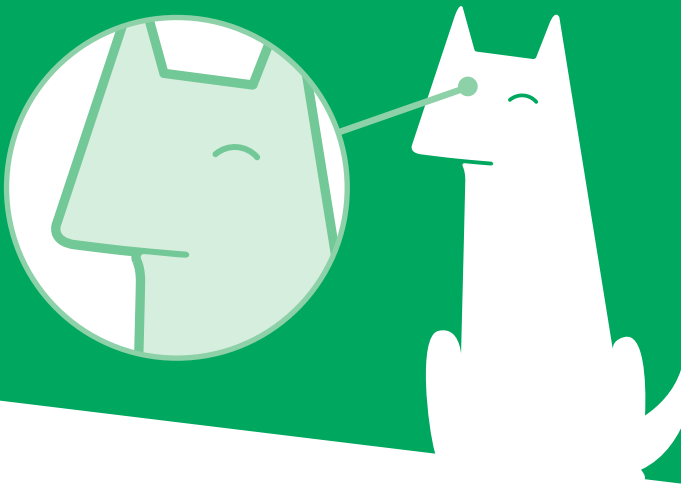
Cats with disabilities



CATS PROTECTION
VETERINARY GUIDE 7

Some cats are born with a disability, whereas others result from accidents, disease or the degenerative effects of old age. Cats are generally very good at adapting their lifestyle to cope with a disability, allowing them to still enjoy a good quality of life. This leaflet describes cats with some more common types of disability – blind cats, deaf cats, three-legged cats and wobbly cats affected by cerebellar hypoplasia.

Blind cats

Loss of sight is often very gradual and often owners don't realise how bad a cat's eyesight has become until it is identified at a regular veterinary examination. Blind cats usually adapt very well to the loss of sight, compensating by using their other senses more. Some cats are born with no or limited vision and compensate from birth.

What causes blindness?

Depending on the cause, blindness can be partial or complete and can be reversible or permanent. Some of the most common causes of blindness include:

- dry eye, as a consequence of feline herpesvirus or an eye injury
- high blood pressure resulting in detachment of the retina, the light-sensitive tissue that lines the inner surface of the eye – often caused by an overactive thyroid gland or kidney disease. Blindness in this case is often very sudden in onset, though if veterinary advice is sought immediately, it can sometimes be reversed
- injury
- glaucoma or increased pressure in the eye – as a consequence of an injury, tumour or inherited disease

- cataracts (when the eye lens becomes opaque) – as a result of an injury to the eye, diabetes or an inherited problem
- degeneration of the retina – this can be caused by dietary problems, toxins, infection or inherited disease
- tumours within the eye or eyes
- scarring to the clear surface of the eye from trauma or infection

If your cat is suffering from one or more of these conditions, he may require regular check-ups with your vet.

What are the signs that my cat is going blind?

You may notice the following signs if your cat is going, or has gone, blind:

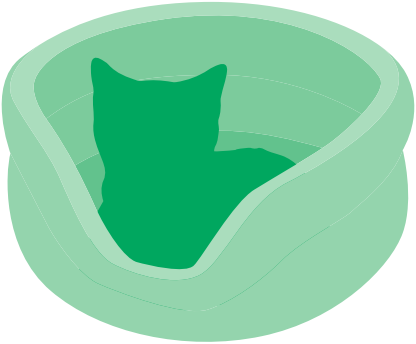
- bumping into things, particularly furniture that has been moved – this may be more apparent at night or in low light
- disorientation or change in normal behaviour
- if blind in one eye, a cat may be startled by sudden movements on their blind side
- a change in appearance of the eye – it may become enlarged, cloudy or change colour
- swelling or discharge from the eye
- pain in the eye – your cat may resent stroking on the head or face or may squint and try to keep the eye closed

How do I help my blind cat adapt?

If blindness is caused by disease or injury, one or both eyes may be removed. A cat that is suddenly blind can become easily disorientated. He may be unwilling to leave his sleeping area and may develop inappropriate toileting habits because he is unable to find the litter tray. Certain precautions will help ensure that your cat adapts to the condition as smoothly as possible. Here are a few tips:

Going outside

Cats Protection recommends that you do not let blind cats roam outside, for their own safety. Keep your cat indoors unless he can have access to a safely-fenced garden or run. Make sure he is microchipped and you may consider carefully fitting a quick-release collar stating his address and disability in case he escapes. You may need to pay more attention to an indoor cat's environment to keep things fun for him. Interactive toys and puzzle feeders can help to create interest. For further information, see Cats Protection's *Essential Guide – Indoor and outdoor cats*.



Finding his bearings

Try to encourage your cat to walk around on his own, as carrying him may cause him to become disorientated. Cats have scent glands on their paws that allow them to leave a trail of scent to follow – this is even more important for blind cats. If you do have to carry him, always put him down somewhere familiar such as his feeding or sleeping area so that he can easily get his bearings. Beware of lifting a blind cat onto raised surfaces as there is a chance he will fall.

Approaching your cat

Talk to your cat as you approach him to avoid startling him. If your cat is blind in one eye, try to approach him from the side he has sight in.

Getting around

As blind cats rely on scent and memory to find their way around, you should avoid moving furniture, food and litter trays. Don't leave obstacles in unexpected places where your cat could walk into them. If you have stairs, place a barrier across them until your cat knows where they are and learns to use them again. Putting a different textured carpet on the top and bottom steps can help your cat quickly learn when to anticipate when they have reached the top or bottom.

Whiskers become more important to blind cats to judge the cat's proximity to an object.

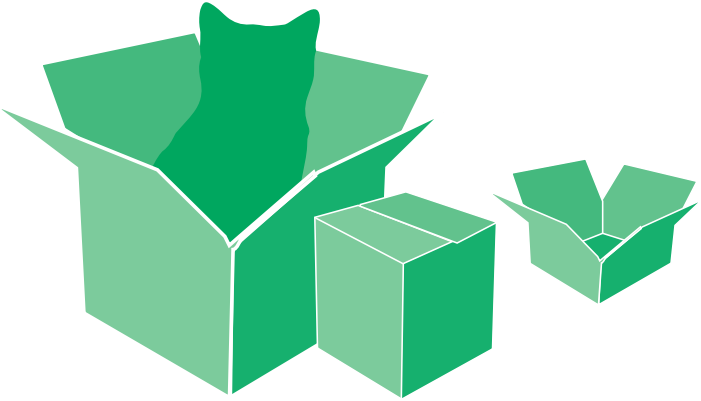
Play and exercise

Sound is obviously very important to a blind cat so he may enjoy playing with 'jingly' toys. It is important to encourage him to exercise as it is part of a cat's natural behaviour and will help to stop him becoming overweight.

Moving house with a blind cat

Moving house with a blind cat is similar to settling a sighted cat into a new home. See Cats Protection's *Essential Guide: Moving house*. However, blind cats will need a little extra attention and you should ensure that the new surroundings are safe.

Supervise excursions around the house until he seems confident. If he becomes disorientated, guide him back to a familiar place by using your voice or by walking with him.



Deaf cats

Some cats are born deaf, but many cats lose their hearing gradually as they age. Sudden loss of hearing is normally the result of illness or injury and may be temporary or permanent.

Deaf cats compensate for their lack of hearing by using their other senses more, so much so that it may be hard to tell whether or not they are deaf. There are varying degrees of deafness and different causes, which may or may not be treatable.

Types of deafness

There are two main types of deafness:
Where the sound cannot pass into the ear, due to:

- tumours
- outer and middle-ear infections
- wax build up
- ear mites

The type of deafness detailed above may be reversible by treating the underlying cause.

Where the nerves associated with the ear do not function properly, due to:

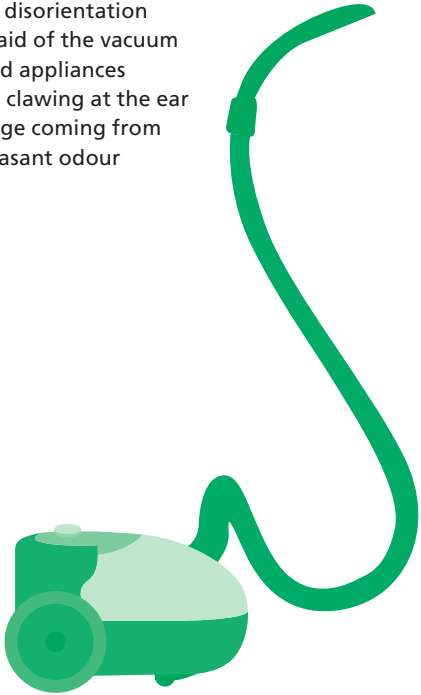
- genetic problems – eg in the case of some white cats
- inner ear infections
- drug toxicity
- noise trauma
- age-related degeneration

These conditions generally produce permanent deafness.

How can I tell if my cat is deaf?

Some deaf cats call out more often and more loudly – they cannot regulate their own volume – while others may become mute. It can be very difficult to determine if a cat is deaf, particularly if he has been deaf from birth and is very used to his condition, but other signs may include:

- failure to respond when spoken to or called
- being easily startled
- signs of dizziness or disorientation
- no longer being afraid of the vacuum cleaner or other loud appliances
- shaking the head or clawing at the ear
- pus or other discharge coming from the ear, or an unpleasant odour from the ears



How do I help my deaf cat adapt?

A deaf cat is easily startled because he won't be aware that you are approaching. Make sure that you walk heavily when approaching him, so he can feel the vibrations. At close range, sharp hand claps or stamping on the floor might still be sufficient to gain a partially-deaf cat's attention.

A deaf cat will not be able to hear danger signals such as cars or other animals, so Cats Protection advises that you keep your deaf cat indoors for his own safety and only let him out into a secure garden or outside run. Make sure that he is microchipped and you may consider carefully fitting a quick-release collar that states that he is deaf and has your details on it, in case he escapes. You may need to pay more attention to his environment to keep things fun for him. Interactive toys and puzzle feeders can help to create interest. See Cats Protection's *Essential Guide: Indoor and outdoor cats* for further information.

Deaf cats can learn to recognise hand signals or the flashing of a torch if they can't hear you calling them. Make sure the signal you choose to call your cat is distinct and consistent so he doesn't get confused.

Three-legged cats

Some cats are born with only three limbs, but the majority of three-legged cats have suffered injury or disease, which has led to amputation of the affected limb. Cats adjust to a three-legged lifestyle remarkably well, although the initial adaptation process can be a little challenging. However, once adjusted, most three-legged cats are able to jump, climb, hunt and play albeit perhaps a little more slowly than in their four-legged days. Young cats and males are more likely to become three-legged – amputation is often a result of traumatic injury, with males more likely to roam further than females, and younger exploring cats more likely to be involved in road accidents. Most three-legged cats have lost a hind limb, rather than a forelimb.

My cat has had his leg amputated, how can I help him adjust?

- confine your cat to the house at least, or take advice from your vet and follow any aftercare advice they provide. Be sure to speak to your vet about the subtle signs of pain in cats, as this may need managing in the post-operative period
- ensure there is easy access to a comfortable, easily accessible place to sleep, food, water, a litter tray and a scratching post. Although cats don't like to eat near to their drinking or toileting area, immediately following surgery, your cat is likely to appreciate these facilities being nearby
- other pets in the household may recognise a change. Cats rely on scent to identify the members of their social group and a stay at the vets can mean cats are not recognised when they return. It is prudent to reintroduce cats to one another slowly and only once the patient has had a chance to recover. See Cats Protection's *Essential Guide: Welcome home* regarding integration of cats

- your cat may take some time to relearn how to balance with three limbs. Limit access to high surfaces and keep him indoors until he is more confident. Provide stools that can be used as steps to help your cat to access things like the sofa
- move furniture closer together so it isn't so difficult to negotiate. As your cat's confidence and ability increases, furniture can gradually be moved back to its normal location
- be aware of litter tray problems. Toileting is a vulnerable activity for a cat and if they don't feel safe using their litter tray, they may choose to toilet elsewhere within the house. You may need to provide a step to improve access to the litter tray and be patient while he learns to cover, dig and clean himself with three legs instead of four
- your cat may appreciate help in grooming areas he has problems reaching due to difficulty balancing. If your cat isn't used to being groomed, start very slowly and be sure to make the experience positive by offering praise and rewards
- when he can go outside again, ensure he has sufficient access to his entry and exit points. If a cat feels under threat while trying to exit the house, he may become reluctant to go outside and this could lead to a behaviour problem. Maintain access to a litter tray for your cat. He may no longer feel confident enough to go to the toilet outside

Do three-legged cats think their leg is still there?

Some cats will feel that they can still use their missing limb – for example, many cats missing a hind leg, will continue to try to scratch their ear with the missing limb, for the rest of their lives. It is not absolutely known whether cats are affected by phantom limb sensation which affects a high proportion of human amputees, but they only rarely show signs suggestive of this.

Why is controlling weight so important in three-legged cats?

It is likely that the change in movement and load shared over the remaining limbs, may contribute to the development of arthritis later in life. The majority of elderly four-legged cats are already affected by arthritis, so it is possible that it may develop earlier in their three-legged counterparts. For this reason, it is especially important to control their weight carefully. Extra weight puts more strain on the remaining legs which can cause problems later in life. Cats which have lost a front leg may be particularly at risk of the consequences of excessive weight and arthritis, as the front legs carry more weight than the back legs. Some cats overeat when stressed and there is likely to be a reduction in exercise during recovery from amputation, so owners should be aware that their cat could be prone to becoming overweight. Discuss an optimum weight for your cat with your vet and ask them to help you in implementing an appropriate diet. See Cats Protection's *Essential Guide: Feeding and obesity*.

Cerebellar hypoplasia

Cerebellar hypoplasia is a condition which occurs in kittens as a result of interrupted development of the brain leading to uncoordinated movement or ataxia. Affected kittens are often referred to as 'wobbly kittens.' There can be many causes of ataxia, but this leaflet specifically addresses one of those causes – cerebellar hypoplasia.

What causes cerebellar hypoplasia?

Cerebellar hypoplasia occurs in kittens as a result of their mother being infected with a virus called feline parvovirus during pregnancy. It can also occasionally occur if the kitten is infected in the first few weeks after birth. Some or all of the litter of kittens may be affected and some individuals may be affected more so than others. The virus affects the cerebellum during the kitten's development and it is this part of the brain which is responsible for fine-tuning movement. See Cats Protection's *Veterinary Guide: Feline Parvovirus*.

What are the signs of cerebellar hypoplasia?

Wobbliness becomes apparent when kittens first start to move at a few weeks of age but is non-progressive so does not worsen over time. Cats are affected for the rest of their lives, and generally learn to cope with their condition. Affected cats may:

- stand with their legs far apart
- sway when they move
- lift their legs high when walking
- show nodding or head tremors, which may worsen when they focus to do something such as eat
- lose their balance

Is there any treatment for cerebellar hypoplasia?

Once the cerebellum has been damaged in this way, it cannot be repaired, so there is no treatment for cerebellar hypoplasia.

Does a cat with cerebellar hypoplasia require special care?

Here are a few tips to help improve the quality of life a cat with cerebellar hypoplasia:

- cats with cerebellar hypoplasia often appreciate a deep litter tray with high sides that they can use for support to balance when toileting, but make sure the cat can get in and out of it without difficulty. A large tray gives the cat plenty of space to move around inside it, and ensures it can't be tipped up
- affected cats can be messy eaters – feed in an easily cleaned area and use a sturdy water bowl that isn't easily turned over – for some cats, raising bowls a little can be helpful
- cats with cerebellar hypoplasia can find it difficult to accurately jump – provide easy ways for cats to access their favourite areas – cushions and rugs under windowsills can act as crash mats
- use a ramp to give an affected cat access to high surfaces. Make sure it is wide enough and cover it in carpet for extra grip – again a crash mat of sorts can be helpful, just in case
- Cats Protection recommends that you do not let affected cats roam outside unsupervised, for their own safety. Their uncoordinated movement may make it more difficult for them to escape easily from hazards. Keep your cat indoors unless he can have access to a safely-fenced garden or run. Make sure he is microchipped and you may consider carefully fitting a quick release collar stating his address and disability in case he escapes. You may need to pay more attention

to an indoor cat's environment to keep things fun for him. Interactive toys and puzzle feeders can help to create interest. See our *Essential Guide: Indoor and outdoor cats*
- keep claws trimmed, as it can be more difficult for them to 'unhook' themselves if they get a claw stuck
- carpets and rugs are often easier for affected cats to walk on than slippery floors

What is the outlook for kittens with cerebellar hypoplasia?

Most kittens are only affected mildly or moderately. With minor adjustments to their care they can enjoy a good quality of life. Occasionally, very severely affected kittens may be unable to perform even their basic functions and euthanasia may be recommended on welfare grounds.

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

ESSENTIAL GUIDES

1 Caring for your cat 84001
2 Welcome home 84002
3 Moving house 84003
4 Feeding and obesity 84004
5 Keeping your cat safe 84005
6 Neutering – family planning for felines 84006
7 When to let go 84007
8 Microchipping 84008
9 Understanding your cat's behaviour 84009
10 Managing your cat's behaviour 84010
11 Cats living together 84011
12 Indoor and outdoor cats 84012
13 Cats and the law 84013
14 Cats and people 84014
15 Caring for your kitten 84015
16 Elderly cats 84016
17 Feral cats 84017
18 Pregnant cats, birth and care of young kittens 84018

VETERINARY GUIDES

1 Arthritis 83201
2 Feline Lower Urinary Tract Disease (FLUTD) 83202
3 Diabetes 83203
4 Itchy cats and skin disorders 83204
5 Feline Parvovirus (FPV) 83205
6 Kidney or renal disease 83206
7 Cats with disabilities 83207
8 Hypertension 83208
9 Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV) and Feline Leukaemia Virus (FeLV) 83209
10 Feline Coronavirus (FCoV) and Feline Infectious Peritonitis (FIP) 83210
11 Heart murmurs and heart disease 83211
12 Hyperthyroidism 83212
13 Feline asthma 83213
14 Teeth and oral health 83214
15 Fleas and other parasites 83215
16 Cat flu 83216
17 Infectious disease and vaccination 83217
18 Digestive disorders – vomiting and diarrhoea 83218
19 You and your vet 83219
20 Cats and pregnant women – Toxoplasmosis 83220

CATS PROTECTION

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)

JUL-13 CODE: **83207**