



Handle with care

Cats

Species: Domestic cat
Scientific names: *Felis catus*

Description

There are hundreds of types of pedigree domestic cats with many different colours and characteristics in terms of face, body shape and type of fur. The most commonly kept household cats are mongrels which – dependent on their parentage – also have many different characteristics and colours. All cats share common features – a flexible backbone, whiskers that act as sensory organs, sharp teeth designed to kill prey and tear meat from a carcass, a rasping tongue used for grooming and feeding, sensitive pointed ears and tails. Tails are used for balance, as a communications signal, as protection against flies and as protection against the cold when cats wrap their tails around themselves. Domestic cats normally range in weight from about 3.5–5.9 kg and their life span is about 12-16 years. However, some cats live for up to 20 years.

Life in the wild

Cats were first domesticated in Egypt about 4,000 years ago and domesticated in Europe during Roman times. Although cats kept as companion animals are often kept singly, in the wild, they would normally live in groups or colonies. Cats are carnivores and hunt their prey using their good eyesight, agile bodies, sharp claws and teeth. They lie in wait or stalk their victims and pounce bringing them down with their paws. Cats catch mice, rats, birds and sometimes fish and amphibians. The instinct to hunt cannot be erased from a domestic cat's nature.

Source of animals

RSPCA animal centres and reputable breeders are reliable sources for cats and kittens – your local veterinary surgeon may also be able to advise. It is important, wherever possible, to always see a kitten with its mother as this gives owners a good picture of how well the kitten has been cared for, its temperament, eventual size and sociability.

Pet shops and dealers are not a good source of kittens – very often different litters of kittens may be mixed and this increases the risk of disease spreading. Kittens should stay with their mother until they are at least 8 weeks old and preferably until 10-12 weeks old by which time their coordination is more fully developed.

Prior knowledge and preparation

Before keeping cats or kittens it is crucial that owners find out all they can. Only then can they decide if a cat will be the right pet for them and if they can provide the specialist care, time, financial means and long-term commitment to look after it properly. Before bringing a cat or kitten home, owners should make sure they have the right accommodation, food and necessary accessories in place. They should also take the time to speak with other experienced cat keepers and a vet for advice before making a final decision about cat ownership.

Cats are not suitable for anyone living near a busy road. They also like companionship and need to be with other cats or people for at least part of the day. Although they have a reputation for being clean, cats can also be destructive and may damage carpets and furniture with their claws. They are not good pets for anyone who likes to attract birds to their gardens.

Vet care/costs/holiday cover

Cats need regular veterinary check ups and yearly vaccinations to protect them from life threatening diseases like feline infectious enteritis, feline influenza and feline leukaemia. They also need regular treatment for fleas and worms. Hundreds of thousands of unwanted kittens are born every year and the RSPCA believes that cats should be neutered at an early age.

Unneutered females come into season about three or four times a year and have up to six kittens in each litter. Unneutered males have a tendency to spray, wander and get into fights, and add to the unwanted kitten problem. Neutering should be seen as an important part of a prospective owner's pet care budget.

Health issues to find out about:

- *Feline infectious enteritis*
- *Feline leukaemia*
- *Feline influenza*
- *Fleas*
- *Worms*

Microchipping – a way of permanently identifying an animal – is also recommended as a good way of re-uniting lost pets and owners. A veterinary surgeon can advise on costs of consultations and provide information regarding care and treatment. Insurance to cope with unforeseen veterinary care and treatment is also recommended.

Holiday cover may be expensive and difficult to arrange, but cats need to be looked after every day while the owner is away. There are various boarding facilities which look after cats, but you may have a reliable friend or neighbour who understands your cat's needs and is prepared to come and look after it.

Unhealthy/healthy animal signs

Healthy cats and kittens will have bright clear eyes with no sign of discharge and the third eyelid showing. Their coats will be clean and glossy without bald patches and their skin should be free of lumps. Brown specks in their fur can be a sign of fleas. An overly rounded stomach can be a sign of worms. Healthy cats and kittens should breathe easily and there should be no fluid around their noses and mouths. Ears should also be clean and pricked up to catch sounds. They should walk easily without limping and there should be no evidence of diarrhoea around their tails.

Why are cats vulnerable as pets?

Cats are dependent upon their owners for food and care and need proper care and attention for every day of their lives. Without regular vaccinations they can suffer and die from disease. They will develop health problems if they are not treated for fleas and worms regularly. If cats are not properly cared for when their owners are away their health will suffer, they may run away and get lost or injured. Cats not kept in at night are also at risk of being run over. If they do not have company they can become lonely and destructive. Some owners get kittens on impulse and then find they cannot cope with an adult cat that no longer looks so appealing, sheds its fur, scratches the furniture and brings in its prey.

Handling/transporting the animal home

Cats should always be picked up carefully with one hand beneath the chest and the other around the hind legs with the rear end well supported. They should never be picked up by the scruff of the neck. They should be transported in carrying case – plastic-covered wire mesh carriers are secure and easily cleaned. Cats also prefer cages they can see out of as it stops them feeling too constrained. Cats and kittens should never be let loose in a car.

For long journeys a carrier or cage big enough to hold a litter tray and food are a good ideal. Cats and kittens should never be left in a parked car on warm days – even with the car window open – as they could literally roast to death.

Needs: grouping, diet, accommodation and environment

Cats like companionship and need either someone to be home with them for part of the day or the company of another cat. They need a balanced diet and a constant supply of fresh water. Adult cats are usually fed two meals a day, but kittens need to be fed more frequently and smaller quantities dependent on their age. A vet will provide advice. Cats should not be given food containing bones as these may splinter and stick in their throats. Cats may also like milk, but they don't actually need it as a part of their diet – it can also give them diarrhoea.

When bringing a cat or a kitten home for the first time it will need to put in a quiet, escape-proof room with its bed, food, water and litter tray. Give it some time to get used to this room and your presence. Children must be taught to handle the pet correctly and to treat it with respect at all times. Once the cat or kitten has become used to this room it can then be introduced to other rooms in the house and then finally the garden. If you keep other pets it will take time for the animals to get used to one another and they should be introduced slowly and carefully.

THIS IS BASIC INFORMATION ONLY.

If you still believe that you could care for this animal then you must obtain further specialist information prior to taking on the responsibility.