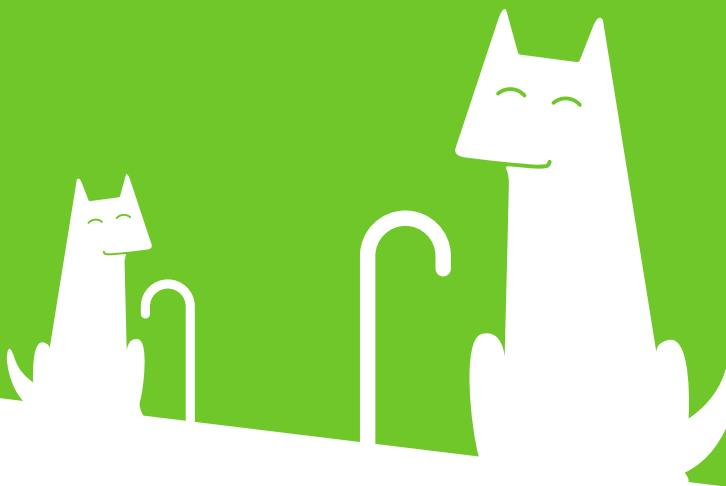


Elderly cats



CATS PROTECTION
ESSENTIAL GUIDE 16



Not yet over the hill, but often overlooked

As your cat enters their golden years, they'll need some extra understanding for their changing lifestyle. Cats are generally considered geriatric from around 12 years of age and there are lots of simple steps you can take to ensure the later years of your cat's life are comfortable and happy. You will be rewarded with a content pet, who is often happy to spend much time quietly at home as a wonderful companion.

What happens during ageing?

- Activity levels decrease and muscle tone reduces
- Appetite and/or fluid intake may change
- Vision and/or hearing may not be as acute
- Bowel and urinary system functions may change
- The immune system may weaken
- Light sleep may increase but deep sleep decreases
- Coat condition may deteriorate
- Age-associated disorders may develop, such as arthritis, diabetes, hyperthyroidism or renal impairment
- Psychological and behavioural changes can occur, such as senility, aggression, increased dependence or excessive vocalisation

Many owners view ageing as a 'normal' process and feel that nothing will help their cat, and some owners worry about mentioning problems they've noticed in their older cat as they fear the vet will say it's serious or that the cat may need to be euthanased. However, these concerns are often unfounded and your vet is there to help wherever they can. Talk to your vet to discuss any concerns you may have. It is very important to take your older cat to see the vet regularly to ensure

they are not suffering or in hidden pain – there are lots of treatments available for many of the issues. You'll want them to enjoy their golden years free from discomfort.

Preventative healthcare

Elderly cats usually need to be taken to the vet for a health check more often than younger, healthier cats, particularly if they have any age-associated symptoms or diseases. Your vet can advise you on how frequently they need to be seen and many surgeries now run special 'geriatric' clinics. Regular weight checks are also important, as are keeping up regular booster vaccinations because cats' immune systems can weaken with age.

Feeding requirements

There is a variety of senior diets available to provide balanced nutrition aimed specifically for older cats. Always ensure that fresh water is always on offer in several different locations throughout the home, including upstairs and downstairs. Provide smaller meals little and often. Monitor your cat's appetite closely as this can decrease or increase, depending on a variety of health factors. If your cat's sense of smell reduces, this can lead to a decrease in appetite – you can try warming the food, which will increase the smell and encourage feeding.

Surgery considerations

Any surgery on an elderly cat should be considered carefully as there may be an increased risk of other health problems. Your vet will carry out a thorough pre-operative assessment to check your cat's internal health. They can advise you on any specific, individual concerns and may suggest diagnostic tests to be run first.

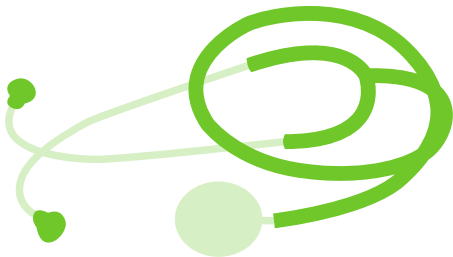
Grooming

Older cats experiencing stiffness may find it more difficult to wash and groom so may have a poorer coat condition. You may need to help by grooming your cat gently with a soft brush. Check their claws regularly as they may have difficulty scratching to keep their claws in shape. As cats get older, their claws can become thicker and longer. Be careful that their claws don't curl round into their pads. Staff at your veterinary surgery can advise you how to look after their coat and claws. Be aware that cats may be sensitive to being touched or groomed in certain areas if they have pain or discomfort.

When to take your cat to the vet

In addition to your regular pet health checks, your cat should be seen by a vet if there are changes to their:

- general health
- appetite and/or thirst
- elimination of faeces and/or urine
- mobility/activity or if they seem to be in pain
- behaviour – including vocalisation or grumpiness. Reduced interaction with you or other pets can be a sign that not all is well with your pet's health



For more information, see Cats Protection's *Veterinary Guide: You and your vet*.

The following indicates some health issues to watch out for, that elderly cats can be predisposed to:

Senility and cognitive dysfunction

Cognitive dysfunction is a decline in higher brain functions, including memory and learning that often occurs with old age. Signs include:

- disorientation
- changes in social and environmental interaction
- changes in sleeping/waking patterns, such as sleeping more during the day and being restless at night
- vocalisation
- house soiling

If you have noticed any changes in your cat's behaviour, take them to your vets for a health check, discussing the behaviour changes with your vet in as much detail as you can.

Constipation

Cats can experience changes in bowel habits as they grow older, including constipation. Signs of constipation include decreased frequency of passing faeces, straining to pass, pain and/or crying when trying to and passing hard faeces. You must ensure your cat always has access to fresh water – speak to your vet for dietary and treatment advice.

Deafness

Deaf cats compensate for their lack of hearing by using their other senses, so deafness in cats often goes unnoticed. Signs of deafness may include:

- no response when called or to loud sounds
- being easily startled
- loud miaowing
- signs of dizziness or disorientation

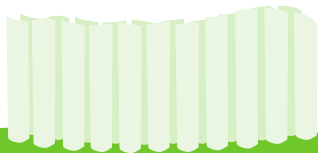
Signs of ear disease which may cause deafness include:

- shaking the head
- clawing at the ear
- pus, discharge or an unpleasant odour from the ear

For more information on how to help your deaf cat, see Cats Protection's *Veterinary Guide: Cats with disabilities*.

Dental disease

Older cats need regular dental health checks to check for signs of dental disease, including tartar build up and red, inflamed gums. Speak to your vet about health checks and preventative care for your cat's teeth. For more information on diagnosis and treatment, see Cats Protection's *Veterinary Guide: Teeth and oral health*.

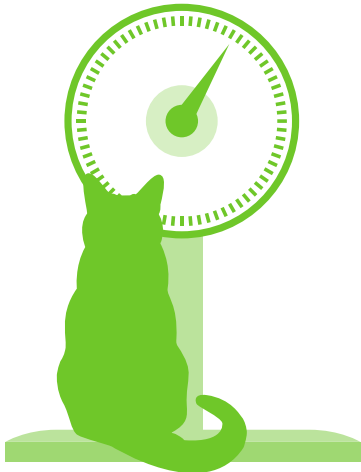


Diabetes mellitus

This condition affects the control of blood sugar levels and usually occurs in middle-aged and older cats, particularly those that are overweight. The signs of diabetes can be similar to a number of other diseases and include:

- increased thirst and/or appetite
- passing more urine
- weight loss
- lethargy/weakness
- vomiting
- being more prone to other infections eg skin or urinary tract infections

Diabetes is often treated more successfully if detected and treated in the early stages. For more information see Cats Protection's *Veterinary Guide: Diabetes*.



Hyperthyroidism

The thyroid is made up of two glands located on either side of the windpipe at the base of your cat's neck. It helps to regulate metabolic rate. In some cats, the thyroid becomes overactive which speeds up the metabolism. Hyperthyroidism mainly affects cats over the age of 10 and can occur in either or both of the glands. The signs may vary from cat to cat, but most commonly include:

- increased appetite and/or thirst
- weight loss
- behavioural changes such as hyperactivity, restlessness and being more vocal
- vomiting
- diarrhoea
- poor coat condition

If you notice any of these symptoms, take your cat to see your vet for a health check. Once a cat is treated for hyperthyroidism, they will return to normal fairly quickly in most cases. If the disease has been detected and treated early on the cat often lives several more years. Untreated, it can damage other organs. For more information on diagnosis and treatment see Cats Protection's *Veterinary Guide: Hyperthyroidism*.

Kidney disease

Disease of the kidneys is one of the most common problems affecting middle-aged and older cats. Unfortunately, damage to the kidneys is irreversible and tends to worsen over a period of time. However, with the help of various treatments, affected cats can often maintain a good quality of life for several months or years. Most cats do not show signs of chronic

kidney disease until 75 per cent of the kidneys have been damaged. Signs can vary between individuals but the most common signs are:

- increased thirst
- passing more urine
- poor appetite
- weight loss
- poor coat condition
- vomiting
- lethargy
- depression
- bad breath

Many vets will try to diagnose kidney disease in its early stages, before clinical signs develop, by offering cat owners the option of urine and blood tests for their older cats at routine check-ups or vaccinations. By doing this, early dietary management or other treatment may significantly extend an affected cat's life expectancy and quality of life. For more information on diagnosis and treatment see Cats Protection's *Veterinary Guide: Kidney or renal disease*.

Cancer

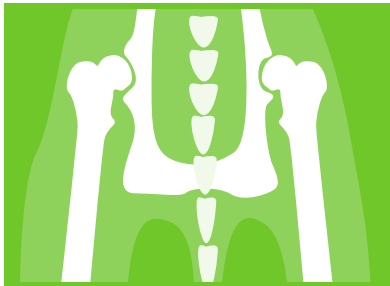
Cats can develop different types of tumours which may either be benign – not usually harmful – or malignant – faster growing and usually harmful. Sometimes the tumours can spread to other areas of the body. It is a good idea to regularly feel all over your cat's body for any lumps or bumps. Other signs of cancer vary dependent on the organ affected, but can include weight loss, increased thirst, passing more urine, depression, poor coat condition, vomiting and/or diarrhoea.

Arthritis

The term 'arthritis' means inflammation of the joint and this condition is extremely common in cats. However, it often goes unnoticed as owners think the cat is just slowing down with age, when it is actually a very painful condition. It is worth getting your cat checked regularly as treating chronic problems like arthritis will make a huge difference to their quality of life. The main signs shown in cats are:

- a change in behaviour, for example:
 - grumpiness, reduced interaction or tolerance with people – the discomfort associated with arthritis can be a cause of aggression in cats
 - not using the litter tray if the sides of the tray are too high for your cat to easily get into
 - reduced interest in play
- difficulty grooming, especially the middle of the back and tail
- increased stiffness immediately after resting which gets better with movement
- stiffness, lameness and reduced mobility – an unwillingness to jump or climb

If your cat is overweight, this can make arthritis worse so it is very important to ensure they maintain an ideal weight. Regular, moderate exercise will also help – play is the best way to achieve this.



Arthritis is an ongoing problem and cannot be cured. However, in many cases it can be managed successfully allowing your cat to be mobile, pain-free and to lead a reasonably active life.

For more information see Cats Protection's [Veterinary Guide: Arthritis](#).

Hypertension

In cats, high blood pressure – known as hypertension – often occurs in association with another underlying disease – for example, cats suffering from kidney disease or hyperthyroidism often have some degree of hypertension as well. It can also occur as a primary problem in itself. The organs most vulnerable to the effects of high blood pressure are the eyes, kidneys, heart and brain. Initially there may be very few signs of high blood pressure, particularly if it is the primary problem but sometimes the signs can occur very suddenly. Signs of hypertension include:

- blindness
- changes inside the eye, including bleeding
- disorientation
- seizures

Many cats can go on to lead relatively normal lives following diagnosis and stabilisation of hypertension, but this will depend on the type and severity of any underlying disease. If left untreated, these signs can become permanent so seek veterinary advice as soon as possible. For more information see Cats Protection's [Veterinary Guide: Hypertension](#).

Cat-friendly homes for the elderly feline

There are a number of small changes that can be made to your home which will have a big impact on the quality of your cat's life. While a number of older cats appear to be 'as young as they feel' with many still showing kitten-like behaviours, others can benefit from a few home tweaks that ensure that all their resources are within easy reach.

What you can do to help an older cat

Microchip

Make sure your cat is microchipped in case they become disorientated or goes missing. A microchip carries a unique number linked to a database holding your contact details, allowing you to be quickly traced should they stray and be scanned. See Cats Protection's *Essential Guide: Microchipping* for more information.

Beds

Allow your cat to reach favourite places to rest by strategically placing boxes or items of furniture for them to climb. Make sure they have a variety of cosy, well-padded beds in safe warm places that can be readily accessed. Your cat may enjoy the hammock-style radiator beds as they are very warm.

Somewhere to perch up high

Older cats can find it difficult to make accurate calculations when jumping and are not as agile as they used to be, especially if they are stiff, in pain or have arthritis. Provide easy ways for cats to access their favourite areas, such as using a ramp or small foot stool to give them access to high surfaces. Make

sure it is wide enough and you could also cover it in carpet to give extra grip. It is a good idea to fashion some sort of crash mat underneath the ramp, in case the cat falls. Cushions under windowsills act as crash mats for uncoordinated or wobbly cats.

Litter trays and toileting

Provide several litter trays in the house at all times, even if your cat has toileted outside all of their life. There are many occasions when an older cat will need an indoor litter tray, such as when it's raining outside, if the normal toileting site has frozen over and is hard to dig, or if they feel intimidated by other neighbouring cats. Place the litter trays in quiet, safe areas of the home.

Providing a large tray gives the cat plenty of space to move around inside. Make sure the tray has a low side so they can get in and out more easily. Some litter types that were acceptable as an adult may be too coarse for older cats. Don't make any sudden changes, but provide additional trays with 3cm of soft, fine litter that they will find more comfortable under their paws.

Older cats are less able to defend themselves or a territory and as a result may become more anxious or dependant on their owners. Some cats will feel reassurance from owners that accompany them outside so they are protected against the neighbouring cats.

If your cat still prefers to toilet outside, provide a newly dug over border as close to the house as possible and maintain it regularly.



Water and food bowls

Place water and food bowls in a variety of easily accessible locations around the house, both upstairs and downstairs so they are easy to find and they don't have to walk up and down stairs just to get food and water. Speak to your vet about the most appropriate diet for your older cat.

Playtime

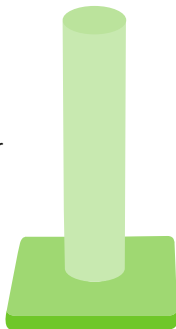
Older cats still like to play, but they need more gentle, brief games than when they were younger. Use toys that are unlikely to intimidate them, such as a feather attached to string that is slowly moved past them. Experiment with different toys to see what captures your cat's attention. Even if they only watch or slowly swipes the toy with a paw, it is still important beneficial mental stimulation.

Regular grooming

As older cats may struggle to look after their coats, additional help and gentle grooming will help to keep your cat's skin healthy and gives you some valuable bonding time with your cat. Stroking a cat is a great de-stressor and may lower an owner's blood pressure.

Scratching posts

Cats may still want to scratch but can find it difficult as they age. You could provide a horizontal scratching post or one with a lower gradient and softer material such as carpet, which they may find easier. Remember to check their claws regularly.



Routines

Cats are creatures of habit and this characteristic becomes more pronounced as they age. They prefer a familiar, regular routine to provide predictability. Where possible, avoid moving furniture so that your cat's environment is familiar and they can easily find their way around your home.

Veterinary care

Seek veterinary advice early if you are worried. Remember, many of the disorders that affect older cats can be treated and managed to allow your cat a happy and content life, particularly when treatment is sought early. However, inevitably there may come a time when your cat is in continual pain, discomfort or distress, and the most loving and courageous way you can show them how much you care is to end their suffering. See Cats Protection's *Essential Guide: When to let go* for further information.

Your elderly cat and you

Caring for an older cat in their twilight years brings a tremendous joy and many owners actively decide to adopt an older cat because of the endearing qualities they can offer. With their wandering days behind them, older cats tend to stay closer to home and appreciate gentle affection. Owners often comment on the special relationship they have with their older pet, enhanced by some simple measures and an understanding of their needs.

Learn more about your cat online!

Take a look at our free interactive tool to help you understand cats' origins and their behaviour within our homes. <http://learnonline.cats.org.uk/content/ufo>

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For more information about Cats Protection or to make a donation, please visit www.cats.org.uk or phone our Helpline on 03000 12 12 12.

Reg Charity 203644 (England and Wales) and SC037711 (Scotland)

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