

# Ask the vets+++

## Have you got a question?

Send your questions to:

Ask The Vets, The Cat magazine, National Cat Centre,  
Chelwood Gate, Haywards Heath, RH17 7TT or email  
editorial@cats.org.uk

CP's team of veterinary experts tackle your feline-related questions...



**Q** My cat has recently been diagnosed with diabetes which I found rather surprising as he is only eight years old. I've been given a regime by our vet but I'm worried for my cat. I work full time and can't always get home during the day and don't want him to have an 'episode' while I'm gone. What does the future hold for diabetic cats and do you think he's suffering by having it? He's my best friend and I feel so badly that he has to cope with all this but I can't bear the thought of losing him.

Jean Bradbury, Cheshire

**A** We're sorry to hear your cat has been diagnosed with diabetes. We absolutely understand the bond that develops between owners and their cats and so how distressing you have found the diagnosis. Sadly it is a common and complex disorder seen in middle-aged to older cats. In some cases, it is associated with feline obesity, a growing issue in our UK pets, and sometimes it is associated with drug administration following treatment of other disorders, though in others, no predisposing factor can be found. Feline diabetes mellitus is closest to human type II diabetes, and results in the reduced ability of cells to take up glucose – due to a lack of, and/or the cells' reduced ability to respond to, the pancreas hormone, insulin. Male cats are most commonly affected. The resulting persistently high blood glucose levels lead to increased urine output which itself leads to increased thirst, weight loss and in some cases a ravenous appetite. Glucose in the urine can predispose to recurrent cystitis. The condition can also lead to a metabolic crisis known as ketoacidosis which is life-threatening.

Most affected cats require regular insulin injections together with careful dietary management – if stabilised early, some cats will go into remission without requiring treatment, though the condition can recur. Unfortunately, it is difficult to comment on your specific cat, as every case is different. Diabetic cats respond to insulin injections differently – the timing of injection and its peak effect at bringing glucose levels down varies from cat to cat, and timing feeding around this can be important. Some cats are hospitalised at the vets for a period while trying to establish the best regime to suit; sometimes owners are able to monitor affected cats at home. Such monitoring can be helpful to know when the peak effect of insulin is and so when the glucose level is likely to be at its lowest.

Once stable, monitoring weight, water intake, behaviour and, often, blood glucose and hormone levels are helpful guides to appraise how well your cat is responding to treatment longer term. Many cats cope well with the treatment and, with owner dedication, you may be reassured to know that many cats, particularly those with no concurrent

diseases, will respond well to treatment and enjoy a good quality of life for many years.

We recommend you develop a good relationship with your vet and discuss all your concerns so that you can work together to develop the best pattern of care. You may wish to find a reliable neighbour or experienced pet sitter to check on your cat while you out. You may also find our Diabetic Cat Register helpful. This support and (non-veterinary) advice network offers volunteers who have experience of living with a diabetic cat and are willing to share their knowledge with worried owners. The register is available by contacting our National Helpline on 03000 12 12 12 or email [helpline@cats.org.uk](mailto:helpline@cats.org.uk) We wish you and your cat the very best and hope that he stabilises quickly.

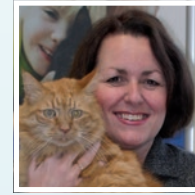
**Q** I am a recently new cat owner, having only ever had dogs before. I didn't set out to be one but I seem to have been 'adopted' by a stray cat who had taken to living in our garden. We advertised and checked the local lost and found registers, but couldn't find her owners and I'd like to do my best for her as she is a lovely little thing. We've had her vaccinated and chipped and checked she was neutered. The vet gave me some good basic advice about cat owning but I was surprised when he told me I could not use the same flea treatment on her as I use for my dogs. He told me it was toxic to them, but I wanted to find out more. Can you explain why this is? Are cats really that different to dogs?

Margaret Stenness, Wiltshire

**A** Congratulations on becoming a cat owner! There is an old veterinary adage, 'Cats are not small dogs', and this applies to so many aspects of our approach to them. Even the history of their domestication is vastly different! I'm sure you've already found out some of the differences between the two species – for example, in terms of their behaviour, their appearance and their diet. In fact, it is thought that the difference in diet may be responsible for the unique sensitivity of cats to a number of chemicals, including some of the dog flea products. Cats are extremely specialised hunters and their digestive system has evolved to suit this – they are obligate carnivores and cannot be vegetarian because they are unable to metabolise their food in the same way. In particular, cats lack a specific enzyme called glucuronyl transferase which helps many other species to break down certain chemicals.

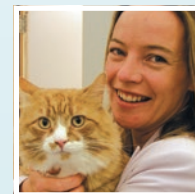
Some dog flea products contain a concentrated form of a drug called permethrin. This chemical is broken down by the liver and it is thought the difference in metabolism is what leaves cats so very sensitive to it, causing them acute neurological problems, for which there is no antidote. Exposure to even tiny quantities of the concentrated form

## THE EXPERTS



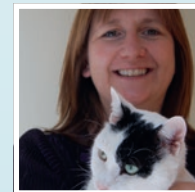
**Maggie Roberts BVM&S  
MRCVS**

After qualifying at Edinburgh University in 1986, Maggie went on to work primarily in private practice. Maggie first worked for CP as Veterinary Officer from 1997-99; her interest in feline medicine brought her back to the charity as Director of Veterinary Services in 2006. She has three cats, Trevor, Frankie and Ronnie.



**Beth Skillings  
BVSc MRCVS**

Beth qualified at the University of Liverpool in 1998 and went on to work in general veterinary practice until 2005 when she joined CP as Head of Veterinary Services. Beth moved into a new role as Clinical Veterinary Officer in November 2006. Beth has a CP cat, Humphrey.



**Lisa Morrow BMLSc,  
DVM, MSc (Vet Epi)  
MRCVS**

Lisa graduated from the Ontario Veterinary College at the University of Guelph, Canada in 2000. Lisa first worked with CP as an Adoption Centre Vet at Derby Adoption Centre and was CP Head of Veterinary Services from 2003-2005. Lisa recently rejoined CP as Field Veterinary Officer in the northern region of the UK. She has two black cats, Kiwi and Mango.



**Karen Hiestand  
BVSc MRCVS**

Karen graduated from Massey University in New Zealand in 2001 and spent two years in mixed practise in her home country. Since then, she has interspersed locumming around the UK with volunteer veterinary work. Karen is the Field Veterinary Officer for the southern region of the UK. She has one cat called Dexter.

Our veterinary surgeons have provided the advice on these pages, but for specific cases and health concerns it is important that you consult your own vet who will be able to look at your cat's history and do a clinical examination.



of the drug can sadly have fatal consequences in cats. These products are freely available over the counter, so be careful to always check the packaging carefully, and it is recommended to seek your vet's advice on optimum and safe flea control for all the pets in the household. It is better to be safe than sorry!

**Q** My cat is 11 years old and I have had her since she was three and during this time she has always slept with me.

However, just recently she has started constantly licking me and prodding and pulling me around during the night. If I turn over to get away from it she just comes round the other side and starts again. She doesn't seem to be ill but it's interfering with my sleep and I don't want to end up getting cross with her – why is she doing this, please help?

Carol Hartley via email

**A** I'm sorry to hear that you're getting disturbed sleep, it's not fun! Even though your cat doesn't seem unwell, they are masters at disguising illness. When cats show a change in behaviour, the first thing we always recommend is that you get your cat checked out by your vet. Please ensure that you specifically discuss her recent night time activities with the vet to rule out any medical problems that could be causing this behaviour. Once she's been checked out, there are a number of possible behavioural causes. For example, cats are crepuscular, meaning that they are naturally more active during dawn and dusk. With the increasing day length, this can affect your cat's activity levels.

Does your cat seem to want something in particular like food or attention? If so, try to give her options to meet her needs herself. If she is bugging you for food and the vet doesn't feel there is a medical reason for this, then try feeding her daily allowance little and often throughout the day and leave a portion down at night too. To keep her amused, you could try hiding some dry food in cardboard egg boxes so that she has to paw out the biscuits and 'hunt' for her food. Always 'show' the cat how to use new feeding enrichment ideas so that they can easily get the hang of it and prevent them losing interest or getting frustrated.

There are also commercially available items such as puzzle boards and food balls which have holes for dry food to fall out when it is moved. If she's after attention, remember that giving her any kind of attention (whether it's positive or not) is going to reinforce the behaviour, so that she's more likely to behave the same way the next time she wants attention. If this is the underlying cause then it's best to ignore her when she's doing this at night, but please give her fuss during the day when it's appropriate.

There are many possible reasons that could cause this behaviour, and these are just a few ideas. Cats Protection can only give general advice and information on the care of cats. Therefore, for specific guidance and help with your cat, we would highly recommend that you consult your own vet who may recommend a referral to a suitably qualified behaviourist or alternatively go to the Association of Pet Behaviour Counsellors (APBC) website [www.apbc.org.uk](http://www.apbc.org.uk) to find your nearest qualified behaviourist.