

CAT 14

# Cats and human health



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## Cats and human health

Owning a pet is one of life's pleasures that is positively good for children and adults alike. Pet owners have a reduced risk of heart disease and may be less prone to other illnesses – on average they visit the doctor less. Stroking a cat helps with relaxation and stress and pets help children to learn caring and nurturing skills.

However, people are sometimes worried that they may pick up illnesses from pets. This does not happen very often, and the chances of catching an infection from a pet can be greatly reduced by taking a few simple measures. Teach children to wash their hands after handling animals, or after playing on ground where animals have been – adults should do the same.

There are many different types of infections that may, under some circumstances, be caught from contact with pets. However, it is not common to catch illnesses from pets. Even among veterinary staff, back strain from lifting animals is a more common problem than catching disease.

Certain groups of people are more at risk. Those suffering from diseases that reduce immunity (such as AIDS), or those who are either receiving cancer chemotherapy or on drugs following transplantation surgery, need to be particularly careful to wash their hands or wear gloves after handling pets. They should also avoid aggressive play with cats and be wary of petting excitable or aggressive cats. If you are suffering from one of these conditions, seek specialist advice. If you are considering getting a cat, it may be better to get an adult, as kittens are more likely to be a source of infection.

Catching an illness from another human is much more likely than from a cat. Simply washing your hands and taking other routine hygiene measures avoids nearly all illnesses from pets.

More importantly, prevention is better than cure, and you are less likely to pick up infection from a healthy cat. When you first get a cat, ask the vet for advice on how to keep your cat healthy and continue to take your pet regularly for check-ups.

## **Flea, tick and cat bites**

These are the most common conditions that pet owners can catch from their cats. Fleas are not serious but they can cause itchy red spots, particularly around the wrists and ankles. Ask your vet to recommend a good flea product – shop bought products such as flea collars and powder are not effective. You need to treat both the cat and the environment to get rid of the eggs.

Cats occasionally acquire ticks and if you live in an area where ticks are common (usually areas with deer or sheep) you want to discuss the use of a tick repellent with your vet, who can also explain how to remove ticks. Tick bites are an occasional cause of illness in people (Lyme disease). You don't need to own a cat to get bitten, but you should consult your doctor if you become unwell after a tick bite.



Cat bites are potentially more serious as there is a risk of infection. Wash well and promptly with soap and water and consult your doctor for advice, particularly if the bite becomes swollen, infected or is on a joint. Also ensure that your tetanus protection is up to date. Avoid handling cats that are frightened or angry and, if you have to pick up an injured cat, remember that cats in pain may bite. Wrap the cat in a thick towel first and be careful.

Bites, as well as scratches, carry a risk of cat scratch fever. This is usually a mild illness with fever and swollen lymph glands, although it can be more severe in children and immuno-suppressed patients. It is caused by bartonella bacteria, which can be carried by some healthy cats.

Fleas probably transmit bartonella bacteria between cats, and infection may be more common in kittens. All cat bites and scratches should be well washed with soap and water and cats should not be allowed to lick open sores or wounds. Good flea control is advisable. For this and other reasons, it is best not to encourage rough play or play with hands.

If you own a cat that is sometimes aggressive, you may be able to learn to read the cat's body signals to predict an attack. Look for tensing, twitching or lashing of the tail. There are many books available on cat behaviour and, if the problem is severe, your vet can recommend an animal behaviourist for advice.

## Toxoplasmosis

This micro-organism spends part of its life in cats and the rest in other animals, particularly sheep. For most cats, infection is harmless, although it sometimes causes various forms of illness. The eggs are passed in cat faeces but fresh eggs are not infectious. It takes at least 24 hours before they can cause infection, but they may remain infectious for up to 18 months. If infectious eggs are eaten by a sheep or other animal, meat from that animal can pass infection to people. Infection is destroyed by cooking and preparing meat. Eating raw or undercooked meat is the most common way that people become infected. Direct contact with cats is unlikely to produce infection in humans.

Toxoplasmosis is often a worry to pregnant women, because it can severely damage the unborn child. In other healthy adults, infection usually causes only a mild, feverish illness, but it can be severe in immuno-suppressed patients.

Recommended measures for pregnant women include washing hands and cooking utensils after preparing meat, washing fruit and vegetables to remove soil, and wearing gloves when gardening.

To be extra sure, it is better for pregnant women not to change cat litter trays or, if unavoidable, to wear gloves and change the litter at least daily, as fresh eggs in the faeces are not infectious. Young cats shed more eggs, so it may be better not to get a kitten while you are pregnant.

## Ringworm

Ringworm is not actually a worm but a fungus similar to athlete's foot. It produces infective "seeds" called spores, which survive for a long time in the environment and are quite common. They can infect skin in all animals, including people and cats. Infection in people is not common and it usually just appears as one or two circular patches of red, irritated skin, but it can sometimes be more severe in children and immuno-suppressed people. If you think you have ringworm, see your doctor.



In cats, ringworm has a number of different appearances. Some cats look completely normal, others have areas of hair loss with a crusty covering, but there are many variations. Young or geriatric cats, and long-haired cats appear to be more commonly affected.

Do not let children handle infected cats, and wear gloves and an apron when giving treatments. Note that some tablets should not be handled if you are pregnant. Restrict the cat to one room until cured, so spores are not spread through the house. Soft-furnishings and carpets should be vacuumed thoroughly and frequently, or steam cleaned, to remove the spores. The vacuum bag should be emptied afterwards and the contents burned. Other items should be cleaned with a disinfectant. Discuss with your vet which disinfectants are effective. Bedding and toys that cannot be cleaned are best burned.

## Intestinal worms

Most kittens are infected by roundworms, caught from their mother's milk. These worms live in the bowel and their eggs are shed in the faeces. Occasionally people can be infected (by accidentally swallowing the microscopic eggs) causing various problems, including – in rare cases – eye damage.

Cats can also get tapeworms, either from hunting or swallowing fleas when they are grooming, and there have been a few cases of these infecting humans.

Infection with all types of worm is easily avoided by washing hands after handling cats, kittens and litter trays, effective flea control, and also by regular worming of cats (at least four times a year, or more often if the cat is a hunter or regular flea treatment has lapsed). Kittens should be wormed fortnightly from six to 16 weeks. It is best to consult a vet to ensure that you choose a product that is active against everything and to design an effective worming programme for your cat's lifestyle.

"Spot-on" products are now available from the vet for cats who won't take tablets.





## Other bacteria

Finally, there are also some less common diseases occasionally caught from contact with cats. A minority of healthy cats carry some of the common bugs that cause food poisoning (salmonella, campylobacter, giardia and others) and these can be transmitted in the faeces. Again, it is always sensible to wash your hands after handling cats or changing litter trays.

Some causes of colds, flu and conjunctivitis in cats (chlamydia and bordetella) can very occasionally be passed on to people. They are easily avoided by washing hands after handling and not allowing cats to rub your face. Like humans, pets can be carriers for MRSA, which is usually caught from humans. There is no risk to healthy humans or animals, but follow routine hygiene precautions with humans or animals who have had surgery. Wear disposable gloves when treating wounds.

## Avian flu

There have been a few cases of cats that have died from avian flu infection. This is a very rare occurrence, and seems to have resulted from eating infected (raw) chickens. There is no evidence that cats can infect people. If there is an avian flu outbreak, cats should be kept indoors to avoid the risk of infection.

## Cats and asthma

Allergy to cats may be a cause of asthma, although some recent studies have suggested that being born into a family with a cat and/or a dog may actually reduce a child's likelihood of suffering from asthma. It is sometimes difficult to determine whether the presence of a cat in the household is causing the asthma and some detective work may be required.

Even if a child has asthma as a result of pet allergy, removing a pet from the home does not completely avoid all

contact, since the clothes of cat-owning classmates can still carry traces of the material – known as the allergen – that may trigger an attack.

In most cases allergies to pets can be managed. Many sufferers have multiple allergies and minimising exposure to all allergens may help. Try to reduce the amount of allergen material in the house; good ventilation is important – open the windows for an hour a day.

Do not allow the cat in the bedroom and encourage your cat to go outdoors where possible. Someone who is not allergic to the cat should vacuum thoroughly using a vacuum with a HEPA filter at least twice a week. Carpets can be replaced with hard flooring, curtains with blinds, and soft furnishings covered with allergen-proof covers. Avoid wearing woollen clothing, as this tends to trap allergens.

The cat should be groomed daily outside the house and, if you have a co-operative cat, washed once a week. This can be difficult, but a grid or mat on the floor of the bath for the cat to grip with his claws during the bath may help. If you are allergic to cats don't let your cat touch your face and wash your hands after handling your pet. The cat's bedding should be washed weekly.

There are also products available to wipe onto cats weekly to reduce the shedding of allergens

(for example, Allergy Relief). If you want to get a cat but you have an allergy, some experimentation may be worthwhile. Some people find they are worse with longhaired cats than shorthaired, or with dark coat colours. Often, those normally allergic to cats find they are fine with the rex breeds.

## Outside the UK

Cats can be very bonded to their territory, so consider other options carefully before deciding to take your pet on holiday with you. There are several diseases, including rabies, not currently present in the UK, which your pet may catch abroad and can be passed on to people. Before you travel, consult your vet, as the DEFRA requirements don't completely cover all diseases that might be encountered.







## Top tips

- Ask your vet for advice on keeping your cat healthy
- Treat your cat regularly for fleas and worms, preferably with a product from the vet
- Wash your hands after handling cats or changing litter trays
- Wear gloves when gardening, especially if you are pregnant
- If you have a pet allergy, reducing your contact with other sources of allergy may help

# Happy, healthy pets

**Blue Cross** advice leaflets are packed full of top tips to help owners with their pet questions. They cover a wide range of topics, from training a puppy to caring for an older cat. So if you need some support to help you with a pet problem, whether it's about a dog or a degu, we're here for you.

You can read and download our leaflets online at [www.bluecross.org.uk](http://www.bluecross.org.uk)

**Visit our website to take advantage of all its features, including:**

- blog posts from Blue Cross experts
- latest news
- events near you
- pets needing new homes

**Or you can join in the chat on our online communities. Find us on Twitter and Facebook – just search for Blue Cross.**



## Blue Cross

Blue Cross has been dedicated to the health and happiness of pets since 1897. Abandoned or unwanted, ill or injured – we do what's needed to give every pet a healthy life in a happy home. We're a charity, so the more help you give us, the more help we can give pets.

## How you can help

Blue Cross doesn't receive any government funding, so we rely on the generosity of pet lovers like you. There are lots of ways you can help the sick, injured and abandoned pets in our care, like making a donation, fundraising for us or leaving us a legacy.

**Please call us on 0300 777 1897 or visit [www.bluecross.org.uk](http://www.bluecross.org.uk)**



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