

**UNDERSTANDING FELINE BEHAVIOUR**

Did you know - The domestic cat shares common ancestry with the African wildcat – a shy cat originating in the Middle East which has many physical and behavioural similarities with our domestic cat and is still found today.

Changes in farming systems led the cat to naturally evolve to become closer to humans approx 10,000 years ago. The domestic cat still retains many of the behaviours and needs of its wild counterparts.

# Domestic cats

Each cat is an individual and both genetics and previous experience will play a great part in shaping their behaviour.

One of the most striking differences between individual cats is their sociability to people.

There are two recognised groups:

🐾Feral

🐾Non-Feral

The domestic cat needs to learn to like people during its early weeks. Positive, gentle interactions and handling by humans when kittens are between two to eight weeks of age leads to cats usually enjoying human interaction and are friendly pets.

Kittens which have not been socialised during their early weeks will generally remain fearful of people and the domestic environment and may become feral cats.

# Feral cats

Some feral cats retain their solitary nature, others can live in groups called colonies. Feral cats within a colony live in harmony with one another if they recognise the shared group scent and they are able to find sufficient resources such as food, water, toileting, sleeping areas and engage in social interactions such as mutual grooming and rubbing. These activities keep the ‘group scent’ topped up, allowing recognition. Despite living as a group, they will continue to hunt, eat and toilet alone. Feral cats within a colony tend to see off any ‘stranger’ cats intruding in the territory. .

# Cats as companion animals

A cat’s requirements are not human-based, so understanding their needs can enhance our own relationship with them. It is very rewarding to see things from their point of view to make a positive change in their welfare.

Pet cats can have a desire to maintain a territory as solitary hunters. However, they can live together, as long as the cats perceive each other to be in the same social group and they have sufficient resources provided so there is no competition.

Many groups of cats living in the same household have not evolved together naturally, but have been introduced as unrelated kittens or adults. They may not actually perceive each other to be in the same social group, but under stress will tolerate the presence of others. Cats in the same social group, sleep touching one another and spend time rubbing and grooming each other. Cats in one social group should be provided with separate resources – eg food, water, toilet and resting areas – from those in a different social group, even if they all live in the same house. In fact, it may even be best to feed those in the same social group in different areas to avoid the risk of relationship breakdown.

Introducing a new cat should be done slowly in the hope that they will ultimately peacefully cohabit because they have been provided with separate resources to avoid conflict and competition. Each new relationship is dependent on the individual cats and how their early encounters were managed.

Just because a cat has lived happily with a cat before, it does not mean that it will take to a new feline companion. There is no guarantee, even with careful management, that the introduction of unfamiliar cats will work out. There are some cats that are unlikely to ever perceive other felines as anything but a threat and may prefer to live on their own.

**Hunters**

Domestic cats are still programmed to hunt and this activity is still not linked to hunger. Each part of the hunting activity – the stalk, pounce, play and kill – releases feel-good hormones called endorphins. Some cats are prolific hunters, while others catch nothing at all – it varies from individual to individual. Like their wild ancestors, those which do hunt will often bring their prey back to their home, or core area.Play is an excellent outlet for cats to exhibit this natural behaviour.

# Communication systems

The cat has limited visual social signals and facial expressions, so can be difficult to ‘read.’ Instead, it relies on scent communication, marking its territory and leaving distant scent signals that last for some time. This allows it to communicate to other cats as well as leave signals and warnings for itself. Cats will rub against items in the home to lay their scent which helps them feel safe and secure.

Cleaning means we may be constantly removing this scent from the cat’s environment, which can cause some anxiety and disorientation.

Cats will often spray the edges of their territory. Usually outdoors, but they may spray indoors – often at entry or exit points, such as windows or doorways. A cat that sprays indoors is leaving itself a warning reminder – it is indicating that something is wrong. This behaviour can be seen in any cat – male or female, whether neutered or not.

Domestic cats scratch to keep their claws in good condition and to mark their territory. A scratching post will provide exercise, claw maintenance and a focal point for your cat to express this natural behaviour – it will help protect your furniture too. Cats like to stretch and scratch after they wake up, so try placing the scratch post near their bed.

It is important to always provide your cat with an easily accessible place to hide which will help to make them feel safe and secure. There are many things that can cause a cat to feel anxious or fearful: fireworks, building work in the house, unfamiliar visitors, or conflict with other cats. A hiding place can be something as simple as a cardboard box on its side, or upside down, with large holes for access. Try not to overly fuss a cat which is showing signs of fear, as it may reinforce the fearfulness.

Cats feel safer if they can view their surroundings from a height. Provide some higher spaces for your cat to relax, such as shelves or the top of a wardrobe. Ensure the cat can access these, for example by placing a stool nearby.

# Sleep

Cats usually sleep for approx 16 hours a day and often prefer to rotate their chosen sleeping area. When a cat falls asleep on our lap, we often don’t realise they’ve drifted off and continue to stroke them, it’s best to stop stroking them so that they can sleep peacefully.

# Toileting

Cats learn to associate toileting with the material used when they were a kitten and generally still prefer to use a fine grain litter. If they were only exposed to one type as a kitten, they are less likely to want to use a different litter consistency as an adult. They will dig and bury deposits and prefer to use a site away from where they eat and drink, in quiet, private areas away from other cats.

Your cat may prefer to go inside in a litter tray or outside in the garden – it varies between individuals. Even if your cat toilets outside, it’s a good idea to keep a litter tray indoors for those moments when they are caught short!

It’s best to have one litter tray per cat, if possible, all in different quiet locations – especially if your cats are kept indoors. Cats don’t like using dirty or soiled trays so make sure the litter tray is cleaned at least once a day.

If your cat toilets outside, try to provide them with their own toilet area in your garden, in a secluded, sheltered area of well-dug, fine soil, if possible. Add some cat litter to encourage them to toilet there. Make sure it’s dug over regularly to remain hygienic and allow the soiled material to decompose naturally.

# Water

Cats often prefer a moving water source away from food bowls and litter trays, also wide brimmed containers with a reflective surface. Some cats choose to drink from a natural water source outside because they dislike the taste of chlorinated water or the taint from a plastic bowl. Fresh water should always be available indoors in case their outdoor source dries up or becomes inaccessible. Others prefer a dripping tap, or to dip their paw into the water and drink off their paw.

# Reproduction

Cats can become sexually active from four months of age. Females will call when in season and with large territory sizes, males will travel long distances to find receptive females. One female cat – queen – and her offspring can be responsible for 20,000 kittens in just five years!!!!

Any kittens born need to experience as many positive experiences as possible during their first two to eight weeks of age for them to consider these safe and normal in future, enabling them to become happy pets. **Neutering is highly recommended by around four months of age to prevent unwanted litters.**

# Individuals

Individual cats have different characters and this contributes to their appeal. Their differences are due to a variety of different factors influenced by:

* genetics
* stress levels of the mother when pregnant
* learning during the early part of life
* experiences during their socialisation period
* behaviour learned from siblings – such as how to play
* behaviour learned from the mother
* later learning experiences
* a cat developing an association between its own behaviour and the consequence of that behaviour. For example, miaowing leads to my owner letting me in, so I will miaow when I want to be let in
* medical conditions
* current environment

# Indoor life

Many cats will enjoy going outside for part of the day and this gives them the opportunity to investigate new things and make use of their fantastic senses. It also provides mental stimulation and reduces stress. If you are keeping cats indoors, extra care is needed to avoid boredom, frustration or the development of behaviour problems.

# Interacting with your cat

Cats normally like often and brief, low intensity interactions.

Cats can get quite stimulated or excited when they are playing or in ‘hunting mode’ and it’s generally not advisable to touch any cat in this state. Even when touching a calm, relaxed cat, there are many places on the body that are quite vulnerable or sensitive. There are always exceptions but generally they are not keen being touched in these places:

🐾belly, which can include their sides and chest

🐾paws

🐾under legs – ie armpits

🐾legs – back legs

🐾stroking the fur against the normal direction

🐾bottom half of back – particularly if stiff or painful

🐾base of tail

🐾genital area

Cats can be difficult to ‘read’ as they have not evolved the many visual communication signals that are seen in social species, like dogs. Spend time watching your cat – see how they move and interact with their environment, their facial expressions, body postures and vocalisations in different situations – and you can start to build a picture of how your cat is feeling.

Here are a few common body postures to give you clues about your cat’s mood:

Cats that come up to you with a tail up is a friendly cat and they sometimes also rub their side against you as a greeting.

Lying – a cat that is relaxed, contented and outstretched awake, will often like a head rub and attention.

In a crouched position with tail tucked around or under their body and muscles tense. Their eyes may be darting about and ears back or moving listening to sounds around them. This normally means a cat is anxious and may be looking for a place to hide, run away or get up high. Make sure they have an escape route if they want to do this.

Very fearful - a cat that feels threatened will normally have an escape stance with an arched back and/or bushy tail. They may hiss or spit, have dilated pupils and ears flat against their head. It is best to not approach and leave them alone as they may attack as this is a warning for you to stay back until the situation says otherwise.

Cats which are nervous, aggressive or act in an inappropriate way – such as spraying indoors – behave that way for a reason. These ‘misbehaviours’ are usually signs that something – from the cat’s perspective, at least – is very wrong. Punishing your cat will only make matters worse. Owners of cats have a legal duty of care to ensure their needs are met, which includes their need to exhibit normal behaviour patterns.

**Signs of pain**

Cats are very subtle when it comes to showing pain and they will do their best to hide it. Signs include:

🐾becoming more withdrawn or hiding more than usual

🐾sleeping more than usual, especially in one place, or slowing down

🐾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

🐾over-grooming

🐾some cats will purr when in pain

**Signs of stress**

Cat’s express signs of stress in a subtle way making it very difficult to tell when a cat is stressed. Stress as an immediate response to a threat is healthy as it enables the cat’s ‘flight or fight’ response and allows them to get away quickly. However, ongoing stress can be harmful for your cat’s wellbeing.

Moving house, change in routine, redecorating, getting new furniture. Also if the litter tray and food bowls are in unsuitable locations, or there aren’t enough. Unfamiliar people visiting the house, introduction of a new pet, baby or child partner can also be a trigger. A cat may be bullied or intimidated by neighbouring cats or even the other resident cats they live with.

Many signs 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.

While most cats settle into new homes quickly, some remain fearful despite a gentle welcome and time to settle in. Showing patience and sensitivity will go a long way to ensure that you have a happy and extremely rewarding relationship with your cat.

**Why is my cat so timid?**

Genetics – an inherited tendency. Some cats are naturally more anxious than others poor socialisation – a lack of contact with humans, particularly during their first eight weeks of life.

Bad experiences – a previous frightening experience that has made the cat fearful

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.

Fear can develop into aggressive behaviour – where your cat adopts ‘fight’ as a tactic instead of ‘flight’. Usually, aggression develops because the cat feels cornered or trapped, or because they have previously learned that flight is unsuccessful.

**Managing shy cats**

There are a number of things you can do to make your timid cat feel more secure.

🐾patience your cat will learn not to be afraid but you must take things slowly.

🐾provide plenty of refuges for your cat around the house. Cats de-stress quicker if they can hide, preferably in high and dark locations eg 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. 🐾Make sure your cat is not being bullied in the garden or intimidated by other cats through the windows, conservatory or patio doors

🐾use synthetic scent pheromones – these can create a reassuring environment for the cat and may help to reduce stress – they are available from your vet

🐾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 etc, so they don’t feel anxious about your presence. 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

🐾rewarding your cat with a treat when they approach you. 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 ball of foil, scrunched up paper or ping pong ball. Rod toys allow the cat to interact without feeling threatened

**Most importantly** never lose your temper or try to force your cat to interact too quickly as this will just reinforce their previous fears. Do things gradually – eventually your cat will learn to trust you and will much happier.

**Aggressive cats**

Cats are rarely aggressive towards humans but they do have their limits. There are many different reasons for aggressive behaviour and sometimes it can be a combination of causes.

🐾Defensive/fear aggression –your cat will usually run from a perceived threat but may defend themselves if they can’t escape.

🐾Play and petting aggression – cats generally prefer to have short frequent interactions, which is normal in feline social etiquette.

🐾Territorial aggression – 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.

🐾misunderstood by their owner

🐾not neutered

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

**Spraying and house soiling**

🐾Spraying – cats sometimes spray short bursts of urine on vertical objects outside to mark territory and leave information for themselves or other cats to ‘read’.

🐾If your cat starts to spray inside the home, it is almost certainly a sign that all is not right in their world.

🐾Urine spraying is a normal behaviour and can be performed by any cat, whether they are male or female, neutered or not. If your cat starts spraying indoors, it can indicate that they do not feel secure in their surroundings.

🐾Urine spraying is a completely different behaviour from normal toileting. 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 while paddling with the back legs and quivering the tail.

**Why is my cat spraying indoors?**

🐾illnes

🐾stressed by changes in the household e.g. new baby or building work

🐾threatened by other cats coming into the household, or by cats in the surrounding neighbourhood

Many owners punish their cat for spraying in the house – this tends to make the cat more anxious and more likely to spray. The best thing to do is identify what is worrying your cat and address it.

If your cat has suddenly started spraying indoors, you should take your cat to your vet to ensure there is no underlying medical cause for the behaviour. If your cat is healthy, the next stage is to find out what the cat finds threatening and then take action to stop it. This can be quite complicated, as there are often many factors involved. It is best to ask your vet to refer you to a suitably qualified behaviourist

Sometimes, spraying can be more easily linked to a specific change in the environment. The addition of a new cat to the household can threaten resident cats and induce spraying. Clues about why your cat has started spraying can be ascertained from the location of the marks, because these will be left specifically where they feel anxious.

If spraying on internal doorways and in hallways it may be because this is where they come into close contact with other cats in the household. You can help to prevent conflict by providing extra litter trays, bowls and places for your cats to sleep, play and scratch. If your cats have to walk past each other because of the layout of your house, you can put up shelving or arrange furniture so they can pass each other at different levels, without direct contact.

If your cat is spraying on the cat flap, external doors or windows then it is usually because something outside is worrying them. Making the inside environment feel more secure is often helpful. If other cats are entering the house through your cat flap, you can fit a microchip cat flap or a magnetic cat flap – where a magnet is attached to a safety collar.

**Inappropriate toileting**

This is different to spraying behaviour and can occur for completely different reasons. If your cat is toileting away from the litter tray, always get your cat vet checked, as it is very important to rule out medical reasons for the behaviour.

**Cleanliness**

Cats are renowned for their clean nature so they will not normally use a dirty litter tray. Remove any deposits once or twice a day if you have a clumping litter and completely clean out the tray at least once a week. Some cats prefer one tray for urinating and another for defecating. Hooded litter trays need to be kept extra clean as they can hold the smell inside and be overpowering for your cat’s keen sense of smell!

Never punish for spraying or inappropriate toileting, even though this can be unpleasant. 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 it.

**How do I clean urine from affected areas?**

If the area is not cleaned appropriately, their sensitive nose will draw them back to spray the same area again in an attempt to top up the faded scent. Using household cleaning products containing ammonia can make it worse. Wash sprayed or soiled sites thoroughly with a warm, 10 per cent solution of biological washing powder and then rinse with clean water and allow the area to dry.

Carpet is extremely absorbent and urine often soaks into the underlay and underneath. If the area is badly soiled over a long period it may be necessary to remove the carpet and underlay and treat the concrete or floorboards underneath before replacing.

**Scratching**

Scratching is a normal behaviour. Cats scratch to keep their claws in good condition and as a communication signal. They have scent glands in between the pads of the paws that produce a unique smell, which is deposited on the surface that the claws are dragged down. This scent leaves a reminder signal for the cat and a message for other felines in the area.

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

🐾obtain a suitable scratching post and put it next to the area where they scratch

🐾choose a scratching post with a heavy base so it doesn’t topple over when in use. It should be tall enough to allow your cat to scratch at full stretch

🐾some cats prefer to scratch horizontally (cats that scratch carpets or stairs) provide a scratching mat to meet these needs

🐾once your cat is consistently using the new post, you can gradually move it to a more convenient location or try placing the scratch post near your cat’s bed

🐾try spraying with catnip spray on the scratch post to encourage scratching

**Scratching to mark territory**

If your cat is scratching furniture as a marking behaviour, try to identify what is worrying the cat in this part of their territory.

**Remember** cats do not scratch just to be naughty. It is a natural behaviour they should be allowed to exhibit. Shouting when your cat scratches your furniture can lead to an increase in frequency as they become more anxious, or learns that it can be used for attention seeking. Cats quickly learn that unwanted clawing gets a reaction, but clawing a scratching post doesn’t. Make sure you praise your cat when they claw the scratching post and try not to react if they scratch the furniture.