

Ageless Wonders

Learn how to help your cat enjoy and thrive during her golden years. Thanks to advances in medicine and at-home care, more cats are reaching age 20 and beyond.

By Karen Lee Stevens

Imagine for a moment that you're picking up cat food and other provisions at a neighborhood grocery store. Out of the corner of your eye, you catch a glimpse of something darting from underneath a long row of shopping carts. Upon closer inspection, you realize that darting something is a tiny kitten.

You don't know how long he has been there or how he managed to avoid being run over by a car. Nonetheless, you scoop up the dirty, dehydrated, and hungry bundle of fur and race to the nearest veterinary office. There, the orange-and-white kitten receives a thorough exam and, despite a gash above his left eye, is pronounced healthy.

Just like that, Ruth Stevenson of Santa Barbara, California, gained a new addition to her household.

KEEP YOUR CAT FEELING YOUNG

- ◆ Encourage daily play by using laser points, feather toys, or squeaky toys. Cats tend to lose interest quickly, so rotate these toys.
- ◆ Build or buy an outdoor enclosure for your cat. This will allow her the freedom to be outdoors without the hazards of cars and other animals.
- ◆ Provide window boxes or window ledges so cats can watch the world go by or take a long nap in the sun. A window box or ledge provides the perfect place to view an outdoor bird feeder.



This grand cat gets ready to celebrate birthday No. 19 with a feline favorite — a fishy treat featuring smelt eggs.

"At first, I couldn't decide on a name for him," Stevenson remembers. "I eventually named him Teddy because he looked like a big, soft, teddy bear."

In 1996, a black-and-white long-haired cat they named Lil' Girl, joined the Stevenson household. Today, both Teddy and Lil' Girl are 15 years old — considered senior citizens in the cat world.

Like Teddy and Lil' Girl, cats are living longer than ever before and perhaps, more importantly, they are living healthier lives. While good genes certainly play a role, the key to longevity appears to depend on a combination of sound nutrition, regular exams, advances in veterinary medicine, early spay and neuter programs, and being kept indoors.

Obviously, good nutrition is an important component in maintaining

a cat's health throughout his lifetime. So, what should owners feed their cats to maintain vibrant health? It's a common question, but one that can be difficult to answer, says Daniel Chan, DVM, research assistant professor in the Department of Clinical Sciences at Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine at Tufts University.

"The simple answer is to feed your cat a good quality commercial food — not any particular brand, but one that is deemed complete and balanced," he says. "The difficult part is to determine what a complete and balanced diet is."

WET FOOD VS. DRY FOOD DEBATE

"The form of the food will depend on the cat," says Dr. Chan. "Dry foods are more convenient and economical than wet food. However, for male

PHOTO BY WENDY HULTO

cats with urinary tract disorders, a wet food diet may be beneficial. In addition, increasing water intake is an important factor in reducing the risk of urinary stones and crystals.”

It is imperative to know that cats cannot live on a vegetarian diet. They are obligate carnivores, which means that they require certain nutrients available only from animal sources. So, be sure the product you select lists meat as one of the main ingredients. Avoid foods made predominantly from corn, wheat, rice, and other grains. They do not offer cats enough nutritional value.

“Owners should look for the American Association of Feed Control Officials (AAFCO) feeding trial statement on the label,” says Dr. Chan. “Foods deemed complete and balanced via AAFCO feeding trial protocols are a nutritional guarantee and a good indicator of a quality food.”

If your cat is prone to dental disease or a build-up of tartar and plaque, Dr. Chan recommends a dry dental diet — one with an endorsement from the Veterinary Oral Health Council. These foods may decrease



PHOTO BY WEEMS HULTTO

It is important to recognize that cats are obligate carnivores. Please make sure the main ingredient in their commercial food contains protein from animal sources.

the need for costly dental cleanings under anesthesia. It is also beneficial to brush your cat’s teeth on a regular basis.

ARE SUPPLEMENTS NECESSARY?

Many people think that in order for their cat to be healthy, they need to supplement their diet with vitamins and minerals. Dr. Chan says that if

you feed a high-quality cat food, you do not need to add a supplement to your cat’s diet. He emphasizes that owners should be wary of supplements not recommended by a veterinarian. In addition, some nutritional experts have expressed concern about the purity and safety of some nutritional supplements.

“People often don’t realize that nutritional supplements are not closely scrutinized for safety and efficacy by governmental agencies, such as the United States Food and Drug Administration,” says Dr. Chan. “There have been reports of contaminants in such supplements, as well as drug-supplement interactions. I usually recommend that clients investigate whether the supplement they use has been independently evaluated by a safety laboratory.”

Preventing a medical problem is much better than waiting until your cat develops symptoms. Beyond good nutrition, schedule yearly veterinary examination, even if your cat appears healthy.

An annual exam encompasses more than a cursory check-up. A veterinarian can pick up early warning signs of a serious problem. If detected early, these problems can be corrected — or at least lessened through med-



PHOTO BY WEEMS HULTTO

Your senior cat can keep mentally sharp and physically in shape with purposeful play. This product engages a cat to try to reach in and “capture” a ball or other object.

ical intervention.

During an exam, a veterinarian will thoroughly check your cat's nose, eyes, mouth, ears, lungs, heart, skin and coat, as well as the abdomen and spine. At this time, your cat's weight will be taken. In addition, your cat will receive vaccinations or blood tests, if necessary.

PREVENT AGE-RELATED DISEASES

Obesity ranks as the No. 1 preventable, nutritional disease in cats. Just as with their people, overweight cats are at risk for a myriad of medical woes, such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, respiratory disease, liver disease, and joint problems. They may also experience a higher incidence of complications during surgical procedures.

Dr. Chan warns that recent claims that carbohydrates in commercial pet foods are responsible for diabetes are unfounded.

"Owners should be very careful of claims that state that high-protein/low-carbohydrate diets (the so-called 'Catkins Diet'), is a way to prevent diabetes," he says. "There is no evidence of this."

LOOK FOR THESE SIGNS

Age-related illnesses and diseases can, at first, be difficult to detect. If your cat is experiencing any of the following symptoms, it would be wise to have him examined by a veterinarian immediately:

- ◆ Unexpected weight loss
- ◆ Loss of muscle mass
- ◆ Joint stiffness, which may indicate the onset of arthritis
- ◆ Poor hair coat quality
- ◆ Vomiting or diarrhea
- ◆ Increased thirst and urination
- ◆ Decreased or increased appetite
- ◆ Gingivitis and an increase in dental tartar, which can affect a cat's ability to chew food properly

Traditionally, cats were spayed or neutered at about six months of age. However, with the surge in pet overpopulation, something had to be done to quell this growing problem.



PHOTO BY WEEMAS HULTO

From a frisky kitten to a dignified senior, cats go through different cycles as they age. Work with your veterinarian to meet your cat's specific needs each year.

Today, it is common for both kittens and puppies to be altered as early as six to eight weeks of age.

Improvements in anesthesia and surgical techniques have made these procedures safer for young companion animals. There are numerous advantages to spaying and neutering at a young age. For instance, kittens recover faster and have fewer complications than their older counterparts, due to the absence of body fat. In addition, the incision is smaller and surgery and recovery time will be shorter.

Health-wise, spaying cats early in life, particularly before their first heat cycle, can dramatically reduce the

risk of mammary cancer later in life. Mammary cancer is almost uniformly fatal in cats. A final good reason: these spayed kittens will never contribute to the tragic pet overpopulation crisis.

THE INDOOR VS. OUTDOOR DEBATE

Like most animals, the family cat is born to roam. Keeping them indoors 24/7 might seem like a cruel fate to even the most contented of cats. But is it?

"We need to play with our indoor-only cats to keep life interesting for them," says Linda Winter, Director of the Cats Indoors! Campaign, a program of the American Bird

Conservancy in Washington, DC. "Wand toys are very stimulating, along with ping pong balls, cardboard boxes, paper bags, and used wrapping paper."

Winter encourages owners to buy or build cat condos for their indoor cats to jump, play, and scratch on. For a little fun in the sun, outdoor cat enclosures can be erected, which will ensure their safety while they explore the great outdoors. Some cats can also be trained to go outside on a harness and leash. However, she cautions that cats allowed outdoors unsupervised may pose hazards to other creatures.

"I think it's very important for owners to know that keeping a cat well-fed or putting a bell on his collar will not prevent him from killing birds or rabbits," says Winters. "The American Bird Conservancy encourages all owners to keep their cats indoors, for the safety of their cats as well as that of wildlife."

Linda Ross, DVM, a small animal

internal medicine specialist at Cummings School at Tufts, estimates that, in the past, the average life span of an indoor cat was 12 years old. Today, cats living inside can reach well into their middle teen years and beyond.

"We know that cats who are solely indoor cats have much longer life spans," says Dr. Ross. "Cats who are allowed outside have a much shorter life span. Some studies have indicated as short as five or six years old. This is because they are exposed to infectious diseases and trauma.

SOME CATS POSSESS GOOD GENES

"It's not that uncommon to see cats who are 18 years old," she continues. "Personally, the oldest cat I've seen was 23 or 24 years of age. It's like with people. Some of these cats just have good genes and owners who take excellent care of them."

Advances in veterinary health care are keeping pace with that of human medicine. In the last decade, many

diseases once associated with old age are being eradicated. The feline leukemia virus has been virtually eliminated, according to Merry Christine Crimi, DVM, a veterinarian at the Gladstone Veterinary Clinic in Milwaukie, Oregon who is a member of the American Animal Hospital Association.

Diseases such as hyperthyroidism can be treated with a single-dose radioactive isotope therapy. New supportive treatments for kidney failure keep cats comfortable with home therapy for several years after diagnosis.

In addition, Dr. Crimi notes some significant advances in health care, including more high-tech diagnostic imaging with CT scans and MRIs, better diets to control diabetes, less frequent vaccinations, and more effective, less-toxic flea control.

"Health care teams in veterinary hospitals work very hard to stay on the cutting edge of what's new and effective in providing quality care for companion cats," she says. 🐾

WHEN TO SAY GOODBYE

When you've done everything you can for your ailing cat whose health continues to decline, euthanasia may be the final act of kindness. Deciding to euthanize is a very personal choice. Dr. Ross suggests asking these questions:

- ◆ Is your cat doing the things he or she used to do? Is he acting abnormally?
- ◆ Is your cat eating normally? Is he eating more or less than usual?
- ◆ Is he vomiting, experiencing diarrhea, constipation, or incontinence?
- ◆ Are you keeping your cat alive for your cat or for you? Are you having trouble saying goodbye?

PHOTO BY WEEMS HUTTO



Some older cats with achy or arthritic joints benefit by having carpeted ramps to assist them on getting up on the comfy bed to nap or sleep at night.