

# Cats and people

[cats.org.uk](http://cats.org.uk)



**If you already share your life with a cat, you're probably aware that you get far more than just companionship and affection in return. But did you know that owning a cat has proven health and social benefits?**

Cat owners are less likely to suffer from stress and are known to relax more and have greater life satisfaction. Cats keep their owners feeling young and active. Learning how to care for a cat can do wonders for a child's self-esteem, social skills and sense of responsibility to others. For many owners, their cat is an integral member of the family, inspiring feelings of peace, joy and happiness and providing fun and laughter. The emotional bond between human and pet can be as rewarding as many human relationships. They offer similar psychological benefits. Cats can make a house a home.

# Domestication

Domestication of cats has been shown to date back as far as 7,500 BC. Cats have always proved helpful in protecting food stores from rats. As cats became more esteemed, even idolised as gods, humans looked after them and, in some cases, controlled their breeding. This has resulted in the domestic cat species found throughout the world today.

These days, in spite of 'domestication', all pet cats need to have positive and friendly experiences with humans from a young age. This allows them to feel safe around people. Between the ages of two to seven weeks of age, the brains of kittens are developing. It is a key time in their life known as the 'socialisation period' when they are able to be socialised with people. If they are handled and gently cared for by a variety of people during this crucial time, they will usually grow up to be friendly pets. Without this early learning experience, kittens will remain fearful of people throughout their life.

Feral cats are usually the offspring of abandoned cats, or those already living wild. Because they live in the wild these cats don't come into contact with humans as kittens and so are always very fearful of us. They make great mousers so are often found living as farm cats, but they also live in towns and cities.

Feral cats can survive in the wild with little or no human intervention. Obviously, they are still able to breed with our pet cats, which is one of the reasons why neutering is so important. For more information see [cats.org.uk/feral-cat](https://cats.org.uk/feral-cat)

## **Cats in modern society**

Cats continue to benefit people in a wide range of ways. They can provide:

- companionship in family homes
- eco-friendly vermin control on farms and stables
- comfort for residents in care homes

Living with a cat companion brings many benefits and it also places legal responsibilities on the owner. Much of the law in relation to animals has now been consolidated into the Animal Welfare Act 2006 England and Wales. Scotland and Northern Ireland have equivalent legislation, the Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006 and the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011. The Act applies to both pet and feral cats. It places a duty of care on owners and those responsible for looking after cats to ensure that their welfare needs are met. These emphasise the need:

- for a suitable place to live
- for a suitable diet

- to exhibit normal behaviour patterns
- to be housed with, or apart from, other animals depending on their particular needs
- to be protected from pain, suffering, injury and disease

Sadly, cats sometimes become the innocent victims of people, through ignorance or neglect, or due to intentional cruelty or over breeding. It is important to understand what our cats need to ensure their physical and emotional welfare.

Pets can sometimes become targets in households affected by domestic abuse. At Cats Protection, we offer a free and confidential fostering service for people experiencing domestic abuse so they can rest assured their cat will be taken care of until they can be safely reunited. For more information see [cats.org.uk/Lifeline](https://cats.org.uk/Lifeline)

## Neutering

It is very important to neuter your cat.

Cats Protection champions neutering as the only effective way to reduce the number of unwanted cats in the UK. Cats are very effective breeders and can have several litters of kittens a year. It is recommended that cats are neutered at around four months old or earlier, as this is when they can start having kittens.

There are already thousands of unwanted cats and kittens and not enough homes for them. A large cat population also has a negative impact on our current pets. Overpopulation contributes to:

- more cats being unable to find homes
- more cats coming into rescue shelters
- the numbers of stray and feral cats increasing

When there are too many cats, they must live more closely with other cats than they would like. This can:

- increase infections
- increase stress-related disease
- cause conflict with other cats
- compromise their health and wellness

Neutering not only helps with population control but it also brings many benefits to the individual cat, including:

- a reduction or prevention of certain cancers
- behavioural benefits. Neutered cats are less likely to roam, fight or spray

For more information on the benefits of neutering see [cats.org.uk/neutering](https://cats.org.uk/neutering)

# Cats and children

Growing up with a pet can be an extremely rewarding experience for any child. Many children regard their cat as their best friend. It is through this relationship that important lessons are learned in trust and empathy, care and love, helping children become responsible and caring adults. Children often prefer to share their feelings with a pet rather than another person.

There are many physical benefits for children too. Pet ownership can provide a source of comfort during recovery and rehabilitation. A number of studies in the UK and USA report that exposure to pets during infancy may significantly reduce the risk for asthma and allergies in later childhood. Primary school children from pet-owning households are also shown to be off sick from school less frequently.

## **Learning by experience**

From their earliest days, children can be taught to be gentle and kind with cats. Children learn best by example. If you treat your cat gently with love and respect, it's more likely your children will grow up to do the same.

As soon as your children can understand, explain:

- cats like to be left alone when sleeping, eating or using the litter tray

- they can become frightened when people shout, make sudden movements or try to grab them

Children can be taught how to interpret the signs of an unhappy cat and how to avoid doing things that upset them. Signs of an unhappy cat:

- walking away
- a change of ear position
- swishing tail
- puffed-up fur

Your children will love helping to take care of your cat too, so involve them in the feeding, grooming and playing routines and you'll have happy children and a happy cat!

Help your cat feel safe

- Provide them with a high windowsill, cupboard top or add some cat shelves. This will mean they can still be involved in family life but stay out of the hectic activity going on below
- Keep food or litter trays out of the reach of toddlers. Ensure they are still located in a place suitable for the cat, to avoid any stress or toileting accidents

For more information see [cats.org.uk/behaviour](https://cats.org.uk/behaviour)

Children can learn more about cats at [cats.org.uk/education](https://cats.org.uk/education)



## Cats and babies

There are many benefits to a child of growing up with a pet, but a baby does bring a whole change of routine and lifestyle for your cat. The character of your cat will affect how they react to this new experience. Even though you have a new baby and all the sleepless nights to contend with, you still have a responsibility to keep your cat healthy and happy. Your cat will have been used to having your attention before the baby arrived and the sudden change in priorities can be unsettling for them.

Following the tips outlined in this leaflet can help ensure everyone in the household is happy.

### **A growing family**

It's always best to be prepared, so once you know a baby is on the way:

- make sure your cat is in good health by taking them for a check-up at your vet
- if your cat is not neutered, get this done without delay
- introduce your cat to any baby items you buy, such as nursery furniture or prams. Let your cat investigate. You may then want to shut these items away because some will be very tempting places for your cat to sleep

- begin getting your cat used to the sounds of the baby. Play a recording of baby sounds on a very low volume to begin with and gradually increase the noise. Crying can be worrying for a cat that hasn't heard it before. A sound file of a baby crying can be found at [cats.org.uk/kitten-socialisation](https://cats.org.uk/kitten-socialisation)
- consult your doctor or health visitor about any other steps that you need to take

### **A safe pregnancy**

Sadly, some pregnant people consider giving up their cats over fears of toxoplasmosis. This is a microorganism that can affect the foetus if a pregnant person is infected.

However, a major study in the British Medical Journal concluded that contact with cats was not a risk factor for toxoplasma infection. Although cats are a link in the transmission of toxoplasmosis, the main sources of infection to people are:

- through contact with contaminated soil from gardening without gloves
- eating unwashed fruit or vegetables
- eating undercooked meat

It is best to wear gloves and an apron when dealing with your cat's litter tray. Better still, it's the perfect excuse to get someone else to do it!

If you are worried about owning a cat while pregnant, seek advice from your doctor and see [cats.org.uk/cats-and-toxoplasmosis](https://cats.org.uk/cats-and-toxoplasmosis)

## **New routines**

Cats are creatures of habit and thrive on routine. Introducing a new routine gradually for your cat before the baby arrives will help ease the situation when the big day comes.

Begin by:

- getting your cat used to having restricted access to where the baby will sleep. This is particularly important if your cat has previously had access to the whole house
- if you need to move your cat's feeding or toileting place, do it gradually so it will not upset your cat's routine too much

## **Once baby arrives**

It is never too early for children to learn to respect, love and understand animals and it's important they feel confident around them. It's the basis of true companionship. Your baby will be around three months old before they first notice that there is something not human in the house. Your cat will have noticed the baby from day one and may be curious about the new arrival.

Don't panic if your cat sniffs the baby's feet or hangs around the pram like a guard-cat. Not all cats want to be near babies, many will just ignore the new infant and keep a wide berth.

**Do:**

- use a safe cot or pram net to keep your cat at bay. Pull it taut to deter your cat from using it as a bed
- keep the nursery inaccessible to your cat while the baby is asleep. Make sure any open windows are cat proof so that your cat cannot enter the nursery from the outside
- keep all of the baby's feeding utensils out of your cat's reach
- keep the baby and cat food separately, you don't want to get them mixed up in a sleep-deprived moment!
- try and set aside a part of the day to make a fuss of your cat. It's important that their normal routines are maintained, it will also give you a chance to grab a quiet moment and relax
- remember your cat should be regularly treated for fleas and worms and their litter tray kept clean

### **Don't:**

- leave a baby and a cat together unsupervised, even if you trust your cat 100%
- leave any children's sandboxes uncovered in case a cat is tempted to use it as a litter tray

If you have concerns about your cat's behaviour once the baby has arrived, please seek advice from a qualified cat behaviourist (such as a member of the Animal Behaviour and Training Council). They may be able to pinpoint a trigger factor and help you to get back to the harmony you previously enjoyed.

## **Cats and the elderly**

Cats can be an enormous source of comfort for older people, providing some structure for each day, and a sense of purpose. Cat companions provide friendship, affection and social support. Stroking a cat has been shown to reduce blood pressure. Older people with a pet have also been found to be more attentive to their own care needs and have an improved sense of their own wellbeing. The benefits cats can bring the elderly are frequently recognised by day centres and residential care homes. Some now allow occupants to bring in their own cat or have a resident cat.

## Cats and your health

There is increasing evidence that shows cats can be beneficial to physical and mental health. Many cat owners get comfort and a renewed sense of wellbeing by stroking and grooming their cat. Such activities can improve people's mood. They reduce levels of stress hormones and increase levels of a variety of feel-good hormones, as well as bringing enjoyment for the cat. Many people can benefit from interaction with cats, especially those affected by mental or physical health issues. Cats can be therapeutic for those with depression, dementia or autism. Stroking a cat companion can help reduce high blood pressure and improve the recovery of trauma victims. Caring for pets can also be helpful as part of the rehabilitation of offenders.

It is important to remember that not all cats will enjoy such close contact with their owners. You should not get a cat with the expectation that they will enjoy intensive handling or stroking. Even for cats who are less interactive, sharing a home with them, caring for them and engaging in small interactions with them on their terms, is a powerful way to boost wellbeing.

## Bereavement

The bond owners share with their cat is similar to that found in human relationships. People often consider their cats members of the family. The sadness felt following the death of a cat as well as the loss of companionship, emotional support and motivation can leave bereaved cat owners feeling isolated and alone. All individuals react differently and bereavement support is available. Our grief support service, Paws to Listen, has trained volunteers to support cat owners with their loss. For more information about this service and advice on coping with bereavement, see [cats.org.uk/grief-support](https://cats.org.uk/grief-support)

## Working with cats

There are many opportunities to spend more time with cats, beyond enjoying them as pets in your home. Opportunities can be found at:

- vet practices
- pet-sitters
- animal welfare charities
- boarding catteries

Qualifications may be required for some of these roles. For more opportunities for volunteering or working with Cats Protection, see [cats.org.uk/cats-protection-careers](https://cats.org.uk/cats-protection-careers)

## **Keeping safe**

As with all things in life, interaction with animals is not absolutely risk-free. It is important to balance the positive influence cats can have in people's lives with any potential risks. Being fully informed can help cat owners minimise the risks.

### **Bites and scratches**

Cats can bite or scratch on occasion due to a variety of health or behavioural reasons. It is also a normal defence reaction if they are feeling threatened or are in pain.

If you are scratched or bitten, it is important to act quickly and seek medical advice.

All animals carry bacteria in their mouths and on their skin and claws. Bites and scratches can lead to infection with those microorganisms. Early medical treatment is usually required to prevent infection, particularly in those people with weakened immune systems.

Taking some time to understand a cat's behaviour and motivations and providing appropriate



essential items for them, all go a long way to help avoiding cat aggression.

For more information see [cats.org.uk/behaviour](https://cats.org.uk/behaviour)  
Seek appropriate behavioural advice early on if you have concerns about your cat.

## **Shared infections**

You will be well aware of the many infections that are shared between people, such as colds and flu. Cats can also suffer with infections which can be passed to other cats. There are also some infections which can pass between animals and people, known as zoonotic diseases.

Some zoonotic diseases can pass from cat to person as well as from person to cat. The risk of catching a zoonotic disease from a cat is very small. Using common sense together with a good hygiene routine will significantly reduce the risk, for example:

- providing appropriate toileting areas and careful hygiene with litter trays
- feed a good quality, complete diet designed for cats
- routinely treat your cats for fleas, roundworms and tapeworms
- seek veterinary advice if your cat is unwell

- avoid situations which could lead to bites and scratches and, if they occur, seek medical advice

Some examples of zoonotic diseases in cats include ringworm and salmonella. If your cat is diagnosed with a zoonotic disease then your vet will alert you to the risks and advise you on how to care for them and prevent the spread to humans.

Infections are more commonly shared between people, than between people and cats. However, it is recommended that immuno-compromised people, such as organ transplant recipients, those having chemotherapy for cancer, and AIDS patients, seek medical advice, particularly if considering close contact with an immuno-compromised cat, such as those infected with feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV) or other chronic diseases.

## **Cats and allergies**

Things that cause allergic reactions are called triggers or allergens. Almost anything can be an allergen including pollen, dust mites or tobacco smoke.

When humans are allergic to cats, they are normally reacting to a protein which cats produce in their saliva, called Fel d1.

This attaches itself to a cat's fur when they groom and spreads from there around the house. Every cat produces this protein.

The severity of an allergic reaction varies dramatically from person to person. Symptoms include:

- sneezing and a runny or blocked nose
- itchy and watery eyes
- coughing and wheezing
- itchy skin

Asthma and eczema sufferers may find that their symptoms are made worse by the presence of an allergen.

### **Am I allergic to cats?**

It is fairly obvious that some people are allergic to cats because they have an almost immediate reaction to a cat entering a room. In other cases it may not be so easy to tell, particularly if someone is allergic to more than one trigger in their environment.

If you think you or a family member might be allergic to your cat, it is a good idea to have a trial separation to determine if the cat is the cause of the reaction.

Cats are often singled out because they are easily identifiable.

It is important to remember that they are just one possible cause and that dust mites are by far the most common trigger for household allergies.

If you don't own a cat but are thinking of getting one, a visit to someone who has a cat or to a cat centre may indicate whether you are allergic or not, although some people may react to some cats and not others.

### **Easing the symptoms**

If you suspect that you are allergic to cats, speak with your doctor. It may be helpful to discuss the following actions that can significantly ease your allergy symptoms:

- using antihistamine tablets or a nasal spray.  
Please consult your doctor first
- having hardwood floors instead of carpets and using blinds instead of curtains
- avoiding woollen clothing
- designating some areas as cat-free zones, particularly bedrooms
- opening the windows for at least one hour every day and move the litter tray and cat bed away from air vents

- regularly cleaning rooms where the cat sleeps. Vacuumed rooms should be allowed to settle as vacuuming stirs up allergens. Air filters may also help
- fitting plastic covers over cushions and mattresses
- grooming your cat outdoors on a daily basis and wiping them with a damp cloth
- washing your cat's bed regularly
- try feeding your cat allergen-reducing cat food

Allergy UK provide further advice, visit their website [allergyuk.org](http://allergyuk.org) or phone their helpline 01322 619 898.

### **Breeds of cat**

All breeds of cat produce allergens. Some breeds, or even certain cats, are better for allergy sufferers than others. Trial and error is the only way to tell if this is the case for you. Long-haired cats may cause more reactions, maybe because there is more fur for the allergens to stick to.

### **Can I get a cat if I am allergic?**

If you still want a cat even though you have a reaction to them, then your symptoms are probably mild to moderate and therefore manageable via the steps above. Some people find that repeated exposure to the same cat gets rid of their allergic reaction altogether.

## **Should I keep my cat?**

The answer to this varies greatly from person to person. It's important to make sure that it is the cat causing the allergic reaction. The decision about whether to get or keep a cat depends entirely on you and the severity of your reaction. In some cases the symptom-easing steps on the previous page may provide enough relief for you to live happily with a cat. For others it is advisable to avoid cats and seek advice from your doctor.

For more information see

[\*\*cats.org.uk/cats-and-allergies\*\*](https://cats.org.uk/cats-and-allergies)

## **Make your house a home**

Cats are popular pets and can be great stress-relievers for families and people living alone or house sharing. They can provide companionship, emotional support and motivation for young and old, as well as opportunities for play.

It is very rewarding to provide for your cat's needs, learn more about their behaviour and ensure you have a mutually beneficial relationship. Cats Protection has great advice about all aspects of cat ownership. For more information see

[\*\*cats.org.uk/help-and-advice\*\*](https://cats.org.uk/help-and-advice)

The following vet-approved guides are available to download from **[cats.org.uk/information-leaflets](https://cats.org.uk/information-leaflets)**

## **Essential guides**

**Behaviour: Understanding your cat's behaviour** W84009

**Behaviour: Managing your cat's behaviour** W84010

**Bringing your cat home** W84002

**Caring for your cat** W84001

**Caring for your kitten** W84015

**Cats and people** W84014

**Cats living together** W84011

**Elderly cats** W84016

**End-of-life, grief and loss**  
W84007

**Feeding and obesity** W84004

**Feral cats** W84017

**Indoor and outdoor cats** W84012

**Keeping your cat safe** W84005

**Microchipping** W84008

**Moving home** W84003

**Neutering** W84006

**Pregnant cats, birth and care of young kittens** W84018

## **Veterinary guides**

**Arthritis** W83201

**Cat flu** W83216

**Digestive disorders: vomiting and diarrhoea** W83218

**Feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV) and feline leukaemia virus (FeLV)** W83209

**Feline lower urinary tract disease (FLUTD)** W83202

**Fleas and other parasites**  
W83215

**Heart murmurs and heart disease** W83211

**Hyperthyroidism** W83212

**Infectious disease and vaccination** W83217

**Kidney or renal disease** W83206

**Skin disorders** W83204

**Teeth and oral health** W83214

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## **Please see [cats.org.uk](https://cats.org.uk) for more information on:**

**Cats and pregnant women: toxoplasmosis**

**Cats and the law**

**Cats with disabilities**

**Diabetes**

**Feline asthma**

**Feline coronavirus (FCoV) and feline infectious peritonitis (FIP)**

**Feline parvovirus (FPV)**

**Hypertension**

**You and your vet**

For more information about Cats Protection or to find out how you can support us, go to **[cats.org.uk](https://cats.org.uk)**



Cats Protection is a registered charity 203644 (England and Wales), SC037711 (Scotland) and is listed as a Section 167 institution by the Charity Commission of Northern Ireland.

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