention of cruelty to animals laws exist to ensure all animals are cared for. Australian society views it as an individual owner’s responsibility to properly care for their animals.

Cats are sentient beings; that is, they have the necessary brain structures to feel pain and suffer, and to comprehend and seek pleasurable experiences. That means owning a cat is a right but it is not a decision to be taken lightly. It is essential that before you get a cat you consider very carefully whether you can take care of it for its lifetime   
(15-25 years) and y meet your obligations under the laws that apply to owning a cat.

## Section 1 Summary

Owning a cat is a right all Victorians have, but with that right come responsibilities. All cat owners have a duty of care towards their cat to ensure its welfare and the welfare of the community in which the cat lives.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Cats benefit humans but can also cause problems in the community | Cats provide companionship to humans.  Studies have shown that owning a cat can benefit the health of the owner.  In Victoria there are more than half a million unowned or feral cats.  In Victoria cats pose a significant risk to wildlife in the community. |
| Legislations governing the keeping  of cats | The Domestic Animals Act (1994)  The Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act (1986)  Local and planning laws also influence the manner in which cats can be kept in individual municipal areas.  Animal management laws exist to protect you, your cat and  the community. |

# Section 2: Cat welfare and management - your duty of care

Owning a cat means accepting responsibility to provide all the care necessary for that cat for its life. In this section we review your responsibilities under the law for the welfare and management of your cat.

Activity

Registration and microchipping of cats in Victoria is compulsory (except if you have a veterinary certificate indicating that your cat’s health would suffer from microchipping).

Answer the following questions:

1. Why is microchipping important?

2. Do you know why it is important to register your cat?

If you are part of a group, discuss why the government has chosen to make registration and microchipping compulsory.

## 2.1 Registration & microchipping

### Registration

All cats are required to be registered with the local Council from three months of age and wear their registration tag when off your property. Registration is vitally important as it helps the Council to be able to correctly identify who owns a cat.

If your cat is lost and found by a ranger or someone who reports finding it, the Council is able to contact you based on the unique registration number for your cat. Registration also ensures that owners take responsibility for the actions of their cats.

While microchipping is also a form of identification, ensuring your cat always has a registration tag will aid and may even speed, the identification process.

Registration is also important because it lets your local Council know how many cats are in your community. This helps them with planning; for example, pet support programs. Part of the registration fee goes towards school, pre-school and maternal and child health education programs on Responsible Pet Ownership. These programs have made a significant contribution to helping families integrate pets and new babies and teaching children about caring for their pets.

Registration must be renewed by April 10 each year. Failure to register your cat every year is a breach of the legislation and can result in a fine and/or impounding of your cat.

If you move house during the year it is your responsibility to contact your new municipality to:

• notify them of the change in your address

• register your cat at the new address (most councils will transfer the fee you have already paid)

• ensure you are familiar with the local law requirements for keeping a cat.

Council can place restrictions on the keeping of cats including: the number of cats a household can own, cat curfews (periods of time when a cat must remain inside the house or securely confined in a run) and mandatory desexing of cats.

### Microchipping

Unfortunately, registration tags may fall off collars or owners may forget/choose not to put a collar on their cat when it is at home. For this reason, microchipping has been introduced. A microchip is a permanent form of identification that is injected between the cat’s shoulder blades. The microchip contains similar information as required for registration, allowing for stray or lost animals to be quickly reunited with their owners.

This could literally save your pet’s life. Sadly, many pets that end up in pounds and shelters are not identified, and have to be euthanased because their owners cannot be located (if a new home cannot be found for them).

Microchips cannot be removed or fall off like the traditional collar and tag. All cats and dogs being registered with a Victorian local council for the first time must be microchipped prior to registration. You can be fined if you do not comply. In addition, councils have the power to require compulsory microchipping of all cats housed in their municipality. You should check with your local council as to what is required in your area.

It is a requirement to microchip all cats when they are sold or given away from pet shops, commercial breeders and pounds or shelters. All cats advertised for sale must have their microchip number included in the advertisement: no microchip, no sale!

### How do I have my pet microchipped?

Only authorised implanters (such as registered veterinarians or authorised implanters who have completed the required training) can implant microchips.

Implanters are required to scan an animal before implantation to ensure it is not already microchipped. A second microchip cannot be implanted unless the original microchip is not working, the ID number does not uniquely identify the animal, or the microchip has migrated out of the scanning region.

The implanter is responsible for sending the application form containing all the required information to a licensed registry within 2 days of implantation, and must keep a copy of the completed application form until they have confirmed the information has been received by the registry and entered onto the database.

Owners may have their pets microchipped at a vet clinic, or at a local council microchip day (contact your local council for details on upcoming events). Microchipping provides owners with the confidence that they will get their pet back if it is lost and ends up in the council pound or injured and at a vet clinic.

### What else should I know about microchips?

Owners of newly microchipped animals will receive a certificate of identification from the licensed registry where information is kept. It is important to check the information on the certificate and make sure it is accurate. In future, if your residential or contact details change, it is vital that you update the information on the microchip registry.

There are a number of requirements in place to maximise the effectiveness of microchipping in returning identified lost pets to owners. Within 3 days of entering a pound or shelter, it is a requirement that cats and dogs are scanned to determine whether they are microchipped.

## 2.2 Confinement

Activity

#### Why confine?

List all the reasons why cats must be kept securely confined to your house and/or backyard?

### Why confine:

Contrary to popular belief, cats don’t have to roam. Providing their basic needs are met, cats can enjoy longer and healthier lives when safely contained to the property.

Serious problems can occur if cats are allowed to roam outdoors, particularly at night (around 80% of accidents involving cats happen at night). Roaming cats can get hit by cars, injured in fights, catch fatal diseases (eg feline AIDS) or become lost.

Roaming cats can also kill native wildlife - even well fed cats will hunt. Roaming cats can annoy neighbours too, by spraying, fighting, yowling and digging in gardens.

Legally, you are not allowed to let your cat trespass on other people’s property. If your cat is found wandering off your property and is not identified, he/she can be seized and impounded. You may have to pay a fine when reclaiming your cat from the Council pound.

Some councils also have laws prohibiting cats from certain areas, or requiring cats to be kept on their owner’s property during certain hours.

You can keep your cat in the house or flat with you, or in the garage or shed at night. Just make sure he/she has a warm dry sleeping area, a litter tray and plenty of water.

Other options include buying or building a “cat enclosure” for your yard, or installing “cat proof fencing”. Look under “Pet Shops’ Suppliers” in the Yellow Pages, or do a web search, for companies that sell enclosures, netting and products to modify fences. For instance, a ‘roller’ type product is available, for installation along the top of existing fences (the roller prevents cats from getting a grip on the fence).

If you’re handy and would like to save money, you can build your own cat proof fencing and cat enclosures. You can find step by step DIY instructions with supporting illustrations and photos on the www.vic.gov.au/pets website.

### Cat proof fencing

Cat proof fencing (ie modifying existing fencing to make it ‘cat proof’, giving your cat free access to parts of, or your entire, yard). As an example, see Figure 1 for a photo of a completed cat proof fence.

If you have a small yard then this may be a better and cheaper alternative to building a cat enclosure. An ideal spot for cat proof fencing is that narrow area between the house and a fence that can be closed off at each end by gates.

Cats should have access to the house through a cat door. If there are times when they are not able to access the house, they require access to a weatherproof sleeping area with a bed, and an adequate supply of fresh water etc while in the yard. There must be no dangerous items in the yard or sharp edges used in the fencing.

In most instances, fence extensions are legal as long as they are entirely on your side of the fence (ie not directly above the fence, or intruding over to the neighbour’s side).

However, some properties may have covenants in place restricting the height of fences check with your local council to see if this applies to your property.

### Cat enclosures attached to the house

There are many options for this type of cat enclosure. The easiest solution can be to clad an existing pergola or patio with cat proof mesh, or fit a roof over a small-enclosed area such as a path between the house and fence.

If you do not have a suitable area then you can choose to build a patio style enclosure from the ground up.

### Free standing cat enclosures

Cats love to move around and keep watch over their territory. They need a warm dry bed and somewhere to laze in the sun. By building your own cat enclosure you can tailor it exactly to the needs of your cat. Cats love the variety that this system of enclosure provides, especially if it is linked to the family home through a cat door. To help you design the layout to suit the space that you have available on your property, the www.vic.gov.au/pets website gives you detailed instructions on how to build a basic enclosure together with add on auxiliary enclosures and linking tunnels that you can mix and match to make the perfect enclosure.

Note that the use of electronic containment systems for cats is strictly regulated under the *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1986*, in order to protect the welfare of cats.

### Design consideration for cat enclosures

Cats must have shelter from sun, wind and rain (however they do need a sunny spot within the enclosure).

Cats must have a weatherproof sleeping compartment with a raised bed (which must be kept in a clean and hygienic condition), along with a separate exercise area.

The cat litter tray area must be well away from the cat’s eating and sleeping areas and must be kept dry and be easily cleaned. Litter trays must contain an appropriate litter material and be cleaned daily (many cats will not use soiled litter, and will therefore soil elsewhere in the enclosure).

Ventilation is important if keeping cats in a confined area, especially if you have a number of cats, to prevent spread of disease and respiratory problems from a build-up of fumes or stale air.

When training your cat to accept confinement, skip the morning feed and call him/her in at night to be fed. Don’t feed your cat until he/she comes inside, your cat will learn quickly that he/she won’t get fed unless home by dusk. Once inside, don’t let your cat out again until morning. If you wish, you can gradually extend the time your cat spends indoors or in an enclosure.

Most cats should adapt well to living indoors and in an enclosure, particularly if they have been kept in this way from an early age. However, adult cats used to roaming outdoors may have more difficulty in adjusting. If this is the case, you can consult your vet for advice. Desexing cats also reduces their desire to roam and helps prevent behavioural problems.

When confining cats for long periods you must enrich their environment by providing toys, scratching posts, multiple levels and hides. This will prevent them from getting bored or developing behavioural problems.

## 2.3 Feeding

Cats need to be fed a well-balanced diet to maintain health, vitality and body weight in the correct range for their breed and age. Regularly monitor a cat’s body condition to ensure its diet is adequate (see body condition category section on page 13).

Cats should be fed at least once daily. However it is recommended that cats are fed twice daily (to avoid overfeeding divide the daily feed into two smaller meals) as their feeding habits are more for small frequent meals rather than one large meal. As a general guide a moderately active cat requires around 70 Kcal x body weight (kg) of food a day.

Diets composed entirely of vegetable matter are not nutritionally adequate for cats, even if such diets are sufficiently palatable to be readily eaten. Nor should cats be fed a diet solely of fresh meat (including fish), as the required minerals and other nutrients will not be provided.

A balanced diet is important as cats have specific nutrient requirements and sensitivities; e.g. excessive feeding of liver will cause Vitamin A toxicity problems. If not feeding a commercial cat food to your cat, seek veterinary advice to ensure a properly balanced diet is being provided for your cat.

Cats have differing nutritional requirements depending on their stage of life, amount of exercise and physiological needs, e.g. during growth (kittens), pregnancy, lactation (kittens suckling), old age and cold weather. They may require food of differing nutritional value rather than just a greater or lesser volume. As a guide the feeding instructions on the can or pack can be followed.

### Minimum standards:

• Cats must be fed at least once a day.

• Cats must be fed a diet that provides proper and sufficient food to maintain good health and meet their physiological needs.

• Cats are carnivores and must not be fed a purely vegetarian diet.

• Cats must not be fed a diet consisting purely of fresh meat (including fish).

• Kittens from 6 weeks to 6 months of age must be fed a minimum of 2 meals per day.

• Cats must not be fed dog food as it lacks nutrients that cats require.

• Ensure bowls are located away from the litter tray. Many cats like having their water bowl in a separate area to their food bowl. Cats can also be given grass to chew (non-toxic varieties).

#### Pregnant or lactating cats

It is important that the body condition of pregnant or lactating queens is maintained within the ideal body weight range to avoid the development of metabolic diseases. Lactating queens usually have increased nutritional requirements to enable them to maintain body weight while feeding kittens and need to be carefully monitored.

#### Kittens

Kittens have special feeding requirements and require more food (per kilogram of body weight) because in addition to requiring energy for maintenance and activity they need extra nutrients for growth. A number of small meals need to be provided daily as their daily requirement of food is greater than their stomach can accept in one feed. Ideally kittens up to 12 weeks of age should be fed 3-4 meals a day, from 12 weeks to 6 months 2-3 meals a day and from 6 months 1-2 meals a day.

### Guidelines for checking if your cat is at an ideal weight/condition

Obesity is a major health and welfare problem for cats, which is often not recognised by owners. It is important to regularly assess whether your cat is receiving too little or too much food by its body condition. By monitoring your cat’s body condition you can adjust their diet to ensure they are maintained in good condition without becoming overweight.

#### Body condition categories

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Underweight | Ribs are easily seen, obvious waist and no fat cover under the skin. |
| Ideal | Outline of the ribs can be felt but not seen with slight fat covering. Cat has a waist when viewed from above. |
| Overweight | Ribs cannot be easily felt. Cat has no waist when viewed from above. Belly is obviously rounded. Cat has excessive filled skin flap in front of hind leg. |

In general cats should be maintained in an ‘ideal’ body condition. Both underweight and overweight cats can have serious health and welfare problems and veterinary advice should be sought for these cats.

#### Emaciated

• individual ribs, spine and pelvis prominent and evident from a distance

• lack of muscle mass

• little or no body fat

• rump hollow

• waist prominent when viewed from above

• neck thin

• no flank fold (under belly), abdomen very tucked up.

Veterinary advice must be sought.

#### Thin

• ribs, spine and pelvis bones visible and easily felt

• little body fat

• neck thin

• no flank fold (under belly), abdomen tucked up

• obvious waist when viewed from above

• increase feeding and worm cat if not wormed recently (ensure all-wormer used – some products do not cover all worms).

Seek veterinary advice if cat remains underweight or unsure of feeding or worming regime.

#### Ideal

• ribs and spine can be felt, last few ribs may be visible

• flank fold (under belly) may be visible from side

• cat should have a waist when viewed from top

• good muscle mass.

#### Overweight

• ribs and spine not visible but can be felt

• little or no waist when viewed from above, rounded appearance

• flank fold (under belly) clearly visible and will wobble when cat moves. Belly and chest rounded

• large ventral fat pad covering hind legs.

Reduce feed intake or provide lower calorie feed. Consider options to increase exercise level of cat.

#### Obese

• ribs and spine not visible and difficult to feel

• tail has obvious fat deposit

• no waist and back broadened when viewed from above

• flank fold (under belly) hangs down and will sway when cat moves, belly and chest very rounded.

Seek veterinary advice on diet and exercise regime.

## 2.4 Water

Cats must have access to clean drinking water at all times.

Cats prefer to drink fresh water and it encourages them to drink more. This is good for their health, and can help to prevent urinary tract infections, and urination outside of the litter tray.

Water containers must be checked daily and maintained in a clean condition.

Water should be provided in a container that is not easily tipped over. The container should be large enough or refilled often enough to provide access to water twenty-four (24) hours a day.

Water containers should be of a design that is easily cleaned and does not cause injury to the cat.

If kittens are present, the container should not be so large or deep that they can fall in and drown.

As a general guide the amount of water needed daily by an adult cat is 50 ml water per 1 kilogram of body weight (more for a lactating queen).

An individual cat’s daily water requirement varies depending on factors such as daily temperature, amount of exercise, water content of diet (ie greater water requirements if fed dry food compared to canned food), age etc.

## 2.5 Health

### Minimum standards

• A cat’s health and welfare must be checked daily.

• Veterinary advice must be promptly sought for cats showing signs of parasites, injury, ill health   
or distress.

• Cats must be treated regularly for internal and external parasites and vaccinated against common diseases.

• Surgical procedures (eg desexing) must only be carried out by a veterinarian.

• Cats must not be de-clawed except by a veterinarian and then only for therapeutic purposes.

Useful website: www.icatcare.org - International Society for Feline Medicine.

### Recommended best practice

When checking daily for health problems: examine the cat’s physical condition, check for signs of ill health and make sure that the cat is eating, drinking, toileting and behaving normally.

It is important to present sick or unwell animals for examination early in the course of a disease as this gives the veterinarian the best opportunity to quickly return the pet to good health.

Cats should receive an annual health check by a veterinarian. More frequent checks may be needed for older cats or those with health problems.

Regular vaccinations for the control of contagious diseases, as well as preventative treatments for internal (ie worms) and external (ie fleas) parasites need to be provided to safeguard the general health of cats. Frequency of treatment depends on the product used and life stage of the cat.

Kittens should be vaccinated (at least 8 days prior to rehoming), wormed and desexed before going to a new home. They require a course of vaccinations from 6-8 weeks of age. Kittens also require more frequent worming than adults, starting at 2 weeks of age. Seek veterinary advice regarding vaccination and worming regimes.

Cats should receive regular check-ups of their teeth for dental problems and be fed raw bones or other appropriate chewing/ teeth cleaning substitutes to help prevent dental problems from occurring. Talk to a veterinarian for advice on dental health.

Cats should be groomed regularly if they have a long coat. Severe matting of the coat is not acceptable and requires a veterinarian or experienced groomer to correct this problem.

To avoid this matting long-haired cats will require regular grooming and may require clipping (this should be done by a veterinarian or experienced person). Matting can be an indication of a health problem, such as pain from an injury or from arthritis restricting the cat’s usual ability to groom itself. If your long haired cat‘s coat is becoming matted you should have your cat seen by a veterinarian.

Scratching posts should be provided for cats. Clipping of nails of cats which are allowed outside is not recommended as blunt nails will affect the cat’s ability to climb and escape from dangers such as dogs. Clipping of nails should be done by an experienced person or veterinarian.

White or light coloured cats, particularly those with white or non-pigmented ears, eyelids and noses, are prone to sunburn and skin cancers. Precautions, such as use of sunscreen, should be taken to protect the vulnerable areas or alternatively keep white cats indoors especially during the heat of the day.

Due to the risk of miscarriage or foetal abnormalities through contracting toxoplasmosis pregnant women should practice extra care around cats and never handle litter trays or faeces without wearing gloves and following strict hygiene guidelines.

Keep any poisons used in the house, garden or work place stored away from any areas which your cat may have access to.

#### Guidelines

Some animal diseases and parasites are transferable to humans (zoonoses). It is important that those handling cats practice good personal hygiene, particularly when cleaning out litter trays.

Cats can appear quite resilient to pain and may just go quiet or hide as a response to injury or disease. This does not mean that they are not in pain or injured. Abnormal behaviours can indicate underlying health problems and a veterinarian should be consulted.

Human medicines should not be given to cats except on veterinary advice as they can be harmful.

### 2.5.1 Vaccinations

Vaccination protects your cat against various diseases which can cause pain, distress and often death. Most diseases that affect cats are viral and do not respond well to medication. Where treatments are available, they can be expensive and in some circumstances even prove unsuccessful. For these and other reasons, prevention of diseases through vaccination is strongly advised.

As well as safeguarding your own pet, vaccination also prevents diseases from being passed onto other animals.

Vaccines contain a harmless form of the virus or bacterium that causes a particular disease. They work by stimulating the body’s immune system in a safe way. If the cat then actually comes into contact with the disease, the immune system ‘remembers’ what it did to deal with the vaccine, so can fight the disease. This protects the cat.

Vaccinations are initially given at a number of set intervals, as recommended by your vet. Thereafter, annual booster vaccinations provide protection for the life of your pet.

Kittens should be vaccinated before they mix with other animals. It is essential for their normal development that they are allowed to socialise with other animals while they are very young, so get them vaccinated as soon as possible.

Vaccinations protect against the following common cat diseases:

• Feline Enteritis

• Feline Respiratory Disease (Cat Flu)

• Chlamydia

• Feline Leukaemia (FeLV)

• Feline AIDS

### 2.5.2 Parasites – fleas and worms

Your cat needs regular treatments so it doesn’t get fleas and worms.

Ask your vet for advice about which worming products to use and how often to use them. Note that worms can also be harmful to cat owners, which is another reason why it’s important to prevent them. For more information, see the page on zoonoses – diseases and parasites that move from animals to humans.

Fleas can cause itching, chewing and licking. The skin may become red and inflamed. You might see fleas on your cat, or you might see small dark flecks (flea ‘dirt’) in the fur and on the skin.

If your cat has fleas it’s important to treat the house, your cat and all other pets in the household. Your vet can recommend safe and effective products to use.

Never use a dog flea treatment on cats, as this can be fatal.

### 2.5.3 Grooming

All cats need regular grooming, but long-haired cats need more coat care than short-haired cats.

A long-haired cat should be combed and brushed once a day while a cat with short hair will usually only need brushing twice a week. Get a brush and comb that are suited to the hair type of your cat.

#### Indicators of cat health status

**Signs of potential ill-health include:**

• sickness or diarrhoea

• significant weight change (in either direction) over a short period

• loss of appetite

• drinking much more or less than normal

• lack of energy/sleeping more than usual

• unusual swellings

• skin conditions

• limping

• coughing

• unusual bleeding

• signs of pain, such as sensitivity to touch

• runny eyes or nose

• changes in behaviour.

If you are worried about the health of your cat, contact your local vet.

**Signs of good health include:**

• bright, alert and responsive

• clean, shiny coat free of bare patches

• free of wounds, swelling or lumps

• free of fleas and intestinal worms

• healthy appetite and normal weight

• moves freely and easily when walking or running

• has a bowel motion at least once a day but does not have diarrhoea

• urinates at regular intervals through the day

• free of abnormal discharges from eyes, nose, mouth or ears

• not coughing or sneezing excessively

• free from abnormal odours.

Activity

Investigate cat vaccinations. What does your vet recommend?

Have you vaccinated your cat for feline influenza? Why/Why not?

### 2.5.4 Common cat poisons

#### Human foods to avoid for cats

There are a number of human foods that you should avoid feeding to cats as they can have an adverse effect on their health.

Alcohol: affects cats in the same way it affects humans. High levels of alcohol consumption can cause intoxication, gastrointestinal irritation, respiratory distress, coma and death.

Avocado: contains persin which is in all parts of the avocado. Ingestion causes gastrointestinal irritation, vomiting, diarrhoea, respiratory distress, congestion, fluid accumulation around the tissues of the heart and even death.

Chocolate: contains theobromine (a methlyzanthine) which is toxic to cats. Toxicity is dose related, meaning that the overall effect of chocolate ingestion depends on the size of the cat, the amount eaten and the type of chocolate. Symptoms include restlessness, excitement, hyperactivity, nervousness, trembling, vomiting, diarrhoea, increased drinking and urination, increased heart rate and seizures. Note that darker chocolate is more dangerous than milk chocolate. White chocolate has the lowest level of methylxanthines, while baking chocolate contains the highest.

Coffee or caffeine products: In large enough doses, caffeine – including in tea - can be fatal for a cat and there is no antidote. Symptoms of caffeine poisoning include restlessness, rapid breathing, heart palpitations and muscle tremors.

Cooked bones: can splinter and cause gastrointestinal obstruction or laceration.

Fat trimmings: Fat, both cooked and uncooked, can cause intestinal upset, with vomiting and diarrhoea. It can also lead to your pet to developing pancreatitis.

Grapes, Raisins, Sultanas and Currants: The toxic substance within grapes and raisins is unknown but it can lead to kidney failure.

Onions, Garlic and Chives: These contain a substance that can cause gastrointestinal irritation and lead to red blood cell damage and a form of anaemia. Garlic and chives contain the same substance but at a lesser volume.

Salt: Large amounts of salt can produce excessive thirst and urination, or even sodium ion poisoning. Signs that your cat may have eaten too many salty foods include depression, tremors, elevated body temperature and seizures.

Tomatoes and potatoes: These contain a substance that causes violent gastro-intestinal problems.

Xylitol (artificial sweetener): Causes insulin release in cats which can lead to liver failure. Initial signs of toxicity include vomiting, lethargy and loss of coordination. This sweetener is used in candy, gum, toothpaste, baked goods and some diet foods.

Yeast dough: can rise and cause gas to accumulate in your cat’s digestive system. This can be painful and cause the stomach or intestines to rupture. The risk diminishes after the dough is cooked and the yeast has fully risen.

#### Toxic plants for cats

A number of plants are poisonous to cats. Consumption of these plants can cause a range of symptoms from vomiting to serious illness and even death in some cases.

Generally, cats will stay away from plants that will harm them but sometimes curiosity and boredom get the better of them and they might nibble on your plants. For a comprehensive list of all plants (both toxic and non-toxic to cats) visit www.aspca.org and search for ‘Toxic and Non-Toxic Plant List – Cats’.

#### Medications

Aspirin: The doses recommended in cats for relief of pain and fever is 10mg/kg every 48 hours. The toxic dose is 80 to 120 mg/kg for 10-12 days. The signs of aspirin toxicity in cats are dose-dependent and may include anorexia, vomiting, gastric haemorrhage, anaemia and hyperthermia.

Paracetamol: Cats are extremely sensitive to paracetamol toxicity. The feline toxic dose is 50 to 100 mg/kg. One regular strength tablet may be toxic to a cat, and a second ingested 24 hours later may be lethal. The signs of toxicity are brown gums, difficulty breathing, blood in the urine, jaundice and swelling.

Ibuprofen: The toxic effect of ibuprofen depends on the dose, the number of doses ingested and age of the cat. It is known that an acute ingestion of 50 mg/kg will produce a toxic effect. The signs of ibuprofen toxicity in cats are vomiting, depression, anorexia and diarrhoea.

Other medications that should not be given to your cat as they can be potentially lethal, even in small doses, include:

• antidepressants – can cause vomiting and lethargy, with certain types leading to serotonin syndrome

• ADHD medications – act as a stimulant and dangerously elevate heart rate, blood pressure and body temperature

• anti-cancer drugs

• anti-diabetics – cause a major drop in blood sugar levels causing disorientation, lack of coordination and seizures

• cold medicines – act as a stimulant causing elevated heart rates, blood pressure, body temperature and seizures

• vitamin D derivatives – cause life-threatening spikes in blood calcium levels in pets that can lead to kidney failure

• diet pills

• muscle relaxants – can impair the central nervous system and lead to death.

#### Household hazards

**Ant baits**: These contain boric acid which is toxic to cats if eaten in a large amount. Ant baits have a sweet smell and taste to attract ants but it also appears to attract cats.

**Antifreeze (ethylene glycol)**: Antifreeze is a common cause of poisoning in small animals. Cats will seek out antifreeze as they find its smell and taste appealing. A lethal dose of antifreeze is 1.5 ml/kg.   
The signs of antifreeze poisoning has three phases:

• phase 1 includes a drunken appearance which occurs within one hour of ingestion

• phase 2 is heart failure which occurs within 12-24 hours of ingestion

• phase 3 is renal failure, vomiting, depression, renal pain, hypothermia, coma and death.

**Fertilisers**: Fertiliser products generally contain varying amounts of nitrogen (N), phosphorous (P) and potassium (K) compounds. They may be liquid, granular or solid and contain additives such as herbicides, insecticides and fungicides. Since fertilisers are usually a combination of ingredients, the effects of ingestion may vary. In general, they cause mild to moderate gastrointestinal irritation which may present signs such as vomiting, diarrhoea, hypersalivation and abdominal pain. Symptoms can be more severe if a larger amount is ingested and they may also be caustic, causing irritation of the lining of the gastrointestinal tract.

**Lead**: Lead is not a common poisoning problem but it may occur from ingestion of lead-containing dust or paint when cats coats get contaminated and they then groom. The signs of chronic, low level, lead poisoning include vomiting, abdominal pain, anorexia and diarrhoea while the acute signs are convulsions, blindness and tremors.

**Rodenticides (rat or mouse bait)**: These are a common cause of cat poisoning. Most rodent poisons use anti-coagulants that kill the animals by causing uncontrollable bleeding. These baits are designed to attract animals so consider the use of them very carefully and try to use alternatives where possible. Signs of rodenticide ingestion appear one to four days after ingestion, they include depression, weakness, coughing and staggering. Most people don’t realise that if a cat eats a poisoned rodent it can also poison the cat.

**Insecticides**: These usually contain organophosphates and carbonates which are highly toxic to cats. Signs of ingestion include vomiting, diarrhoea, hypersalivation, muscle tremors and seizures.

**Molluscacides (snail and slug bait)**: Molluscacides come in a variety of forms and may be mixed with other toxins. Ingestion can be fatal and there is no antidote. The effects of ingestion include anxiety, elevated heart and respiratory rates, uncoordination, severe muscle tremors and death.

#### What to do if your cat is poisoned

• don’t panic. Rapid response is important, but panicking can interfere with the process of helping your pet

• take the time to safely collect and have at hand any material involved. This may be of great help to your vet, as they determine what poison or poisons are involved. Also, collect in a sealable plastic bag any material your pet may have vomited or chewed

• if you witness your pet consuming material that you suspect might be toxic, do not hesitate to seek emergency assistance, even if you do not notice any adverse effects. Sometimes, even if poisoned, an animal may appear normal for several hours or days after the incident

• do not try to make your cat vomit unless instructed to do so by your veterinarian.

## 2.6 Cat desexing

If you aren’t going to breed from your cat, have him or her desexed.

Thousands of healthy cats are euthanased (killed) each year in Victoria. This is because Victoria has more cats than people who want pet cats - we have an ‘over supply’ of cats.

Many cats are bred by accident, because owners don’t get around to desexing them.

You are less likely to forget to desex your cat if you have it done as soon as you get the cat. If you get a cat from a shelter, it should be desexed before you can take it home.

In general, cats can safely be desexed from six to eight weeks of age. Desexing can be less stressful for kittens than it is for older cats, and kittens may recover more quickly.

Along with helping to prevent cat overpopulation, there are many other benefits to desexing cats. Desexed cats can be better behaved. They may be less likely to roam, yowl at night or spray strong-smelling urine.

Desexing pets can also prevent them from getting certain types of cancer.

It is also important to desex a female cat even if she is kept inside as cats can continue to cycle if they are not mated which can cause problems for the cat.

Your vet can give you further guidance on desexing your kitten or cat.

## 2.7 Housing

### Minimum standards

• Give your cats access to shelter from sun, wind and rain.

• If you don’t keep your cat in the house, it needs access to a weather-proof sleeping area with a bed.

• If your cat is housed in an enclosed areas or building, make sure there is adequate ventilation to prevent build-up of stale air and odours that can cause respiratory problems in cats.

• Cats must not be tethered at any time.

• Enclosures for cats need at least 2 square metres floor space per cat (except where otherwise stated by an applicable code of practice under the Domestic Animals Act 1994). The enclosure must be a minimum of 1.8m high with separate sleeping quarters, feeding area and litter tray.

• Cats may be multiply housed in colony pens with no more than eight cats per pen. Entire (un-desexed) males must be housed separately from entire (un-desexed) female cats. In colony housing every cat must have an individual raised sleeping area and feed bowl. Enclosures must incorporate a scratching pole, have at least two levels joined by a climbing plank, and provide refuges (hides) for cats.

• All housing areas for cats must be safe, clean and hygienic at all times.

• When confining cats there must be no dangerous items or sharp edges used in the structure or fencing.

• Clean cat litter daily to remove urine and faeces.

• Never use disinfectants containing phenol around cats.

### Recommended best practice

You should confine your cat to your property from dusk until dawn and preferably at all other times, for the protection of the cat’s welfare. Keeping cats confined reduces the chances of them being hit by cars, fighting other cats or dogs, or contracting diseases such as cat flu and feline AIDS from other cats. It also protects them from poisons, theft or trapping.

It will also keep your cat from killing wildlife. Cats are generally sedentary animals and can be confined to your property at all times without a risk to their welfare providing environmental needs are met (including exercise by playing with them).

If cats are kept inside on a permanent basis, they need to be provided with a litter box placed well away from the cat’s eating and sleeping areas. Litter must be cleaned daily to remove urine and faeces for hygiene reasons. Many cats will not use soiled litter and will therefore soil elsewhere in the home.

Each cat requires his/ her own litter box, that is big enough for easy access and is located in a safe and private area (if a cat is startled while using the box, he/she may not use that box in future). You may have to experiment to find out your cat’s preferences for covered or uncovered boxes, type of litter and depth of litter.

Cats are very clean animals that do not like using dirty litter boxes, so boxes will need to be scooped daily, and cleaned with water and non-scented soap once a week. Cats prefer non-scented litter. Scented litter can cause cats to eliminate outside of the litter tray. A thin layer of baking soda placed on the bottom of the box will help absorb odours between scoopings. If you are pregnant, it is best if litter trays are cleaned and disinfected daily. Wear rubber gloves when cleaning trays, or get someone else to do it for you. This will prevent you catching toxoplasmosis, which is a very rare disease that can be transmitted through contaminated cat faeces, and can harm unborn babies.

Cats need some exposure to sunlight to ensure good health. If they are kept indoors for long periods access they need to be able to get sunlight through a window or fly screen.

Protect cats from hazards within the household such as electrical appliances, power cords, household poisons and water sources such as toilets or swimming pools.

Find suitable accommodation and carers for cats when you go away on holidays, for example, a boarding cattery that is registered with the local council or a responsible person who is providing the necessary daily care for the cat.

#### Guidelines

Cats can be contained to their property by:

• keeping them in the house at all times

• building or buying cat enclosures, which can be separate or connected to a cat door into the house

• enclosing verandahs

• making property fences cat proof, such as by placing netting at an inward angle on top of the fence or adding a ledge to the inside of the fence so that cats cannot climb over.

Cat modules/enclosures can be created either separately or linked to the house and can be a great way to provide an interesting environment while containing cats to the property. Such cat housing needs to be easily cleaned and maintained and human access points are needed in case of emergencies.

An important aspect of cat enclosures is the complexity of the environment. Cats require regular exercise. Environmental enrichment and exercise needs can be met by putting platforms at different heights in the vertical space connected by walkways (static and swinging), climbing frames and an interesting visual outlook. Constant confinement without stimulation for exercise and play can lead to a dull, apathetic cat or to the development of destructive behaviour. Scratching poles need to be provided for confined cats.

Cats also respond to visual stimulation so enclosures for solitary cats should be situated where the cat can see other activities.

In a group enclosure a number of hiding and escape areas should be provided to create a refuge from other cats and humans. Group housing pens should have a scratching pole and at least two levels joined by a climbing plank. When cats are group housed they should be socially compatible. It is strongly recommended that only desexed cats and/or female cats are group housed. Entire, or un-desexed, male cats should be housed individually to avoid conflict or else live only with desexed cats, provided they are compatible.

Activity

What type of cat housing do you have currently?

What other types would work at your house?

If your cat is confined to your house at all times, are they restricted to certain rooms and why?

## 2.8 Environmental enrichment

Activity

Make a list of enrichment items you could put out for your cat.

List some household items that you need to make sure your cat doesn’t use as a toy (eg. power cords)

Cats have a number of basic needs that must be met if they are to stay happy and healthy when they are contained in the house, yard or an enclosure.

By taking notice of your cats surroundings you can help them get the exercise they need, confine them for their own safety and ensure they have access to ample food and water while you are out.

Companionship: Cats require plenty of social contact with owners. If cats are in an enclosure, this can be achieved by access to the house through a cat door (and tunnel if applicable). Set aside time each day to interact with your cat, for instance, patting, playing with, or grooming him or her.

A well-informed owner: You should find out as much as you can about cat behaviour and care. Talk to your vet about health and nutritional requirements for cats.

Space: Cats prefer to have their own ‘personal space’, and this is particularly important to prevent aggression when you have more than one cat housed together. Each cat requires his or her own area that provides all the essentials (food, water, bed, resting places, litter tray etc).

Sleeping, resting and viewing areas: Cats like to spend a lot of time sleeping and resting in quiet areas where they feel safe and secure. You can buy cat beds, or just use blankets, towels, pillows etc. High-sided cat beds and boxes are useful to give cats a sense of ‘privacy’. Cats use elevated areas as vantage points from which to observe their surroundings. These are essential, and can be provided by access to platforms, shelves, climbing posts or window ledges. Some cats love to watch birds (you can place a bird bath/feeder outside the window or enclosure), insects (try planting flowers to attract them), fish in aquariums and even nature footage on TV!

Scratching posts: Scratching is a natural behaviour for cats. It sharpens claws, stretches muscles and leaves scent marks. Your cat will need a scratching post, which can be horizontal or vertical, and can be made from sisal (a coarse natural fibre), carpet, cardboard or wood. You can encourage your cat to use the scratching post (rather than other things like the furniture!) by putting catnip on it. Cats have an excellent sense of smell, and many cats love catnip, which can be supplied as a dried herb or grown fresh in pots.

Toys and exercise: Exercise your cat through play or even by training your cat to walk outside on a harness and leash. Cats enjoy toys that move or make noise and remind them of prey such as mice, birds, and insects. They need a variety of toys they can roll, pounce on, capture and bite, and toys should be swapped regularly to prevent boredom. Some examples of simple and cheap toys (that are safe for cats to play with) are crumpled paper balls, paper bags to explore, cardboard boxes, and toilet paper tubes. Try stuffing old cotton socks with cotton balls and some catnip, and tying a knot in the end. You can also buy furry toys (eg in the shape of a mouse) that make noises and can be rolled, balls (eg ping pong balls, or balls that can be filled with food or treats), sticks with toys dangling from the end of a string etc.

If your cat is not in an outdoor enclosure, make sure he or she can access window ledges for sunshine, or place a chair near a window.

Hides: Cats like to have a place to retreat to. A hide is a great place for cats to feel safe and secure but still be able to see what is happening around them. Providing a cat hide is a great way of giving cats the security they require. Hides are also useful for making fearful and stressed cats feel more secure.

## 2.9 Training and socialisation

### Minimum standard

• Training methods used with cats must be humane and not cause pain or distress.

### Recommended best practice

Cats should be trained to fit in with the life of their owners (for example, trained to not jump onto tables if you don’t want them there).

Cats do not require obedience training but do need a chance to get familiar with any new experience or environment and will need to be socialised with other cats, animals and humans.

It is important that from as young as three weeks of age, cats have regular social contact with a human carer. Cats also need plenty of stimulation (both mental and physical) so you need to give them toys and an interesting environment. Teach family, friends and children how to properly interact with cats.

Cats should be toilet trained to use a litter tray. If you don’t know how to do this seek advice from a veterinarian or experienced person.

Collars should be elasticised or ‘quick release’ so the cat will not choke if the collar gets caught. Collars need to be snug fitting to ensure the cat’s paws cannot get caught up in them but not so tight that they rub or choke the cat. Collars should be checked daily for any sign of rubbing or injury.

Collars, carry cages and harnesses used for leading should be introduced gradually. Where a cat is trained to use a lead, the lead should be attached to a harness and not to a collar.

#### Guidelines

Take care when introducing a new cat into a household with existing cats or dogs. Introduce a new cat slowly and under supervision to ensure any conflict over territory or hierarchy is minimised.

New cats should be kept inside for at least two weeks to enable the cat to become familiar with its surroundings.

Young kittens should be supervised outside until at least five to six months of age as they are too young to protect themselves from predators and other hazards.

Young children should not be left unsupervised around cats.

## 2.10 Cats in cars

### Minimum standards

• Cats must be confined in a secure, escape-proof, well-ventilated container when travelling.

• Your cat must be able to comfortably stand, turn around, lie down and act normally in its travelling container.

• Adequate ventilation must be provided in the vehicle and travelling container/cage. For containers/cages this means multiple holes on at least three sides of the container/cage.

• Travelling containers must not have any projections that may injury the cat.

• Secure or restrain the travelling container in the vehicle.

• Don’t transport your cat in the boot of a car.

• Don’t leave your cats unattended in the car if the weather is hot or very cold.

### Recommended best practice

Cats should be adequately restrained when travelling inside a vehicle, for the safety of both the cat and human passengers. Unrestrained cats can cause accidents and should never be allowed in the vicinity of the driver. In the case of an accident, an unrestrained cat may become a projectile and can injure itself or the occupants of the vehicle.

If you have to leave your cat in a parked car, lock all doors, park in a shady area and open windows wide enough to provide ventilation (without enabling the cat to escape or get its head caught). Leave water in a container that will not tip over. Be aware that the interior of a car can rapidly become hot enough to cause heat stress and even death in a cat even on mild days.

If you are travelling long distances, cats need regular opportunities to drink. Take temperature and transporting conditions into account when figuring out how often to provide water. The best way to provide water is via a container within the cat’s basket that can be filled without opening the basket. If the basket has to be opened take care to ensure the cat does not escape.

Cats should also be fed at least once every 24 hours and have regular access to a litter tray and water if these are not provided in the travelling container.

## 2.11 Breeding

If you intend to breed your cat it must be healthy; that is, fit and disease-free. Females must not be bred before they are nine months of age. Kittens must not be separated from their mother before they are seven weeks of age. Before breeding, both parents should be checked by a vet for health, including genetic problems. If you frequently breed cats you may be required to become a registered Domestic Animal Business and comply with the mandatory Code of Practice for the Operation of Breeding and Rearing Businesses.

## Section 2 Summary

If you fail to comply with any of the laws below you may bet a fine, your cat may be removed from your premises or in the worst cases, you may cause injury or death to other people, animals, or to your own cat.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Registration | Kittens must be registered from three months of age.  Existing registrations must be renewed by April 10 each year.  If you move to another council, you must advise the new council of your cat’s registration details.  Cats must wear their registration tag at all times when they are off your property.  If you get a cat that was previously registered with a council, you must re-register it with your local council. |
| Microchipping | Kittens must be microchipped before they can be registered.  Older cats that are being registered for the first time with a council must be microchipped.  If you move house, you must update your contact details with the microchip registry. |
| Owning cats | You need a permit is to keep more than a certain number of cats (your local council will advise you as to what this number is).  Council can impose mandatory cat curfews (periods of time when a cat must remain inside the house or securely confined in a run) on the keeping of cats. |
| Care of  your cat | You must provide regular food, water, adequate shelter and veterinary attention (when required) for your cat.  Indoor cats require individual litters trays in a location separate from their food and water. Litter trays require daily cleaning.  Cat enclosures have a number of specific minimum standards, including a minimum floor area of 2 square metres per cat, a minimum enclosure height of 1.8m, a raised bed, at least two levels joined by a climbing plank and separate feeding and toileting areas.  A maximum of eight cats may be housed together in a colony (or group) cage. Entire (un-desexed) male and female cats must not be housed together. Colony cages must provide individual raised beds and food bowls for each cat.  Cats should be kept confined to the property by installing cat-proof fencing, an outdoor cat run or confinement within the house.  Cats require environmental enrichment – particularly those confined to houses and/or cat runs.  Toys, scratching posts and areas to hide will reduce nuisance behaviours in your cat by enriching their environment. |
| Desexing | If you do not intend to use your cat for breeding purposes you should have it desexed. Some councils require all cats to be desexed if they are not owned by a registered breeder – refer to your local council.  Council can make desexing mandatory for owners who are not registered breeders of cats. |
| Travelling in the car | When travelling in a car, do not put your cat in the car boot. Confine your cat in a transport cage. Cats travelling in vehicles must have adequate ventilation.  Cats can quickly become heat stressed when left in a car. Do not leave cats in cars unattended. |
| Cats and poisons | There are a number of foods and general household items which are poisonous to cats. Keep these foods and substances out of reach of cats to avoid accidental poisoning. |
| Prohibited procedures | Electronic cat collars must not be used except in accordance with the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Regulations 1997.  Cats must not be de-clawed except by a veterinarian and then only for therapeutic purposes. |

# Section 3: Cat behaviour

To understand why your cat does the things it does, it is useful to have some background information about cats. Despite what we might think, cats do not do things with the intention of deliberately annoying us or making our life difficult. They normally do things in their self-interest. In this section we are going to look at the importance of genetics, the cat’s previous experiences and its present environment; that is, the three major factors affecting the behaviour of cats.

We will view images designed to teach us to interpret cat behaviour and examine nuisance behaviour issues such as scratching furniture and carpet, spraying, inappropriate urination and defecation, yowling and aggression towards other animals and humans.

## 3.1 Behaviour – the basics

The behaviour of any cat has three main determinants:

• genetically inherited behavioural tendencies (these can be breed-specific, but individuals vary and not all cats of the same breed will display the same behaviours)

• learned behaviours the cat has acquired throughout its life. From the moment your cat is born it begins to learn about its environment. Every experience helps to shape the behavioural responses of a cat

• the impact of the immediate environment; that is, what is happening to and around the cat at any given time.

So when analysing or predicting the behaviour of any given cat it is important to remember that all three factors influence what your cat will do.

**Genetic tendencies   
+   
Past experience   
+   
Present environment   
=   
Behavioural response**

While it is very difficult to predict your cat’s behaviour in any given situation, understanding the natural tendencies of the breed toward certain situations; recalling key behavioural responses to stressful, exciting or memorable experiences in your cat’s life; and analysing the present situation (who is there, what are they doing and what has been happening to the cat in the last little while) will all help you to identify how your cat might respond to specific situations.

If you understand how your cat might respond to a specific situation, it will help you predict the likelihood of nuisance behaviours. If your cat is repeating nuisance behaviours, keep notes on when these happen and under what circumstances. If you can see a pattern, you may be able to predict when these behaviours are more likely to occur and you may then be able to assess or manage a situation better. For example if your cat scratches the furniture and carpet in your bedroom just as you are going to bed every night you could try providing a scratching post or pad, in your bedroom to avoid damage to furniture and carpets.

Activity

Sally has a four-year-old, spayed domestic short-hair called Minnie. Minnie has access to the house and the backyard and uses a cat flap in the back door to get between them. Minnie does not generally use a litter tray, but has done so in the past when Sally has been on holidays. Minnie has also spent short periods of time confined to the house when Sally has been away and has coped very well. Sally’s backyard has cat-proof fencing to stop Minnie from getting out of the property.

Minnie is very uncomfortable around dogs. She tenses when they are around, arches her back, hisses and meows. Eventually Minnie runs away and hides and won’t come out for several hours. Once she stayed under the car for a whole day and refused to eat or drink. When Minnie was a kitten she was chased and bitten by a small Jack Russell puppy that had come to visit Sally in her house.

#### Scenario – predicting Minnie’s behaviour

Sally has invited a close friend to stay with her for a week. Sally’s friend, Jemma, owns a small miniature fox terrier. Her mini fox terrier is three years old and quite gentle, but she does have a habit of chasing cats. Jemma has asked if she can bring her dog to stay as well as she doesn’t want to put her in a kennel. Jemma’s dog is used to having free access to both the house and the yard and would not cope particularly well if just confined to the backyard.

Given Minnie’s dislike of dogs, what would you advise Sally? Should she allow Jemma to bring her dog, and if ‘yes’ under what conditions? Should she say ‘no’ to the dog?

Let’s assume Sally says ‘yes’ to Jemma’s dog, what steps could Sally take to make sure Minnie does not suffer from too much stress during the visit? Think about the types of environmental enrichment reviewed in the previous section.

While this is a very simplistic scenario, it does illustrate how we can use the three factors to predict how our cat may behave in a situation.

## 3.2 Cat postures and vocalisations – understanding your cat

Cats will sometimes use postures and other behaviours, such as vocalisation, hair standing etc to indicate how they feel in a certain situation. The following illustrations show different cat postures and how these postures correspond to how the cat is feeling.

#### Happy

• body is generally relaxed

• tail carried high with the tip hanging over the back or relaxed and low

• ears erect

• eyes are wide open or if completely relaxed may appear half closed

• whiskers in neutral position.

#### Frightened / timid

• body low to the ground making itself look small

• generally the ears are laid flat on the head

• whiskers are laid back or flattened against the face

• tail may be under the body.

#### Defensive

• tail is erect and fluffed up

• back arched and ears flat to head

• whiskers back and pupils dilated

• hissing.

#### Aggressive / ready to pounce

• tail low and swishing

• straight back with head in line with the body

• ears forward

• whiskers bristling forward

• hissing with mouth open and teeth bared

• claws out.

Cats will often support their posture/behaviour with vocalisations to emphasise how they are feeling. Cats generally have three major types of vocalisation: purring, meowing and hissing. Each vocalisation can vary in duration and intensity depending on how the cat is feeling at any given time. In addition, cats use vocalisations as a complex form of communication with each other and the outside world. A very simplistic outline of vocalisations is provided below.

### The purr

Purring is a sound familiar to all cat owners, and is the most common form of vocalisation in cats. The sound comes from the build up of pressure, as a result of the opening and closing of the glottis, that causes a sudden separation of vocal cords. Many people think that purring is a sign of contentment, however, cats will purr in a variety of situations, including those in which they are angry, scared, hungry, and content. If you listen carefully to your cat you will also note that the rate and volume of the purr will change with circumstances. For example, when hungry your cat’s purr made be very loud and fast, when he is sleeping or settling to sleep it may be quiet and slow. Currently, scientific research not been able to determine the ‘meaning’ of purring. All we know is that purring is a form of vocalisation used by cats to convey mood.

Activity

List as many situations as you can think of where you have noticed your cat purring. If you are undertaking this course online, you may wish to stop at this point and spend some time observing your cat in different situations to determine the when your cat purrs, and note the speed and volume of the purring. Note any other characteristics that alter your cat’s purr in different situations.

### Meow

The meow is the second most common form of vocalisation in cats; however, it is rarely used as a form of communication between cats but appears to be mostly used for communication between cats and humans. In particular, kittens learn at a young age that meowing generally results in attention from their owners or other humans. Kittens also use a meow to attract the attention of their mother (the most frequent form of cat to cat meow communication), particularly as a distress call.

Some animal behaviourists think that the pitch or tone of meows differs for the intended purpose of the meow. For example, the meow used to signal hunger is different from the meow used to indicate fear or distress and different again from the meow used during play.

### Hissing and other vocalisations

Hissing is a threat vocalisation. It is used when the cat is startled. Cast tend to make a higher pitched hiss or shriek when in pain, fearful or being aggressive.

Snarling is another form of vocalisation that is limited to aggressive interactions, particularly between two toms fighting over territory or a female.

Cats also tend to growl. Growling is a low-pitched sound that warns of danger.

## 3.3 Nuisance behaviours

### Scratching furniture

Cat scratching is normal! Although it is often seen by owners as a nuisance behaviour, particularly if your cat has created tears on your furniture or carpets, scratching has many functions for a cat. The first, and most commonly known, function is to sharpen claws. But scratching is also important for stretching out back and shoulder muscles and is frequently used by cats for stress or emotion release. Scratching is very important to the physical and emotional well-being of cats.

Interestingly, scratching is also a form of territorial marking. Scratching an object or area provides a visual marker to other cats that they have entered into someone else’s territory.

Activity

Wander around your home and make note of all the places where your cat frequently scratches. What do you notice about those locations? Can you pick up a pattern to their location; for example, are they near doors, or particular areas of furniture?

If you were to try and redirect your cat’s scratching from your furniture or carpets, where would you place your scratching posts?

#### Re-directing scratching behaviour

Given the emotional and physical importance of scratching, you should think carefully about how you redirect the behaviour. A common method is to provide scratching posts, but there is a trick to this. Scratching posts must:

• have an appealing texture – carpet is not rough enough, or is too soft

• be stable and tall enough – posts must allow cats to stretch up to their full height on their back legs. They also need to have a very large base so that they are stable enough to support the cat’s weight when they are scratching it

• be well located – think about the areas your cat normally likes to scratch and place your post accordingly. You may need to have a few goes at it to get the perfect location, but do not place it out of the way as your cat will just go back to your furniture

• sufficient for all your cats – you need one for everyone so your cats do not have to share!!

Some cats prefer horizontal scratching. For these cats you can obtain corrugated cardboard scratching pads from pet supply stores.

### Marking territory (spraying)

Many animals, not just cats, use urine to mark their territory. Territory marking allows cats to understand the boundaries of one another’s territories. The smell of cat urine can be unpleasant and spraying can be irritating, but spraying/marking territory is a normal behaviour for cats, giving them security.

Generally spraying occurs vertically (up against a wall or tree) as opposed to horizontally. If spraying is occurring outside it may be a nuisance to neighbours. Both male and female cats can and will spray.

Indoor cats are less likely to feel the need to mark their territory as long as they do not have other cats entering the house. Occasionally, however, stressed or anxious cats may begin to spray inside your home. One of the common causes of this behaviour is stress. Stress can be caused by children, dogs, guests, the introduction of a new cat (particularly an adult cat) and new scents or sounds within the home.

Another cause for urinating in the home is a urinary tract infection. If your cat starts spraying within the home, take him or her to see your veterinarian for a full health check to rule out some sort of infection. If your cat is not desexed, you may wish to discuss this option with your vet as desexing can reduce or eliminate marking in most cats. Desexing before sexual maturity is an excellent method of preventing the development of marking behaviour.

If your cat tends to spray in and around its litter tray, you could try an enclosed litter tray or placing another litter tray vertically against the wall next to their litter box to catch the spray.

Proper litter tray care can prevent cats from urinating or defecating outside the tray. Cats may not use a tray if it isn’t cleaned often enough (it should be scooped 1-2 times daily), if the tray is too small (it should be at least 1.5 times the length of the cat’s body) or if the litter material is not adequate (most cats prefer a fine grained unscented litter such as clumping litter). The ideal number of litter trays is one per cat, plus one. They should be placed in different locations that offer privacy and allow at least two ways for cats to enter and exit the tray.

Use enzymatic cleaners to clean up any areas that have been sprayed with urine (or faeces) as this will stop your cat being attracted to the spot. In addition, you can block your cat’s access to areas where they have begun spraying. Alternatively, you can, after thorough cleaning, place your cat’s food in those areas or play or interact with them in the area and that should help to reduce the association between the area and spraying.

Finally, if you believe your cat’s spraying is a stress response, then reducing or removing the stressor is a key to reducing or eliminating marking behaviour. Feliway, a synthetic feline facial pheromone, can be useful for various types of stressors; however, if you believe your cat may be stressed then seek help from your veterinarian.

#### Spraying outside the home

If your cat is spraying outside your home and creating a nuisance for your neighbours, you may need to consider cat proof fencing or a cat run to stop your cat leaving your property. It is important to remember it is your responsibility (and the law) to ensure your cat does not cause a nuisance. If your cat is spraying along fence lines or on neighbouring properties, you will need to take action to prevent your cat from gaining access to the area.

Owners whose cats enter and spray on neighbouring properties can be fined and risk having their cat impounded by the local council under Section 23 of the *Domestic Animals Act* 1994. Section 25 of the *Domestic Animals Act* 1994 also requires cats to be confined to their owner’s premises, and failure to do so can result in fines and the cat being seized by council.

### Aggression

Cats displaying aggressive behaviour can injure other animals and people.

Aggression towards humans can be caused by:

• lack of socialisation. For instance, kittens that are not handled until 14 weeks of age grow up more fearful and aggressive toward people. This can be prevented by introducing cats to a variety of people, if possible before they are seven weeks old

• play aggression. Kittens often play roughly, but if they are not taught to moderate their behaviour this can lead to aggression as adults. You should play with your kitten using interactive toys (e.g. a fishing pole type toy with feathers at the end), rather than letting the kitten play directly with your hands or fingers

• aggression associated with being patted. Some cats become less tolerant of being patted as they get older, and may bite if patted for more than a few seconds. Such aggression can be avoided if you learn to give your cat attention in other ways, and pat your cat for very short periods only

• pain-associated aggression. A cat may attack someone that causes them pain. For instance, being brushed may cause pain if the cat has developed arthritis. If your cat suddenly becomes aggressive, take him or her to the vet for a check up

• predatory behaviour. Cats have a strong drive to hunt prey, even if they are not hungry. The best way to prevent predatory behaviour is to raise kittens with potential prey animals eg pet birds. Even non aggressive cats should always be supervised when around prey animals. To prevent predation on wildlife, keep cats confined to the house or an enclosure.

Aggression towards other cats in the house can also be a problem. Aggression can arise over competition for food, litter boxes, resting places, and attention. Inter-cat aggression is particularly common when a new cat enters the household, or when a resident cat comes back after an absence (such as a stay at the vet). The victim will usually become withdrawn, and both cats may display problem behaviours such as spraying. The best way to prevent this is to ensure multiple resources are available (eg separate litter trays, bowls, resting places for each cat), and to ensure gradual introductions are made if adopting another cat. You can read more about this here: http://www.aspca.org/pet-care/virtual-pet-behaviorist/cat-behavior/introducing-your-cat-new-cat. You can also speak to your vet about pheromone products to help reduce aggression.

### Caterwauling

Caterwauling or loud/persistent meowing can be a significant nuisance behaviour. In essence caterwauling is your cat trying to talk to you – to tell you something important. Caterwauling can be caused by:

• illness – caterwauling can be a sign that your cat is suffering or in pain. Many physical conditions can cause your cat to feel unwell or in pain. At the onset of persistent caterwauling take your cat to your veterinarian to get a general health check. If there is nothing physically wrong with your cat you need to begin looking for other triggers

• stress – caterwauling can be a result of stress or frustration. When your cat begins vocalising, take note of where and under what circumstances it occurs. For example, an indoor cat may begin to caterwaul at a particular window in the house. It may be that they can see an intruder or a bird or other stimuli that is causing them stress or frustration. If this is the case, try blocking access to the window

• night time – if your cat tends to caterwaul outside at night, try locking them inside to determine whether the behaviour continues. If you are locking your cat inside for the first time at night you will need to give them a litter tray and you may wish to confine them to a smaller area of the house to encourage them to sleep

• learned behaviour – caterwauling can also be a learned behaviour. This means that at some point your cat has learned that if it vocalises you will behave in a way it finds positive, such as providing food or attention. This type of caterwauling is a learned behaviour. You will need to ignore the behaviour when it occurs, offering rewards (such as patting or food) when the cat is not vocalising. If the behaviour is learned it can take some time and patience to teach the cat that vocalisation will no longer be rewarded.

Section 32 of the Domestic Animals Act 1994 requires owners to prevent, address and minimise noise (eg caterwauling, hissing and fighting) and any other behaviour of their cat that may be deemed by a neighbour as a nuisance. Owners found to be in breach of section 32 can be ordered by a court to take action to correct the behaviour of their cat or face a penalty.

## Section 3 Summary

Failing to address and reduce nuisance behaviours in cats, specifically those that affect neighbours, may result in a fine and/or the seizure and impoundment of your cat.

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| Cats must not be  at large | Sections 23 and 25 of the Domestic Animals Act (1994)  Cats must be securely confined to your property. |
| Nuisance behaviours  (Caterwauling) | Section 32 of the Domestic Animals Act (1994)  Owners must not allow their cat’s behaviour to become a nuisance for their neighbours. In particular caterwauling must be addressed by owners and steps taken to stop the behaviour. |
| Scratching | Scratching is a normal behaviour for cats. Owners can take steps to reduce this behaviour by providing appropriate scratching posts or pads. |
| Spraying | Spraying is also a normal behaviour of cats. Spraying is generally used to mark territory. Cats spraying on or near neighbouring properties may be viewed as a nuisance. Owners must take action to prevent spraying being a nuisance as per Section 32 of the Domestic Animals Act. |

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