

# 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** I'm looking for a bit of advice, my cat, who is one year old, tends to eat spiders. He catches them, plays around with them then eats them. I'm worried sick with him doing this due to these false widows that are going around. Just wondering if there's anything I can do to stop this. Any advice would be gratefully appreciated.

Catherine Hastie, via email

**A** False widow spiders are not known to cause a specific issue to cats. If bitten, like with people, there is the possibility of pain, swelling, redness and even effects such as vomiting or a fever. Ingestion is not likely to be an issue (unless perhaps bitten in the mouth) as any venom will be deactivated through the digestion process. If a cat is bitten by a false widow or showing the symptoms described (which could also be attributable to other problems), then treatment may be needed to control any discomfort and veterinary advice should be sought. However, we have found no reports of false widow spider bites to cats so at the moment the risk seems to be very low. Encouraging appropriate alternative forms of play may reduce a cat's interest in spiders. Other biting creatures such as fleas are more likely to pose a problem to cats and we would recommend these were controlled through regular treatment of the pet and home using appropriate treatments safe for cats. If you have specific concerns about your cat's health, then do speak to your vet.

Cats are hunters and their instinct is to catch prey. Provide a variety of toys, such as ping pong balls and fishing rod toys on which your cat can direct this behaviour towards. Cats can sit for a long time watching their prey and will only pounce when they are sure of a kill so even watching toys is enough to stimulate the mind into prey mode. Make the toy 'alive' by moving it in a way that makes the cat react. It is particularly important to allow the cat to regularly 'catch and attack' the toy to help prevent frustration and release happy hormones – endorphins. Rotate the toys often to keep the games interesting. Short games of a minute or two frequently through the day are best to mimic the cat's natural hunting activity. Cats are generally most active during dawn and dusk (as this is normally when their prey is most active), so it can be useful to have extra play sessions during these times to use up that extra energy. Cats in the wild spend a lot of their time on short, frequent hunting expeditions. In comparison, our domestic cats are given food bowls, so a meal doesn't take long to eat and doesn't make use of their great senses. Create interest at meal times by hiding food around the house for your cat to search out,

make a pyramid out of cardboard toilet roll tubes and hide food in the tubes, or use a puzzle ball. Lastly, don't leave your cat unsupervised with toys which might be shredded and/or eaten, or where they could become caught up in string.

**Q** We recently took on a cat that lived under our bed and would only come out at night, to vanish instantly if we so much as moved in the dark. This went on for six weeks after which we determined it was cruel to keep her under these conditions and let her roam free outdoors instead. I admit I feel that I have failed in some way.

David Bishop, East Sussex

**A** All adult cats and kittens show considerable individual variation in their friendliness towards humans, whether familiar or unfamiliar, and even kittens from the same litter can differ considerably in their friendliness. One will be shy; one will be confident and explore the room while another will seek the company of humans. However, in general terms, if a cat is to be a confident, happy pet when homed, it must be well socialised when young. The socialisation phase of a kitten's development lasts from approximately two to eight weeks of age, although there is some variation between individual kittens. During this phase kittens need to be exposed to as many aspects of the domestic environment as possible. At this time, the kittens' brain and sensory systems are still developing, and the stimuli they encounter influence how this development occurs.

The function of this period is to give the kitten a 'window' in order for them to learn which aspects of their environment are 'normal' and 'safe'. Conversely, they are much more likely to be scared of anything that they don't come across during this period once they become adults. Therefore it is crucial that young kittens have been handled by as many different people as possible so they are happy being handled as an adult.

After about eight weeks of age, when the socialisation period ends, kittens will tend to be fearful of things that they have not come across before. This is why feral kittens that do not have any contact with people in the first two months of life are fearful of people when they are handled later as adults.

Kittens that first come into contact with people after about eight weeks will be very fearful and need to be taught that people are not threatening. This takes a gradual approach with plenty of time and patience. Equally, adult

cats that are fearful of people should be allowed to approach in their own time – it will be counter-productive to force contact as this will only make them feel more scared of humans.

Some adult cats may be fearful and difficult to handle when they first come into an adoption centre. This may be for a variety of reasons including poor socialisation, genetics, stress or previous traumatic experiences. They cannot be socialised in the same way as young kittens once they have passed the socialisation period as brain development is complete, but it may be possible to desensitise them so they are more relaxed and are more likely to be homed successfully.

Desensitisation is a gradual process of trying to increase the cat's confidence by having very limited and non-threatening contact with them and gradually increasing the amount and duration of contact over days and weeks. Food is used as an incentive. Some cats will improve rapidly and others may take a long time or never be desensitised. Cats must have had at least some socialisation as kittens for desensitisation to be successful. It is not suitable for true feral cats and those who have had no socialisation at all, and these cats will have to be homed to a farm or stables rather than a domestic home.

It is always worth a vet check first, to ensure your cat does not have any health issues that are causing her to behave in this way. If not, your cat may well be happier able to free-roam outside if she does not seek out human company or traditional home comforts. As long as she is able to access to her key essential resources – such as food, water and shelter without fear, and you are able to keep an eye on her from a distance, this arrangement may well suit her fine. If she can control her environment and choose interaction on her own terms, she may become friendlier in time. If in any doubt, seek your vet's advice, and for guidance on an appropriate desensitisation programme, your vet may refer you to a suitably qualified behaviourist.

You may be interested in our free feline behaviour e-learning course that is available on our website. This goes into more details of the things that make cats, cats! [www.cats.org.uk/learn/e-learning-ufo](http://www.cats.org.uk/learn/e-learning-ufo)

**Q My cat was recently neutered and she is wearing the Elizabethan collar, but somehow she manages to keep taking it off and licking her wound. What can I do?**

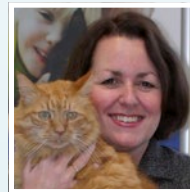
**Rosalind Matthews via email**

**A** Many cats tolerate wearing an Elizabethan collar well but there are some that will manage to remove them. Most cats will take a few hours to adjust though and learn how to negotiate doorways and their food bowl. Check how well the collar fits your cat and make sure that it sits snugly on her neck and is not too big for her. Ask your vet how to secure it so that it is not too tight, but tight enough to prevent a cat's paw from being able to slip underneath and remove the collar.

If your cat is licking her stitches because her wound is painful, it would be worth taking her to the vet for a check-up. If the wound looks red or swollen, if the stitches look tight or if there is any weeping or oozing from the wound, these are all signs that the wound may have become infected which will be sore.

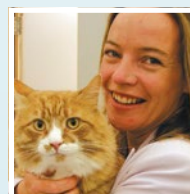
If your cat simply objects to wearing the collar, alternatives are available such as inflatable collars or floppy, soft material collars that hang down like a clown's ruffle. Both styles work by preventing the cat from being able to reach its stitches. A light dressing over the stitches may sometimes be needed to protect the area from interference and in extreme cases, a soft body suit type of covering might be necessary. Your vet will be able to advise on which would be the best option.

## THE EXPERTS



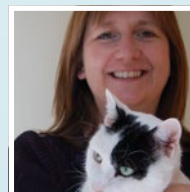
**Maggie Roberts BVM&S MRCVS**

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.



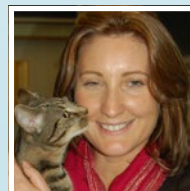
**Beth Skillings BVSc MRCVS**

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 practice in her home country. Since then, she has interspersed locum work 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.