

Keeping Your Cat Healthy

By Virginia Clemans, DVM

You can do many things to help ensure that your cat stays healthy. One of them is regular veterinary care. You should seek veterinary care at the very first sign of illness, rather than waiting a day or two to see if the cat gets better on his own. A quick call to your veterinarian can often mean the difference between a rapid recovery and the development of serious complications. If you're attentive to your cat's behavior, you can greatly enhance the likelihood that your kitty will live a long, healthy life.



Remember that cats age about five times faster than humans. The average life expectancy for cats is about 14 years and depends on genetics, nutrition, environment, and vaccinations. Cats should receive a physical exam yearly until the age of eight, and then bi-annual exams should be done. Follow your veterinarian's recommendations regarding necessary vaccines. Even if no vaccinations are needed, your cat still needs a physical exam annually or bi-annually. At this time, your veterinarian will also make recommendations regarding your cat's diet and exercise.

Important things to be aware of include your cat's appetite or thirst (increase or decrease), constipation or diarrhea, vomiting, coughing, lumps or bumps, sneezing or nasal discharge, urination problems, weakness and weight loss. When you seek veterinary care, be prepared to provide a history of these problems. You should be able to answer these questions:

- How long has the problem been present?
- Is the problem getting worse or staying the same?
- Have any home treatments been tried and what are they?

Be as thorough and concise as possible when telling your vet about the problem. To have the best outcome possible, follow your veterinarian's treatment recommendations closely. If you are unable to administer the prescribed medications or treatments, report this immediately so that an alternative can be prescribed. Remember, if the treatment is not given, your cat will not improve.

Good nutrition is the foundation for a long and healthy life. Choosing a type of food for your cat can be confusing, since there are so many brands. All cat foods are not created equal. Premium brands are usually better than store or "generic" brands, but as with anything else, the adage "you get what you pay for" is generally true about cat foods. For advice on choosing a diet for your cat, consult with your veterinarian. Should you choose wet or dry? Some cats prefer one or both. You should know, though, that feeding your cat only dry food doesn't guarantee that your cat won't need regular dental care.

One final note: Spay or neuter your cat! This surgery can be done as early as eight weeks of age in cats. A spayed or neutered cat has fewer behavioral problems, such as aggression and urinary marking. Heat cycles in female cats are eliminated and the urge to roam in male cats is gone. The chance of developing reproductive organ and mammary cancer is lessened or eliminated. And, a spayed or neutered cat will not contribute to the pet overpopulation problem.

Dr. Virginia Clemans was Best Friends' chief veterinarian from 2001 to 2004. She now resides in Salt Lake City, where she is chief of staff for the Utah County Fix, a low-cost, high-volume spay/neuter and vaccine clinic sponsored by No More Homeless Pets in Utah, Maddie's Fund and Best Friends Animal Society.