

# Elderly cats

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



**Caring for an older cat in their twilight years can bring tremendous joy and many owners actively decide to adopt an older cat because of the endearing qualities they can offer. With their more adventurous days behind them, older cats tend to stay closer to home and appreciate gentle affection. Owners often comment on the special relationship they have with their older pet.**

Cats are generally considered senior from around 11 years of age. As your cat enters their golden years, they'll need some extra understanding for their changing needs. There are lots of simple steps you can take to ensure the later years of your cat's life are comfortable and happy.

## **What happens during aging?**

- Activity levels decrease and muscle tone reduces
- Appetite and/or thirst may change
- Vision and/or hearing may not be as good
- There may be changes to their toileting habits
- The immune system may weaken
- Light sleep may increase but deep sleep decreases
- Coat condition may deteriorate
- Age-associated disorders may develop, such as arthritis, diabetes, hyperthyroidism or kidney impairment
- Psychological and behavioural changes can occur, such as senility, increased dependence or excessive vocalisation

While aging is a normal process, older cats are more prone to various health conditions. Some of the signs above may be part of aging, and others could be signs of a health concern. Regular veterinary checks are particularly important for senior cats. Tracking any changes in their weight, behaviour and health can allow earlier diagnosis of disease. Some owners worry about seeing the vet with an older cat, in case the vet finds something serious.

There are treatment options available for many of the conditions of older cats. Monitoring their health, making small changes at home, and medical treatment can help keep senior cats healthy and comfortable for many years.

## **Preventative healthcare**

Elderly cats usually need to be taken to the vet for a health check more often than younger cats, particularly if they have any age-associated symptoms or diseases. Your vet can advise you on how frequently they need to be seen, and many surgeries now run special 'geriatric' clinics. A health check for an older cat will involve a full clinical examination, with special attention to their weight and any conditions which could result in pain such as arthritis or dental disease. The vet will also look for more hidden diseases such as high blood pressure. Before attending your appointment, it is worth making a note of any changes in your cat's behaviour such as changes to appetite or thirst, or activity or coat condition. Taking videos of your cat's movement (such as going up and down stairs) can be helpful to your vet when looking for signs of arthritis.

## **When to take your cat to the vet**

In addition to your regular pet health checks, your cat should be seen by a vet if there are changes to their:

- general health
- appetite and/or thirst
- pooing or peeing
- mobility/activity or if they seem to be in pain
- grooming
- behaviour, including vocalisation or changes in their interaction with you or other pets

For more information, see [\*\*cats.org.uk/finding-a-vet\*\*](https://cats.org.uk/finding-a-vet)

## **Feeding requirements**

- There are a variety of senior cat foods available to provide balanced nutrition specifically for older cats. Your vet can advise on the options available
- Ensure that fresh water is always on offer in several different locations throughout the home, including upstairs and downstairs. As water intake is even more important for older cats, you may want to offer a water fountain but ensure this is provided as an extra rather than a replacement, as some older cats won't accept something new

- Provide smaller meals little and often and offer food in more areas of the home so it is easily accessible
- Raising food bowls a few inches off the floor is more comfortable for some older cats. Ensure the rim of the bowl isn't too high
- Monitor your cat's appetite and thirst closely as this can decrease or increase, depending on a variety of health factors

If you notice any changes to your cat's eating or drinking, seek veterinary advice.

## **Grooming and claw health**

Older cats experiencing stiffness or pain may find it more difficult to wash and groom so may have a poorer coat condition. You may need to help by grooming your cat gently with a soft brush. Check their claws regularly as they may have difficulty scratching to keep them in shape. As cats get older, their claws can become thicker and longer. Be careful that their claws don't curl round into their paw pads. Your vet practice can advise you how to look after their coat and claws. Be aware that cats may be sensitive to being touched or groomed in certain areas if they have pain or discomfort.

Both a reduction in grooming and overlong claws may be signs of arthritis. Arthritis is common in older cats, and causes pain and discomfort, however signs can be subtle in cats. There are several options of treatment available

which can greatly improve your cat's quality of life. A change in grooming habits could also indicate dental disease. If you notice these changes, arrange an appointment with your vet.

## **Surgery considerations**

Considering surgery for an older cat may feel especially worrying. Although surgery on an elderly cat should be carefully considered, there are procedures for older cats, such as dental treatment, which can greatly improve their quality of life and overall health. Your vet will carry out a thorough assessment first and may suggest diagnostic tests to check your cat's internal health. They can advise you on any specific, individual concerns and discuss ways these will be managed during the procedure.

## **Other health issues to watch out for**

### **Senility and cognitive dysfunction**

This is a decline in higher brain functions, including memory and learning that often occurs with old age.



It is sometimes compared to dementia or Alzheimer's in people. Signs include:

- disorientation
- changes in social and environmental interaction
- changes in sleeping/waking patterns, such as sleeping more during the day and being restless at night
- vocalisation
- house soiling

These signs can also be present with other health conditions. If you have noticed any changes in your cat's behaviour, take them to your vet for a health check. Discuss the behaviour changes with your vet in as much detail as you can.

## **Constipation**

Cats can experience changes in bowel habits as they grow older, including constipation.

Signs of constipation include:

- decreased frequency of passing poo
- straining to pass poo
- pain and/or vocalising when trying to pass poo
- passing hard poo

Cats showing these signs need to see a vet urgently. In older cats, constipation may be related to pain or dehydration, which may require medical and dietary treatment. Alongside this, ensuring easy access to water and offering wet food can help with hydration.

Ensure litter trays don't have too high sides, but also deep fill them with comfortable litter. Providing more litter trays throughout the house can also encourage cats to toilet.

## **Deafness**

Deaf cats compensate for their lack of hearing by using their other senses, so deafness in cats often goes unnoticed. Signs of deafness may include:

- no response when called or to loud sounds
- being easily startled
- loud miaowing

Often in older cats, deafness is part of age-related changes in the inner ear. However, if you notice your cat scratching at their ears, any dizziness, or ear discharge such as pus, contact your vet as it may indicate ear disease.

For more information on how to help your deaf cat, see [cats.org.uk/deaf-cats](https://cats.org.uk/deaf-cats)

## Dental disease

Older cats need regular dental health checks to check for signs of dental disease, including tartar build up and red, inflamed gums. Your vet can advise on preventative care for your cat's teeth. For more information on diagnosis and treatment, see [cats.org.uk/dental-care](https://cats.org.uk/dental-care)

## Diabetes

This condition affects the control of blood sugar levels. It usually occurs in middle-aged and older cats, particularly those that are overweight. The signs of diabetes can be similar to a number of other diseases and include:

- increased thirst and/or appetite
- peeing more
- weight loss
- lethargy/weakness
- vomiting
- being more prone to other infections for example, skin or urinary tract infections

Diabetes is often treated more successfully if detected and treated in the early stages.

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

## Hyperthyroidism

The thyroid is made up of two glands located on either side of the windpipe at the base of your cat's neck. These glands produce thyroxine, a hormone which helps to regulate their metabolic rate; how your cat's body converts food into energy. In some cats, the thyroid becomes overactive and produces excessive amounts of thyroxine. This is called hyperthyroidism and it speeds up the metabolism.

Hyperthyroidism mainly affects cats over the age of 10 and can occur in either or both of the glands. The signs may vary from cat to cat, but most commonly include:

- increased appetite and/or thirst
- weight loss
- behavioural changes such as hyperactivity, restlessness and being more vocal
- vomiting
- diarrhoea
- poor coat condition

If you notice any of these symptoms, take your cat to see your vet for a health check. There are several treatment options for hyperthyroidism and the condition can usually be successfully controlled.

Untreated, it can damage other organs, cause cats to feel agitated and uncomfortable, and ultimately, shorten their life.

## **Kidney disease**

Disease of the kidneys is one of the most common problems affecting middle-aged and older cats. Although damage to the kidneys is often irreversible and tends to worsen over time, with the help of various treatments, affected cats can often maintain a good quality of life for months or years. Signs can vary between individuals but the most common signs are:

- increased thirst
- peeing more
- poor appetite
- weight loss
- poor coat condition
- vomiting
- lethargy
- depression
- bad breath

Many vets will try to diagnose kidney disease in its early stages, before clinical signs develop, by offering cat owners the option of pee and blood tests for their older cats at routine check-ups or vaccinations. By doing this, early dietary management or other treatment may significantly extend an affected cat's life expectancy and quality of life. For more information on diagnosis and treatment see [cats.org.uk/kidney-disease](https://cats.org.uk/kidney-disease)

## **Cancer**

Cats can develop different types of cancer which may either be benign (not usually harmful) or malignant (faster growing and usually harmful). Sometimes the cancer can spread to other areas of the body. Signs of cancer vary dependent on the organ affected, but can include:

- weight loss
- increased thirst
- peeing more
- depression
- poor coat condition
- vomiting and/or diarrhoea
- lumps or bumps on the body

For more information see [cats.org.uk/cancer-in-cats](https://cats.org.uk/cancer-in-cats)

## Arthritis

Arthritis causes inflammation of the joints and the condition is extremely common in cats. Unfortunately, it often goes unnoticed as owners think the cat is just slowing down with age, when it is actually a very painful condition. Treating chronic problems like arthritis will make a huge difference to a cat's quality of life. The main signs shown in cats are:

- stiffness, reduced mobility and lameness. This is often displayed as your cat resting more with an unwillingness to jump or climb or more difficulty doing this
- difficulty grooming, especially the middle of the back and tail
- a change in behaviour, for example:
  - reduced interaction with, and tolerance of, people. The discomfort associated with arthritis can be a cause of aggression in cats
  - not using the litter tray if the sides are too high for them to easily get into it
  - reduced interest in play
  - restless behaviour at night
- increased stiffness immediately after resting which gets better with movement

- swollen, enlarged or painful joints
- susceptibility to joint trauma, such as sprains
- a worsening of these signs during cold or damp weather

If your cat is overweight, this can make arthritis worse so it is important to ensure they maintain an ideal weight.

Arthritis is an ongoing problem and cannot be cured. However, in many cases it can be managed successfully with medication, allowing your cat to be comfortable and active. Always use medication prescribed by your vet. Do not use human painkillers as many of these are toxic to cats. Alongside medication, adapting the home so cats can move around more easily is helpful for arthritic cats. For more information see [cats.org.uk/elderly-cats-health-issues](https://cats.org.uk/elderly-cats-health-issues)

## **Hypertension**

In cats, high blood pressure, known as hypertension, often occurs in association with another underlying disease. For example, cats suffering from kidney disease or hyperthyroidism often have some degree of hypertension as well. It can also occur as a primary problem in itself. The organs most vulnerable to the effects of high blood pressure are the eyes, kidneys, heart and brain.



Initially there may be very few signs of high blood pressure, which is why it is important to check blood pressure in older cats, even if otherwise well. Sometimes the signs can occur very suddenly.

Signs of hypertension include:

- blindness
- changes inside the eye, including bleeding
- disorientation
- seizures

Many cats can go on to lead relatively normal lives following diagnosis and treatment of hypertension, but this will depend on the type and severity of any underlying disease. If left untreated, these signs can become permanent so seek veterinary advice as soon as possible.

For more information see

[\*\*cats.org.uk/elderly-cats-health-issues\*\*](https://cats.org.uk/elderly-cats-health-issues)

# What you can do to help an older cat

## Microchip

Make sure your cat is microchipped in case they become disorientated or go missing. A microchip carries a unique number linked to a database holding your contact details, allowing you to be quickly traced should your cat stray and be scanned. In England all cats over 20 weeks old must be microchipped. For more information see [cats.org.uk/microchipping](https://cats.org.uk/microchipping)

## Beds

Allow your cat to reach favourite places to rest by strategically placing boxes, steps or items of furniture for them to climb. Make sure they have a variety of cosy, well-padded beds in safe, warm places that can be readily accessed. Your cat may enjoy the hammock-style radiator beds as they are very warm.

## Somewhere to perch up high

Older cats can find it difficult to make accurate calculations when jumping and are not as agile as they used to be, especially if they are stiff, in pain or have arthritis. Provide easy ways for cats to access their favourite areas, such as using a ramp or small foot stool to give them access to high surfaces.

Make sure it is wide enough, and you could also cover it in carpet to give extra grip.

## **Litter trays and toileting**

Provide several litter trays in the house at all times, even if your cat has toileted outside all of their life. There are many occasions when an older cat will need an indoor litter tray. As they become less mobile they may not be able to get outside to toilet as quickly as they used to. They are also less likely to tolerate rain, cold or extreme heat and so it is best to provide them with lots of indoor litter trays for their comfort and to avoid accidents. Place the litter trays in quiet, safe areas of the home.

Providing a large tray gives your cat plenty of space to move around inside. Make sure the tray has a low side so they can get in and out more easily. Some litter types that were acceptable as an adult may be too coarse for older cats. Don't make any sudden changes, but provide additional trays with 3cm of soft, fine litter that they will find more comfortable under their paws.

## **Toileting outside**

If your cat still prefers to toilet outside, provide a newly dug over patch of soil as close to the house as possible and maintain it regularly.

Older cats are less able to defend themselves or a territory and as a result may become more anxious or dependent on their owners. Some cats will feel reassurance from owners that accompany them outside so they are protected against the neighbouring cats.

## **Water and food bowls**

Place water and food bowls in a variety of easily accessible locations around the house, both upstairs and downstairs. This means they are easier to find and your cat doesn't have to walk up and down stairs just to get food and water. Ceramic or glass bowls are least likely to taint the taste of water and food. Raising bowls a few inches off the floor can be helpful for some older cats. Speak to your vet about the most appropriate diet for your older cat.

## **Playtime**

Older cats still like to play, but they need more gentle, brief games than when they were younger. Use toys that are unlikely to intimidate them, such as a feather attached to string that is slowly moved past them. Experiment with different toys to see what captures your cat's attention. Even if they only watch or slowly swipe the toy with a paw, it is still important, beneficial mental stimulation.

## **Regular grooming**

As older cats may struggle to look after their coats, gentle grooming will help to keep your cat's skin healthy. It also gives you some valuable bonding time with your cat. Stroking a cat is a great de-stressor and may lower your own blood pressure!

## **Scratching posts**

Cats may still want to scratch but can find it difficult as they age. Providing a horizontal scratching post or one with a lower gradient and softer material such as carpet, which they may find easier to scratch, may help. Remember to check their claws regularly.

## **Routines**

Cats are creatures of habit and this becomes more pronounced as they age. They prefer a familiar, regular routine to provide predictability. Where possible, avoid moving furniture so that your cat's environment is familiar and they can easily find their way around your home.

## **Veterinary care**

Seek veterinary advice early if you are worried. Remember, many of the disorders that affect older cats can be treated and managed to allow your cat a happy and content life, particularly when treatment is sought early. However, inevitably there may come a time when your cat is in pain, discomfort or distress, and there isn't treatment to alleviate this. Then the most loving and courageous way you can show them how much you care is to end their suffering. For more information see [\*\*cats.org.uk/putting-a-cat-down\*\*](https://cats.org.uk/putting-a-cat-down)

## **Looking for cat 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)**



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