

CAT 6

# Basic healthcare



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The charity dedicated to helping sick, injured and homeless pets since 1897.



## **Basic healthcare**

*It is wise to take an interest in feline health, but always think about your information source. Remember, there are lots of old wives tales about cat health! If in doubt, ask your vet and never give human medicines to pets.*

Simple measures, such as checking for any ear discharge, attending to dental care and feeling for external lumps, are an important part of routine healthcare. Annual health checks, which can be done at vaccination time, are strongly recommended and are particularly important for cats over eight years old. Keep your cat trim and “in shape” – obesity can reduce life expectancy. For further information, see the pet care leaflet, *Getting back in shape* (C8). Keeping your cat indoors at night can help to reduce the risk of road accidents. Daily grooming is particularly important for long-haired cats to avoid matting but is beneficial to all cats, and provides an opportunity to examine your pet. Start by doing a little at a time, and try to do areas such as the belly, under the tail and around the hindlegs.

Reduce stress – cats can be easily upset by noise, or harassment by other cats or animals. You can help by making sure that your cat has plenty of “retreats”, such as a “one cat sized” shelf up high, or a box to get into. Make sure that other cats cannot enter your home. You can now get cat flaps that can read a microchip and ensure that only the resident cat gains entry. If you have more than one cat, provide several feeding places, water bowls and litter trays. However, you will need to consult your vet about other important healthcare measures for your pet.

## Why you should neuter your cat

Too many kittens grow up to be unwanted cats, and there are also health reasons for your cat. Female cats come “on heat” at least every three weeks. During this stage they are restless, may miaow loudly and roll around, appearing to be in pain. Drugs to suppress heat are available but there is a risk of side effects. Recurrent heats may distress your pet, but they can be stopped by spaying. In addition, spaying prevents womb infections later in life and reduces the risk of breast cancer. A cat does not need to have had a litter first. The operation is usually done at around five to six months of age, although it can safely be done younger or older, and can also be performed on cats in early pregnancy.

Male cats should also be neutered at five to six months in order to minimise the risk of contracting the cat form of incurable disease AIDS (FIV) from fighting – see the pet care leaflet, *FIV* (C16). Cats that have not been neutered are also more likely to spray in the house (which smells strongly) and behave aggressively.

In both cases the operation is straightforward and your pet will usually return home the same day. Female cats have a patch of hair shaved, either on the flank or the belly.



## Flea treatment

Recovery is rapid – usually by the next day, although females may have to wear an Elizabethan collar to prevent interference with the wound for a few days. See your vet if your kitten seems poorly after the operation. In some breeds (such as Siamese) shaved hair may grow back a darker colour, but this returns to normal in time.

Most cats get fleas at some point. They are most common in summer and are hard to spot as they spend little time on the animal. Even if you have no other pets, fleas can be picked up outdoors in the summer. Routine treatment is recommended, especially for an itchy animal, and usually needs to be repeated monthly. Treatment is best supplied by your vet. Some products now also kill ear mites and some intestinal worms at the same time. Most pet shop and supermarket products, including collars and powders, do not work as well as those supplied by your vet.



Never use two treatments together unless directed by a vet. All other dogs and cats in your household need to be treated, as does the home, usually by using a spray. Vacuuming can help to reduce flea numbers. It is best to vacuum the house before treating as the vibration stimulates hatching of flea eggs, which are very resistant to most treatments.

When treating, pay particular attention to dark crevices, such as down the sides of chair cushions and round skirting boards, as fleas crawl away from light to breed. Some of the treatments given to your cat can also prevent flea eggs developing. This can be helpful in reducing flea numbers in the outdoor environment. Discuss their use with your vet. Never use a flea product designed for dogs on a cat, as they can be poisonous. Treatment of nursing mothers and young kittens is important, as they are vulnerable to serious anaemia from flea bites – ask the vet for a product that is safe for young kittens.

## All cats should be vaccinated

Vaccination can prevent illness in your pet, but no vaccination can be guaranteed to work in every animal. Vaccines will not work if the animal is already infected. Cats can be vaccinated against killer diseases such as infectious enteritis and leukaemia, and against cat flu (not usually a killer, although it can be serious). As with people, not every

flu strain is covered by vaccination but it may reduce the severity of disease. Kittens need two injections, usually three to four weeks apart, and regular boosters thereafter. The precise components needed for vaccinations are affected by individual lifestyle. For example, a cat lives alone and never goes outside will not need leukaemia vaccination. The recommended frequency of boosters is being re-examined, and should be discussed with your vet. The first booster, given one year after the initial course, is always essential. Consult the vet as soon as you acquire a new pet. If you do not know whether your pet has been vaccinated, it does not hurt to repeat the course.

For further information, see the pet care leaflets, FeLV (C17) and Cat flu (C18).



## Are there any side effects?

Your cat may get a slight cold or fever following vaccination, and sometimes a lump will appear at the injection site. If this lump persists, or one develops at any time in the future, consult your vet. Serious allergic reactions to vaccination are extremely rare, and would happen immediately afterwards.

## Internal parasites

Kittens need worming against roundworm every two weeks from six-16 weeks old. Check that the product is appropriate for

the age and weight of the kitten. Adult cats should be wormed regularly, and when feeding kittens. Recommended frequency depends on whether good quality flea treatment is given regularly, and if the cat is able to hunt. It is probably sensible to treat most cats at least four times a year.

Some tapeworms – which look like grains of rice in the faeces (excrement) – are caught from fleas, so a good quality programme for flea control is essential – consult your vet.

A single treatment for all worms can be purchased from your vet. “Spot on” treatments are available for cats that won’t take tablets. With pet shop products, use the correct dose for your pet’s body weight, and check which worms they control.

Toxoplasma is a microscopic parasite which lives in the bowel and can be present in cat faeces. Infection cannot be prevented, though the chance can be reduced by discouraging hunting and not feeding raw meat. It can be harmful if passed to pregnant women, but is usually caught from handling or eating raw meat. Contact with cat faeces should obviously be avoided.

For further information, see the pet care leaflet, Cats and human health (C14).



## Dental care

Teeth are important and, just like people, animals benefit from regular dental care. Teeth that are bad and heavily coated in plaque (containing bacteria) are a potential source of infection of other parts of the body, and can also spoil your pet's appetite.

Dirty teeth develop infections at the gum line. The gums recede, the teeth loosen, and the mouth becomes foul smelling. Daily brushing can prevent this process.

Before starting, look inside your pet's mouth. The teeth should be evenly white or off-white. If they are grey or brown it may indicate plaque accumulation. Is there an unpleasant odour? Are the gums pink where they meet the teeth or red and inflamed? Do the surfaces of the teeth look clean, or is there a grey-brown coating which looks like kettle scale?

Unless the teeth look clean, or your pet is under a year of age, it is best to get your pet's mouth examined by the vet. Plaque in animals is hardened by saliva, forming a concrete-like coating. Brushing will not remove this, and it will contribute to the accumulation of further plaque. An anaesthetic will be needed so your pet remains still. Plaque is then removed using an ultrasonic de-scaler. The vet will also fully examine your cat's mouth, and remove any problem teeth which need to come out.



Start the habit of brushing whilst your kitten is young – although you can train an older cat to accept it. Wait until your pet is in a relaxed mood before your first attempt. Keep initial sessions short. You will need a special brush from the vet or pet shop. Toothpaste designed for humans cannot be used; it is too frothy, and can cause stomach irritation. You may clean your cat's teeth without using toothpaste, but a nice tasting toothpaste helps to make the procedure more acceptable. Some toothpastes contain chemicals which may slow down the accumulation of plaque, however, the mechanical effect of brushing is probably more effective. At first, just put a little toothpaste on the cat's nose or lips and let them lick it off. Repeat this daily for three to four days.

Then start to combine this with holding your cat in a position suitable for brushing. Be as calm and relaxed



as possible. It is best if the cat is on a surface at a suitable height so that you can stand or sit comfortably. Face the cat away from you, and use your body to prevent backing away. Lean forward over the cat and position your forearms so that they are pressing on the sides of the cat to restrict wriggling. Spread your left hand (if your cat is struggling, you may be holding too tight). Practice moving the cat's upper and lower lips with your other hand. Be careful not to be bitten. At the end of each session, give a tasty treat, such as a small piece of prawn.

Spend three to four days practising putting the cat in position, and applying toothpaste to the lips. Don't progress too fast – your cat needs to feel comfortable with each stage of the procedure before you move on.

Finally, you can start to brush the teeth. You do not need to open the mouth. Put a little toothpaste on a cotton bud and pass it between and under the lips to the teeth, then start to brush with a circular motion. It's usually best to start with the back teeth. Do this for just a few seconds, and then let your cat go. Give a treat.

Gradually extend the time period until you are brushing all the teeth. Pay special attention to the area where the tooth meets the gum, as this is where plaque tends to build up. Once your cat is comfortable with the procedure, you can move on to using a toothbrush. Aim to brush daily and to do about a minute on each side of the mouth. Do not worry if there is sometimes a little bleeding when the tooth is brushed. Always give a treat after each brushing session.

Other ways of trying to reduce plaque formation are not as effective as daily brushing. Gels and mouthwashes do reduce plaque formation to some extent and are useful for cats who will not accept toothbrushing.





A special diet is another possibility. It is often said that dried foods and biscuits are good for the teeth and gums (although this might surprise our own dentist!), but few have been studied

to see if they really reduce plaque long-term. One or two of these foods, on which studies have been conducted, are available through your vet. Some have a higher fibre content which acts like a brush on the teeth as they are chewed, whilst others create an antibacterial coating on the teeth which slows the accumulation of plaque. Ask your vet's advice.

Dental chews may be helpful. Select something tough and chewy and large enough that your cat definitely has to chew it. Cats are adept at swallowing small biscuits complete – they are not “designed” for chewing. Avoid things which are too hard as there is a risk of damage to the teeth.

Daily brushing, however, is still the best course of action.



# 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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