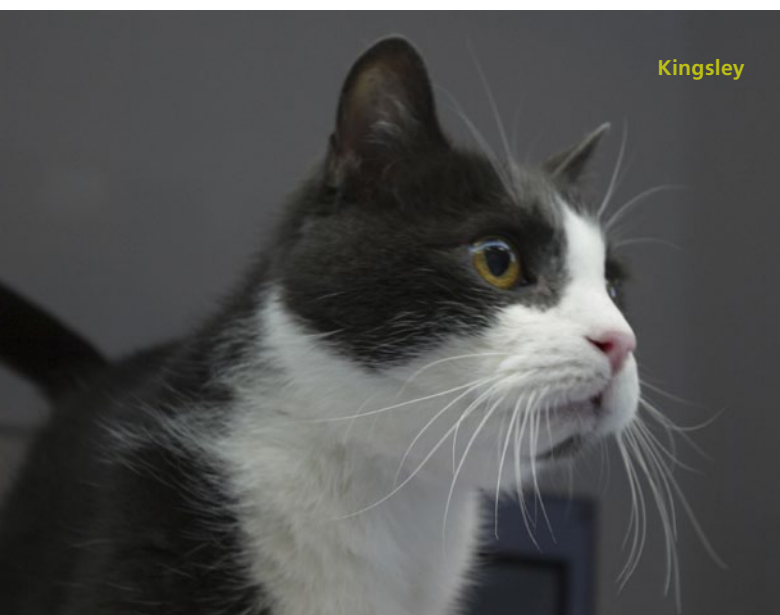


Living with diabetes

Francesca Watson finds out from two dedicated supporters that diabetes doesn't have to be daunting



Jazz



Kingsley

When it comes to our branches and adoption centres all our cats have one thing in common – they're looking for a loving new home, an opportunity to live out their lives surrounded by warmth and affection and to be able to give the same back.

Speak to the volunteers and staff and you'll not be surprised to find that there are some cats that are considered more difficult to home due to ongoing medical conditions, but thankfully there is the conviction among all that there is a home for every cat, no matter how long it takes.

At the National Cat Adoption Centre (NCAC) in Chelwood Gate, Sussex they had a recent example of this. Diabetic cats are always hard to place as the prospect of daily care involving diet and injections can be quite daunting to some, not least the worry of having an 'ill' cat. But in reality, providing the necessary treatment is received, there is no reason why diabetic cats should not enjoy a relatively normal life for years.

All that Jazz

In January 2010 Sharon and Johnny Allen were at the NCAC looking for another cat to add to their home after the sad demise of Bagheera, one of their three cats.

Sharon takes on the tale: "Bagheera began to show signs; he became ravenous for food, even eating the Brussel sprouts that had fallen off our plates! He'd never shown a partiality to these before so we knew something was wrong. He was diagnosed with late onset diabetes and we soon learned how to look after him with this condition. We learned to inject him daily, monitor his food, keep a close eye on his general condition and although he did stabilise for a while, he was an old cat with other complications and eventually it was time to let him go.

"We knew we had to get another cat and decided to go to the NCC and see the cats they had ready for rehoming. When I explained that we'd just lost Bagheera, who'd been diabetic, I could see the Cat Care Assistant's eyes light up and he immediately offered to show us Jazz who was, he said, 'a beautiful cat also with diabetes'. We agreed that we'd visit her after we'd looked around. The next cat we saw was Kingsley and he had a very stately fashion about him. We were taken with him even before we found out that he too had diabetes!

We were then introduced to Jazz. The door of the pen was opened but she just gave us a quick look and then put her head down again. She looked really miserable and depressed. I knew there and then that we had to have her. A home visit was arranged that day to check out our cottage and while we were talking about Jazz I announced that we had to take Kingsley too. I think Cats Protection was very pleased to hear this. I know that they find diabetic cats hard to rehome and to have two taken must have been quite a relief!"

Kingsley immediately settled in to his new home. He ventures outdoors occasionally but as Sharon puts it "He's a stately old bloke who's really like a lodger who sits in the window in the sunshine." This cat lives for food and doesn't even notice the daily injections because he's too busy eating! Kingsley was a thin cat but he is now healthily putting on weight and his diabetes is beginning to stabilise.

Jazz took a little more patience and more time to settle. At first she would not eat and Sharon tried everything; dried food, wet food, syringing it... but after four days Jazz suddenly began to eat.

Photos: Martin Dewhurst

Sharon explains "It took patience, calm and gentleness. I realised that she wanted me there when she was eating, not for long but she found my presence reassuring. They'd both come from living in a pen and arrived at a new home. The change would have been just as disorientating for a cat without diabetes – it just takes a little more patience but it is more than worth it. Jazz is now a very happy cat and during the summer it's sometimes difficult to find her to give her injection. She just loves the outdoors and I have to call her back home!"

Most people whose cats develop diabetes will be daunted by the prospect of injecting but will take it on. It can take time to find the correct dose of insulin required but it is a daily requirement and the dose will be worked out by your vet. Staff will often demonstrate to owners injection techniques and many will find caring for a diabetic cat incredibly rewarding and injecting a cat soon becomes part of an easy daily routine.

Sharon and Johnny concur. "We weren't fazed by the thought of injections as we'd had enough experience with Bagheera. It can be an initial worry but we got over it quickly. The needles are very small, just one centimetre in length, and very easy to handle, all you do is draw up the insulin and inject the cat in the scruff of the neck. The needle goes in sideways and then you push the plunger and you're done. We give the injections when they're eating. Kingsley doesn't notice because he's so intent on his food and he actually purrs when he's injected! Jazz is different because we had to settle her first but I found that if I fed her on a windowsill she'd be level with me when I injected her I could stop her running off and reassure her and keep her calm."

Both the cats have different colour coded medicines; Kingsley is on a small amount, Jazz on a little more. They are also on special diabetic food recommended by the vets.

Regular check ups

Consistency is the key with the treatment of diabetes whether it be the routine of injections, feeding regimes or exercise. The majority of treatment and monitoring takes place at home but there are regular check ups with occasional blood tests to monitor any changes. Some owners find that keeping a diary helps logging such things as water intake, behaviour changes and weight.

Sharon and Johnny certainly don't see that their lives are inconvenienced by caring for Jazz and Kingsley and they still manage to get away on holiday during the year. They are lucky to have a regular cat-sitter who comes and stays in their cottage and looks after the animals. She is experienced in caring for diabetic cats, administering injections, ensuring the correct food and drink is given and just as importantly is there to administer love and affection in Sharon and Johnny's absence.

Cats Protection's Diabetic Cat Register lists volunteer contacts who have experience of caring for diabetic cats who can offer advice and support.

Jazz and Kingsley are lucky cats. They've been taken on by Sharon and Johnny when many passed them by. Yes, it can be more challenging, involve a more disciplined cat care regime but the rewards are immense. Sharon has no regrets, she says simply, "Ultimately they're the same as any other cat – they just want someone to love them and I'm glad we could do that for them." ●

Diabetes: The facts

Diabetes mellitus affects the control of blood sugar levels and usually occurs in middle-aged and older cats, particularly those that are overweight. There may also be a genetic predisposition to the condition.

After eating, a cat's blood glucose level rises. In normal cats, the pancreas responds to this rise by releasing a hormone called insulin into the blood. Insulin processes the excess glucose and brings the level back down to normal.

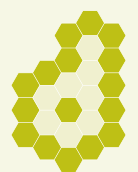
A diabetic cat does not produce enough insulin or does not respond properly to the insulin he does produce, leaving the body with abnormally high levels of circulating glucose. Untreated, diabetes can make a cat extremely ill.

The signs to look out for are increased thirst and/or appetite, more frequent urination, weight loss, lethargy/weakness, vomiting and being prone to other infections such as skin or urinary. Treatment is given in the form of diet and medication, most often insulin injections, sometimes oral drugs. Usually, diabetic cats require daily injections for the rest of their lives but some cats, if treated early, will stabilise, becoming non-diabetic again for weeks, months or even years.



The Diabetic Cat Register

Cats Protection has compiled a register of volunteers who have had experience with diabetic cats and who are willing to offer their non-veterinary advice and support to owners. For a hardcopy of the register, please send a SAE (stamps to the value of 50p) to: Helpline, Cats Protection, National Cat Centre, Chelwood Gate, Haywards Heath, Sussex RH17 7TT or, contact Helpline on: T: 03000 12 12 12 E: helpline@cats.org.uk



diabeticREGISTER
your directory of contacts with experience of coping with a diabetic cat