

# Managing your cat's behaviour

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



**Cats Protection has a clear vision of a society where every cat has their best possible life because they are protected, cared for and understood by everyone.**

**What makes a cat unique is the very reason why they are so well loved. By trying to understand your cat's background, behaviours and needs, you can prevent any problems that may arise and enjoy sharing your life with a happy cat.**

Cats who are nervous, aggressive or act in a way which we consider to be inappropriate (such as spraying urine indoors), behave that way for a reason. They are not misbehaving but their behaviour is usually a sign that something, from their perspective, is very wrong.

## Five important things

- Cats who misbehave may just be exhibiting normal cat behaviour
- If your cat's behaviour changes, it could be a sign that they're stressed, scared or sick. See your vet straight away
- Never punish your cat for 'misbehaving' as it will never help but may stress your cat more
- You have a legal duty of care to meet your cat's needs, including their need to exhibit normal behaviours
- You can help to reduce unwanted behaviours such as spraying urine, scratching and fighting by understanding the causes of them and then trying to treat the cause

To understand more about your cat's **normal** behaviour, needs and motivations go to:

[cats.org.uk/behaviour](https://cats.org.uk/behaviour)

If your cat starts to do something that is out of character, the first thing you should always do is speak to your vet, who may suggest a health check. This can rule out any medical problems that could cause this behaviour. Medical disorders are very common causes of behavioural issues, even if the link is not immediately apparent. Always discuss your cat's behaviour and all your observations and concerns with your vet.

## **Signs of pain**

Cats are very subtle when it comes to showing pain and they will do their best to hide it. They are more likely to show slight changes in lifestyle or behaviour than they are to show a limp, for example. There are many different medical problems that cause discomfort and varying intensities of pain. Keep a close eye on your cat and if you notice any change in their behaviour, take them to the vets for a health check. Treating pain can greatly improve their quality of life.

Signs of pain include:

- becoming more withdrawn or hiding more than usual
- being less active or sleeping more than usual, especially in one place
- becoming less tolerant of people or being handled
- aggressive behaviour
- hesitating or becoming more reluctant to jump up or down from furniture or go through the cat flap
- being stiff after resting, or showing a preference for using a particular leg when going up and down stairs
- crouching in a hunched-up position with squinty eyes
- playing less, or reduced interaction with an owner
- reduced eating or drinking
- increased anxiety or fear
- sleep disturbance
- pacing, circling or restlessness
- a scruffy or matted coat, particularly in hard-to-reach areas
- vocalisation, especially when moving or using the litter tray

- not using the litter tray
- overgrooming
- some cats will purr when in pain

## **Signs of stress**

Cats express signs of stress in a subtle way making it very difficult to tell when a cat is stressed. There are many reasons why it can occur. Stress is an immediate response to a threat and is healthy as it enables the cat's 'fight or flight' response and allows them to get away quickly. This is known as acute stress. However, ongoing (or chronic) stress can be harmful for your cat's wellbeing.

A few reasons cats get stressed include moving house or a change in routine, for example redecorating or getting new furniture. It can also occur if the litter tray and food bowls are in unsuitable locations, or there aren't enough of them. Unfamiliar people visiting the house and the introduction of a new pet, baby, child or partner can be a trigger. A cat may be bullied or intimidated by neighbouring cats or even the other cats they live with.

Signs to look out for include many of those listed on the previous page for pain, but also:

- appear to be sleeping more, some cats will actually pretend to be asleep while trying to monitor the cause of the stress
- crouching in a hunched-up position with squinty eyes, some cats will cringe away from you if you try to approach
- over-eating

Many of the signs listed for pain and stress could also be due to many other medical conditions or behavioural problems. Always see your vet if you notice any changes in your cat.

## **Shy, nervous or timid cats**

While most cats settle into new homes quickly, some remain fearful despite a gentle welcome and time to settle in. Don't be too disappointed if your shy or timid cat tries to run away and hide from you initially. Showing patience and sensitivity will go a long way to ensure that you have a happy and extremely rewarding relationship with your cat.

Timid behaviour could be due to:

- genetics: an inherited tendency. Some cats are naturally more anxious than others



- poor socialisation: a lack of contact with humans, particularly during their first seven weeks of life. If young kittens are not properly socialised with people, they will be frightened or stressed by human contact
- bad experiences: a previous frightening experience that has made your cat fearful

## **Signs**

Your cat cannot tell you how they feel so it can be difficult to recognise that your cat wants you to move away. Signs of fear include running away and retreating to hiding places. A scared cat will show dilated pupils and/or flattened ears and will cringe and cower from you.

This fear can develop into aggressive behaviour, where your cat adopts 'fight' as a tactic instead of 'flight' as a last resort. Usually aggression develops because the cat feels cornered or trapped, or because they have previously learned that flight is unsuccessful. Avoid putting your cat into this situation and ensure they can always get away easily if they want to.

## Managing shy cats

There are a number of things you can do to make your timid cat feel more secure. As long as your cat had some positive contact with people when they were a young kitten, with patience your cat will learn not to be afraid. Take things slowly and it also helps to:

- provide plenty of refuges for your cat around the house. Cats de-stress quicker if they can hide, preferably in high and dark locations, for example behind sofas and under beds. A cardboard box on its side or blankets placed on shelves or wardrobes can help your cat feel safe
- ensure other neighbouring cats cannot enter the house through the cat flap or open windows. Be vigilant to make sure your cat is not being bullied in the garden or intimidated by other cats through the windows, conservatory or patio doors
- keep all your daily routines consistent where possible. This provides a predictable, reassuring environment for your cat
- use synthetic scent pheromones, such as FELIWAY®. These can create a reassuring environment for your cat and may help to reduce stress. They are available from your vet and [cats.org.uk/shop/other-ways-to-help/ceva](https://cats.org.uk/shop/other-ways-to-help/ceva)

- sit quietly in your cat's vicinity to allow them to get used to you in their own time. Ignore them while you read a book or take a nap so that they don't feel pressurised or anxious about your presence. Do it while they are eating or provide a small treat. You can end these sessions by leaving a small treat for them, so they associate your presence with something positive. The time you spend near them can very gradually be built up as they adjust
- let your cat make the first move. Direct approaches are extremely threatening so don't force attention on your cat
- blink slowly at your cat, narrow your eyes so they are half open and then turn your face away slowly to reassure your cat that you are not a threat

**As your cat becomes braver, try:**

- talking to your cat quietly in a calming tone; it is a great way to bond
- rewarding your cat with a treat when they approach you. At first, give the treat as soon as your cat approaches but gradually increase the time between the approach and the treat. Over a period of weeks, work up to being able to calmly stroke your cat once or twice before giving the treat

- using small toys you can gently throw for them, such as a ball of foil, scrunched up paper or ping pong ball. Fishing rod toys allow the cat to interact with you, without them feeling threatened by close contact

Most importantly, never lose your temper or try to force your cat to interact too quickly. This will just reinforce their previous fears. Build on your successes gradually. Eventually your cat will learn to trust you and will be much happier. In some cases, you may find guidance from your vet or a suitably qualified behaviourist useful.

Overcoming a cat's shyness through patient handling and care often leads to an extremely rewarding and close relationship between you and your cat. It is well worth the extra time and effort.

## Aggressive cats

Cats are rarely aggressive towards humans but like all of us, they do have their limits. There are many different reasons for aggressive behaviour and sometimes it can be a combination of causes. Here are just a few examples:

- **defensive/fear aggression.** Your cat will usually run from a perceived threat but they may defend themselves if they can't escape, or have previously learned that fleeing is unsuccessful

- **play and petting aggression.** Cats generally prefer to have short but frequent interactions. In contrast, people tend to interact less often but with more intensity. This can be a bit much for some cats and many have a limit when it comes to petting
- **territorial aggression.** This usually occurs when two cats meet on disputed ground, or when one cat is passing through another cat's territory
- **pain-induced aggression.** A cat suffering from pain will have drastically reduced tolerance levels and this is a very common reason for aggression

Cats may be more inclined to show aggressive behaviour if they:

- are kept indoors without stimulation, an outlet for their natural hunting behaviours or access to food, water, bed and a litter tray
- are young and not given enough stimulation
- are misunderstood by their owner
- have learnt to play with fingers/toes as a kitten, so view these as appropriate toys
- are not neutered.

Find out more: [cats.org.uk/neutering](https://cats.org.uk/neutering)

If your cat is aggressive, particularly if this is newly-developed, seek advice from your vet immediately. If there is no medical reason causing the aggression, ask your vet for a referral to a qualified behaviourist.

If you have any bites or scratches that break the skin, clean the wound carefully and seek medical attention.

## **Spraying and inappropriate toileting**

### **Spraying**

Urine spraying is a completely different behaviour from normal toileting. When a cat goes to the toilet they will generally pee from a squatting position. They will usually produce a large puddle in a private or secluded area. In contrast, cats will spray urine in order to leave a specific 'scent message'.

When they spray, they will back up to a vertical surface in an open location and squirt a spray of urine from a standing position. Sometimes they will paddle with their back legs and quiver their tail.

Urine spraying is a normal behaviour and can be performed by any cat, whether they are male or female, neutered or not.

However, if your cat starts spraying indoors, it can indicate that they do not feel secure in their surroundings.

### **Why does my cat spray urine?**

Spraying urine is a normal part of scent-marking behaviour. Cats use scent to identify different areas in their territory. It provides them with a 'scent map' of their environment as they move around. For example, cats tend to rub their cheeks on objects in the 'core' part of their territory where they feel safe and relaxed. In contrast, they usually spray urine to mark areas of their territory where they feel threatened. It's thought that the scent deposited acts as a reminder to themselves to be wary in that part of their territory. When the smell begins to fade, your cat will re-spray to top it up.

### **Why is my cat spraying urine indoors?**

Cats may spray urine indoors when they are:

- ill
- stressed by a perceived threat
- stressed by changes in the household, for example a new baby or building work
- threatened by other cats coming into the household, or by cats in the surrounding neighbourhood. This is the most common reason

Often there is a combination of factors that have led to the development of urine spraying. In some cases, the behaviour can start for one reason and develop or change due to other causes. For example, many owners punish their cat for spraying urine in the house. This tends to make the cat more anxious and more likely to spray. You need to identify what is worrying your cat and address it.

### **What can I do if my cat sprays urine indoors?**

If your cat has suddenly started spraying indoors, the first step is to take your cat to have a health check with your vet. This can rule out any underlying medical cause for the behaviour. If the vet thinks your cat is healthy, the next stage is to find out what the cat finds threatening and then take action to stop it. This process can be quite complicated, as there are often many factors involved. Your vet can refer you to a qualified behaviourist to help with this.

Sometimes, spraying can be more easily linked to a specific change in the environment. For example, the addition of a new cat to the household can threaten resident cats and cause spraying. Clues about why your cat has started spraying can be seen from the location of the marks. They will be left specifically in the areas where they feel anxious.



## **Spraying on internal doorways and in hallways**

This may be because this is where they come into close contact with other cats in the household.

To overcome this, you can help to prevent conflict and create a sense of security by:

- providing extra litter trays, food bowls and water bowls
- providing extra places for your cats to sleep, play and scratch. This will reduce the need for competition
- put up shelving or arrange furniture so your cats can pass each other at different levels, without direct contact

## **Spraying on doors and windows**

If your cat is spraying on the cat flap, external doors or windows then it is usually because something outside is worrying them. They may be able to see other cats through the windows. Make the indoor environment feel more secure for them by:

- covering the windows with a semi-transparent material to restrict their view of other cats
- having a secure microchip or magnetic cat flap (where a magnet is attached to a quick-release safety collar). This will prevent other cats from entering your home

- discouraging neighbouring cats from entering the garden, see 'Keeping other cats out of your garden' later in the this leaflet for ideas.

## **The importance of scent**

Redecorating, changing furniture or moving house removes familiar smells that comfort your cat. To prevent your cat from becoming anxious at unfamiliar scents, it is a good idea to introduce them to a new environment or house gradually. When moving into a new house, keep your cat in one room with items familiar to them. Gradually allow access to other areas to help to decrease their anxiety. Also see 'Pheromone therapy' later in this leaflet.

## **Inappropriate toileting**

Inappropriate toileting is different to spraying behaviour. It can occur for completely different reasons. If your cat is toileting away from the litter tray, there are many different reasons. As already mentioned, always get your cat checked out for any possible underlying medical cause first. Read on for some general guidelines that may help. If you have all these measures in place and the problem persists, it is worth getting a referral to a qualified behaviourist to help identify the causes.

Even if your cat has outside access, always provide litter trays inside. Some cats can feel safer using a tray in the house as there could be neighbourhood cats outside that intimidate them. Understandably, many cats don't like to go out when it's bad weather, or if their toileting site is frozen over in winter and it's difficult to dig.

## **Privacy**

Toileting is a very vulnerable activity for cats and they will try to choose a quiet, private location for this. If your cat is upset by an incident outside, or near to their litter tray, they may instead find a quiet corner indoors to use as their toilet. If the tray is positioned in the open where it may be disturbed, the cat may feel too vulnerable to use it and will seek a safer spot instead. A tray may not be used if it is placed next to a noisy washing machine or by a cat flap, and remember that cats like to toilet away from where they eat and drink. When placing litter trays, put them in quiet, private areas that are away from busy walkways and noisy appliances.

## **Litter tray**

There are many different types of litter trays available to suit your cat's needs. As a kitten grows up, they will need a larger, adult-sized tray with enough space to manoeuvre. An elderly cat requires a tray with low sides so they can get in and out more easily.

Nervous cats may prefer the privacy of hooded litter trays. Each cat is an individual and what might work for one cat, won't necessarily work for another.

Indoor litter trays:

- provide one litter tray per cat, plus one extra
- don't place all the trays in a line as the cats will see it as just one big litter tray
- place them in different, quiet, private areas of the home, away from food and water bowls
- allow access without having to pass other cats or things that make them anxious such as a noisy washing machine
- clean out the litter tray at least once a day
  - hooded litter trays need to be kept extra clean as they can hold the smell inside, which can be overpowering for your cat's well-developed sense of smell
- with clumping litter, remove solid lumps once or twice a day (with some types of litter you may need to replace all the litter on a daily basis)
- cats prefer at least 3cm depth of unscented litter and most prefer a litter of a sandy texture because it is softer and more comfortable under their paws

- make any changes to the tray, the litter or its location very gradually to avoid toileting accidents
- trays should be cleaned once a week by rinsing with water and then using a cat-safe disinfectant. Caution: phenol-based disinfectants are toxic to cats
- always rinse carefully with hot water, and dry before refilling with fresh litter
- rinsing the disinfectant off ensures safety, as well as removing the smell which some cats don't like

You will be able to buy a suitable disinfectant from your vet or a pet shop.

## **Never punish for spraying or inappropriate toileting**

Although urine spraying or inappropriate toileting can be an unpleasant and distressing problem, you should never punish your cat. They are spraying because they feel anxious. Punishing them will only make them more likely to spray due to stress. The best thing you can do is to identify what is worrying your cat and address this.

## **Cleaning urine from affected areas**

Once a cat has sprayed, if the area isn't cleaned appropriately, their sensitive nose will draw them back to spray the same area again in an attempt to top up the faded scent.

- Avoid household cleaning products, such as bleach. These contain ammonia which is also found in cat urine, so using these can make the problem worse
- Clean sprayed or soiled sites thoroughly with a warm, 10% solution of biological washing powder and then rinse with clean water and allow the area to dry
- If the surface is suitable, surgical spirit can be applied after cleaning to remove all lingering traces of urine. It is worth doing a small patch test first to ensure this cleaning regime will not cause any damage
- Badly soiled carpet and underlay should be cut out. You may also need to treat the concrete or floorboards underneath before replacing

## Scratching

Scratching is a natural behaviour for cats; not only is it essential for claw maintenance but scent is released from between the cat's toes. It is a form of scent marking similar to when they rub their cheeks on something. If you want to protect your furniture and furnishings from your cat's claws, provide them with a suitable alternative to scratch instead, such as a scratching post or scratch mat.

Cats like to stretch and scratch after they wake up so try placing the scratching post/mat near where they sleep.

### **Why is my cat scratching indoors?**

If your cat has limited or no access to the outdoors, either through their own choice or yours, they will have to maintain good claw condition inside the house. They will find one or two suitable scratching sites and continue to use them, whether this is a cat scratching post or the back of your sofa.

If the scratched areas are widespread throughout your home including areas of conflict like doorways and windows, it is likely that your cat is scratching for communication reasons and feels insecure in these areas. Just like spraying, the most common reason for scratching indoors is the presence of another cat.

The reason for cats to show this behaviour can change over time. If your cat enjoys attention, they might learn that whenever they scratch the furniture you interact with them, so they will carry on scratching.

## **What can I do if my cat scratches the furniture?**

If your cat is scratching furniture or wallpaper to maintain their claws:

- protect the scratched item by covering with thick, shiny plastic sheeting as this will be unappealing to your cat
- obtain a suitable scratching post and put it next to the area where they scratch. A scratching post should:
  - have a strong sturdy base, so that the cat can lean against the post without it wobbling
  - be tall enough that the cat can stretch fully
  - have a vertical thread that allows the cat to scratch downwards

Some cats may prefer scratching a horizontal surface, so you could provide them with a scratching mat instead

- once your cat is consistently using the new post or mat, you can gradually move it to a more convenient location. Plastic sheeting can then be removed from the furniture or wallpaper

Each cat in a household should have a scratching post or mat positioned in different locations to prevent conflict. Some posts and mats are impregnated with catnip, or you could try rubbing catnip on the scratching post/mat to entice them.



Placing pieces of food on the post/mat may also help. Playing with your cat little and often throughout the day and providing toys may help to redirect their energy away from scratching.

### **Scratching to mark territory**

If your cat is scratching furniture as a marking behaviour, then try to identify what is worrying them in this part of their territory and remedy it (see 'Spraying' section earlier in this leaflet).

For a long-lasting solution it's best to help understand their feelings of insecurity rather than simply providing them with another scratching surface. You may need guidance from a qualified behaviourist to help identify the cause of their anxiety. Follow the advice already given and cover the scratched areas with a protective material and place a scratching post/mat next to them.

### **Importance of praise**

It is important to remember that cats do not scratch just to be naughty. It is a natural behaviour they need to be allowed to exhibit. Shouting when your cat scratches your furniture can lead to them doing it more often. They can become more anxious or learn that scratching can be used to get attention. Cats quickly learn that unwanted scratching gets a reaction, but using a scratching post doesn't.

Make sure you praise your cat when they use the scratching post and try not to react if they scratch the furniture.

## **Keeping other cats out of your garden**

The Animal Welfare Act 2006 (including the Scottish and Northern Irish equivalents) gives all cats legal protection. Using homemade or shop-bought deterrents which could harm or injure a cat may be considered an offence under animal welfare legislation for causing unnecessary suffering, so bear this in mind when considering deterrents.

Find out more: [cats.org.uk/cats-and-the-law](https://cats.org.uk/cats-and-the-law)

For those who wish to avoid having cats visit their garden, the following advice may be useful.

- Shoo a cat away by either shouting or clapping your hands when you see them enter your garden
- Squirt water near the cat (do not aim it at them) using a low-powered water pistol (not a super-soaker) being careful to avoid their eyes. Most cats hate water
- Install an automatic garden spray, triggered by an infra-red detector which locates movement

- Erect high, close-boarded fences next to the hedges in the garden, making it difficult for cats to visit
- Avoid leaving food for birds and other wildlife in places that are easily accessible to cats and ensure dustbin lids are secure. In addition, do not start feeding a cat if you do not want them around as this will encourage them
- Plants shrubs closely together to prevent cats from finding a place to dig
- Consider covering parts of the garden that you do not want the cat to toilet in with stone chippings, pebbles or small rocks
- The following have been used with varying levels of success to deter cats from toileting in flower beds: Lion dung-infused pellets, planting of the 'Scaredy cat' plant (coleus canina) and putting down crushed egg shells

## **Pheromone therapy**

Your cat has many scent glands over their body that release pheromones. Many are found around their face; under their chin and ears, on their forehead and cheeks, and around the mouth. Other glands are located near their paw pads, and around female cats' nipples.

These are scented chemicals that act as a communication system for cats. Rubbing their scent onto you, or objects around them, marks them as familiar. The smell also tells the cat they are in a safe place, providing a sense of reassurance. These messages help your cat feel secure. Cats regularly re-mark with these pheromones as they go around their home. There are man-made versions of these chemicals, such as FELIWAY®. These help to make a new place or situation feel more familiar and safe for cats, reassuring them and helping to reduce their stress.

Alternatively, you can try using a clean cotton cloth or glove to gently rub on your cat's cheeks to collect the pheromone. Rub this on surfaces at your cat's height, such as onto new furniture, so that it smells familiar. Remember that the pheromone will need to be topped up regularly, until your cat either rubs their cheeks on the item or shows relaxed behaviour.

FELIWAY® can be a great support tool for helping stressed cats, however it is always recommended to rule out medical conditions first with your vet. It is important that the reason for your cat's behaviour is also identified and dealt with. If your cat has a behavioural issue, then it is recommended to get a referral from your vet to a

qualified behaviourist such as a member of the Animal Behaviour and Training Council ([abtc.org.uk](http://abtc.org.uk)).

The FELIWAY team of scientists has been working for over 25 years to improve their knowledge about how cats communicate. The FELIWAY Classic Diffuser can help reduce stress-related signs such as scratching in inappropriate places, urine spraying, toileting outside the litter tray, hiding, reduced activity, overgrooming and reduced appetite. The spray can be used around the home or when travelling, lasting up to 24 hours.

FELIWAY Optimum is an advanced solution and offers enhanced serenity for cats, calming them better than ever and is available as a plug-in diffuser. Both the Classic and Optimum diffusers last up to four weeks, continuously releasing the comforting pheromone into the local environment.

Visit [cats.org.uk/shop/other-ways-to-help/ceva](http://cats.org.uk/shop/other-ways-to-help/ceva) for more information.

## Further help

This advice is aimed at encouraging positive behaviours and helping with some common behavioural issues. However, it is not individually tailored to a specific cat, and the development of behaviours in each cat is unique. The cause of a problem can sometimes be difficult to identify, particularly if it is complex or there are a number of contributing factors.

Seek help sooner rather than later as it can be more difficult to rectify long-standing issues. Luckily many problems can be resolved, allowing you to enjoy positive companionship with your cat once more.

If your cat has a behavioural problem, it is recommended that you discuss the problem with your vet who can refer you to a qualified behaviourist, such as a member of the Association of Pet Behaviour Counsellors ([apbc.org.uk](http://apbc.org.uk)), the Animal Behaviour and Training Council ([abtc.org.uk](http://abtc.org.uk)), or a certified Clinical Animal Behaviourist (CCAB) that can be found through the Association for the Study of Animal Behaviour (ASAB) at [asab.nottingham.ac.uk](http://asab.nottingham.ac.uk)

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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