



Older pet care: How to care for senior cats

It's always a privilege to care for our companion animals, and as they grow older, the time together becomes even more precious. If you're the lucky owner of a senior cat, you will want to keep them happy and thriving well into their golden years. This means understanding what to expect, identifying the signs that may indicate an underlying health issue and knowing how to adapt your care to meet their changing needs.

The good news is that generally cats are living longer these days compared to 20 years ago, likely due to advances in veterinary care and nutrition, and better owner education. Keeping cats [safely contained](#) increases their chances of living a long life. In general, cats are now considered to be 'senior' at 11 years of age. It's not uncommon to know cats who live into their twenties!

To give your cat a good quality of life in their senior years you should be familiar with the changes that come with ageing. [Physiological changes](#) that are seen in apparently healthy senior cats can include increased frailty, and reduced hearing, smell, taste, digestion/absorption (of fat, protein, and nutrients), muscle mass, immunity, skin elasticity, wound healing, nail strength, ability to retract nails and stress tolerance.

You may notice behavioural changes such as your cat being less active, spending less time outside, sleeping more, showing less interest in play and grooming, losing their appetite, being a fussy eater, vocalising more, seeking security and generally being more dependent. These behaviours can be related to physiological changes and can also be a sign that your cat is unwell.

Ageing is associated with an increased likelihood of developing a range of illnesses. Some of the most [common illnesses in senior cats](#) are kidney disease, heart disease, liver disease, diabetes mellitus, arthritis, hyperthyroidism, dental disease and cancer. Cats are masters at hiding their sickness. This can be a problem, particularly for senior cats who can exhibit changes in health and behaviour that are assumed to be 'normal' and age-related but are, in fact, signs of an undiagnosed and potentially treatable medical condition.

To avoid this, it's important to get regular checkups for your cat with their veterinarian (at least every 6 months) and mention any changes in health or behaviour, even if you think they are age-related. In addition, if you notice any of the following abnormal signs, you should promptly take your cat to the veterinarian:

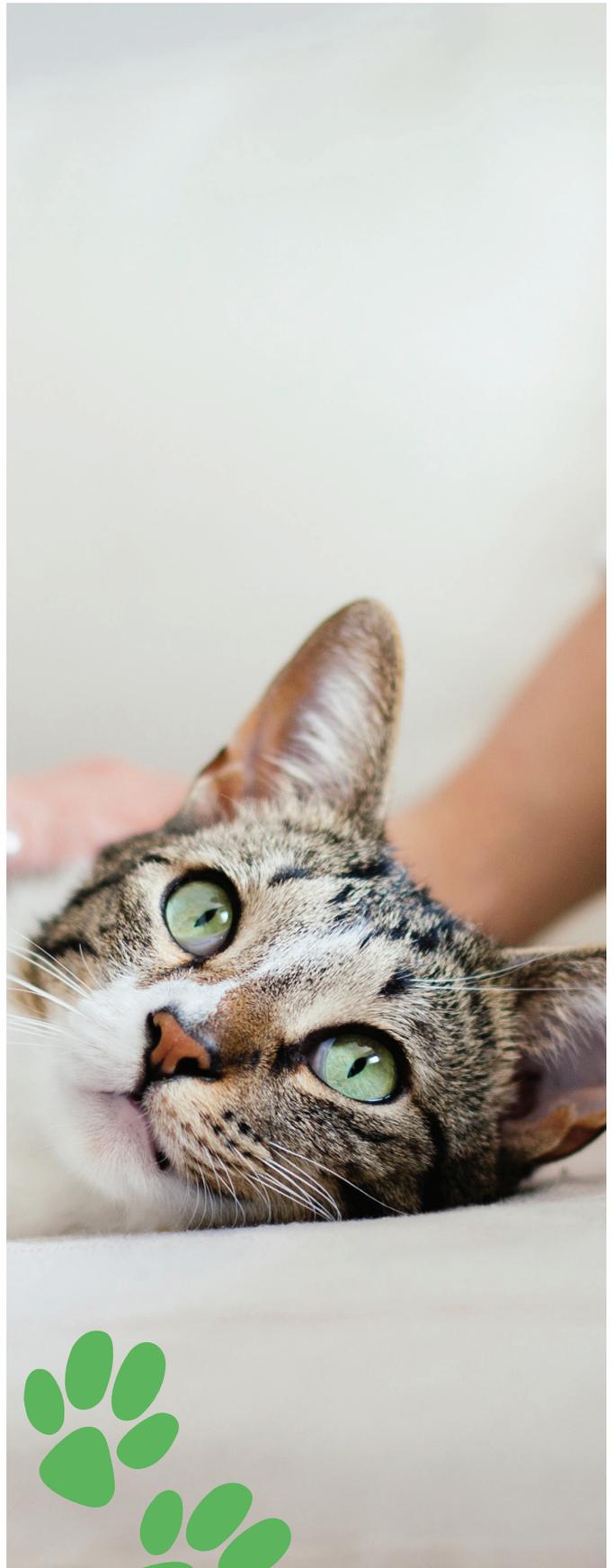
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- Loss of or increase in appetite
- Difficulty eating
- Bad breath
- Weight loss or weight gain
- Drinking more
- Increased or decreased urination
- Stiffness, lameness or difficulty jumping up
- Difficulty grooming
- Lethargy or depression
- Lumps or bumps anywhere on the body
- Changes to coat, including matts
- Balance problems
- Toilet accidents or difficulty passing urine or faeces
- Diarrhoea
- Vomiting
- Respiratory problems (such as coughing or difficulty breathing)
- Disorientation or distress
- Uncharacteristic behaviour, such as hiding, agitation, aggression, excessive vocalisation

Caring for older cats involves more than remaining alert to signs of disease. As [for older dogs](#), there are many ways you can adapt the care of your senior cat to support their health and wellbeing and help them adjust to ageing. These include:

Eating and drinking

Physiological changes can mean that older cats are not able to digest or absorb the nutrients in their food as effectively. They may also have a declining sense of smell and taste. Your veterinarian can advise you about a premium diet specially formulated for senior cats that is highly digestible/absorbable, very palatable, and with high quality nutrients to support healthy aging and immune function and address some age-related issues.

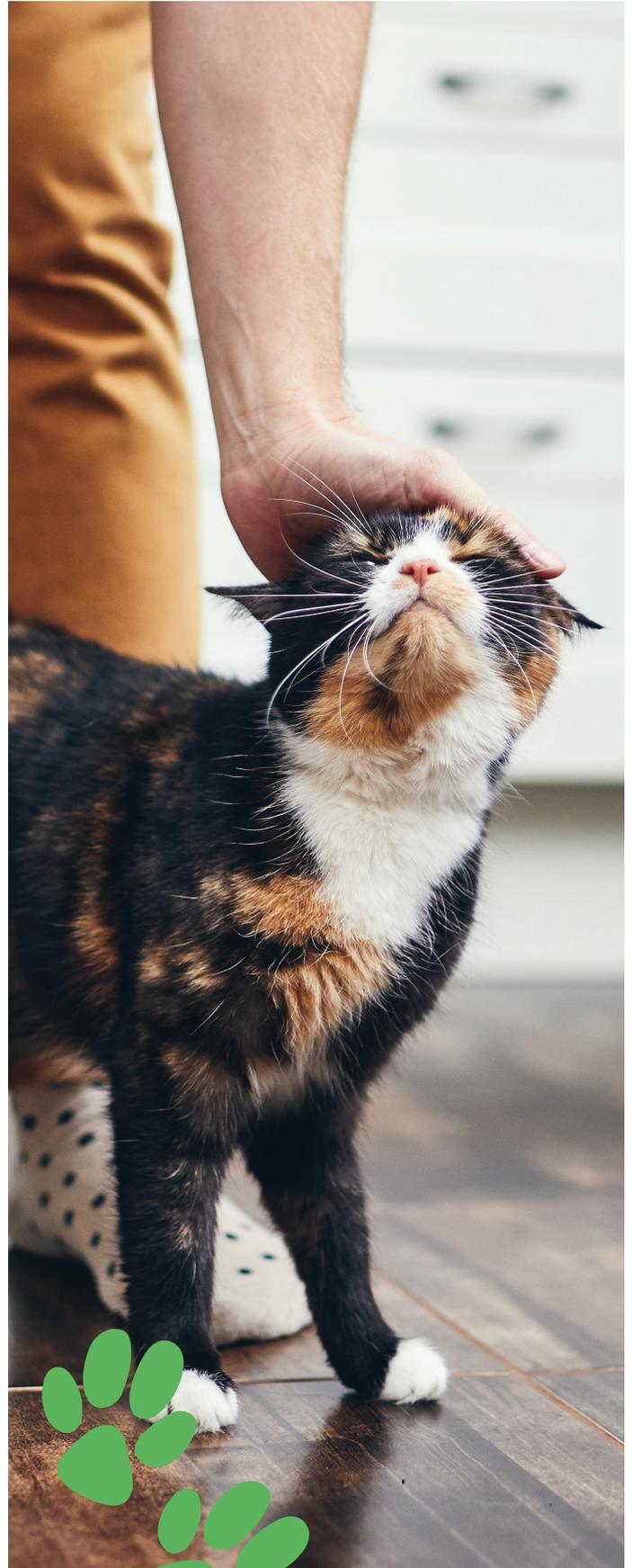


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It's advisable to select your cat's senior food in consultation with your veterinarian, because a more specific prescription diet may be required to help manage chronic conditions such as arthritis or kidney disease. Your veterinarian can also advise about the best balance of wet and dry food for your cat, and on when to transition to a senior diet. Senior diets are formulated for cats aged 7 years and above, from when they are considered mature. As with any dietary change, the transition to a senior diet must be gradual to avoid gastrointestinal upset.

You may find you need to encourage your senior cat to eat because a diminished sense of taste and/or smell can reduce their normal appetite. Tips for [tempting your cat to eat](#) include gently warming their food to body temperature, offering several small meals per day, altering the consistency of food (some cats prefer their food mushy), experimenting with different food bowls, raising their bowl to increase comfort if they have arthritis and trying unfamiliar as well as familiar foods.

As cats age, they struggle more with maintaining their hydration and often need a higher fluid intake to prevent dehydration and help support kidney function. A higher fluid intake can be achieved through an increased fluid content in their diet and through water intake. So, it is a good idea to discuss feeding more wet or canned food with your veterinarian. Keeping a variety of different water bowls around the home (away from feeding areas), varying the type of water (tap, filtered or spring) and adding some water to their wet food helps to keep them hydrated and supports kidney function. You can also try using pet water fountains as the moving water can encourage some cats to drink more.



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□ Weight control

From the age of 11 years, many cats lose body weight and become 'skinny', which has been associated with a decreased lifespan. This is why you will need to ensure your senior cat is on a diet that meets their energy and metabolic requirements and that any underlying medical conditions causing weight loss are identified and treated. These can include chronic renal disease, diabetes mellitus, hyperthyroidism, cancer, inflammatory bowel disease, exocrine pancreatic insufficiency, and dental problems.

[Weight loss in senior cats](#) is called 'cachexia' when associated with chronic disease, and 'sarcopenia' (loss of muscle mass and strength as a result of ageing) when not associated disease (sarcopenia can be associated with insufficient caloric intake or reduced appetite due to declining senses of smell and taste). Cats may present with both cachexia and sarcopenia. Being underweight is a much greater problem than obesity for senior cats.

Weight loss can occur gradually over a few years and may be associated with either an increased or decreased appetite, so can go unnoticed. This highlights the importance of regular veterinary checks that include the monitoring of body weight and body condition, which assists the early detection of underlying disease. Obesity in cats is most common between 5 and 10 years of age, increasing the risk of diseases such as diabetes mellitus, lower urinary tract disease, [arthritis](#) and fatty liver.

To avoid your cat becoming overweight as they enter their senior years, provide the correct diet under veterinary guidance and make sure your cat has regular health checks to monitor body weight and body condition. If your senior cat is overweight or obese, your veterinarian will advise you on dietary management and a gradual and safe weight loss plan.

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□ Mobility and movement

Keeping your senior cat active is important for both their physical and mental health. There are many ways you can encourage your cat to [exercise](#), either through interactive play (such as hide and seek or swiping at toys) or by moving around and entertaining themselves (through puzzle feeders, cat towers or exploring the outdoors in a contained setting). Be mindful that older cats may be frailer and have poorer balance than when they were young. All these activities can be tailored to your senior cat's individual activity levels and situation. For example, ensuring any cat towers are within their climbing ability and providing your cat with stairs to reach higher places that they may have trouble jumping up to.

Regular short periods of gentle play are best for senior cats. Try to include exercises that [extend their range of motion](#) (such as large toys they can grab and kick) or require paw dexterity (such as removing dry kibble from tubes or cardboard egg boxes).

One of the major impediments to mobility in senior cats is osteoarthritis. This is well recognised in dogs, but because cats are so good at masking pain and discomfort, many cats are untreated. Arthritis in cats is a common condition and this is both more common and more severe in seniors, with two thirds of cats over the age of 12 having radiographic evidence of arthritis in their limbs.

Seek veterinary attention if you notice your cat slowing down or if your cat shows other possible signs of arthritis such as: reluctance to play, difficulty using the litter tray, reduced grooming, stiffness, difficulty getting up, using stairs or jumping, lameness, crying out when touched, or changes in temperament.

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Arthritis is painful and reduces a cat's quality of life, but there are many options for managing arthritis in cats. This involves medication to control pain and reduce inflammation, environmental modification, dietary supplements, prescription diets and sometimes adjunctive therapies such as acupuncture. Keeping your cat's weight within the healthy range is important, as being overweight or obese worsens the symptoms of arthritis by placing additional pressure on the joints.

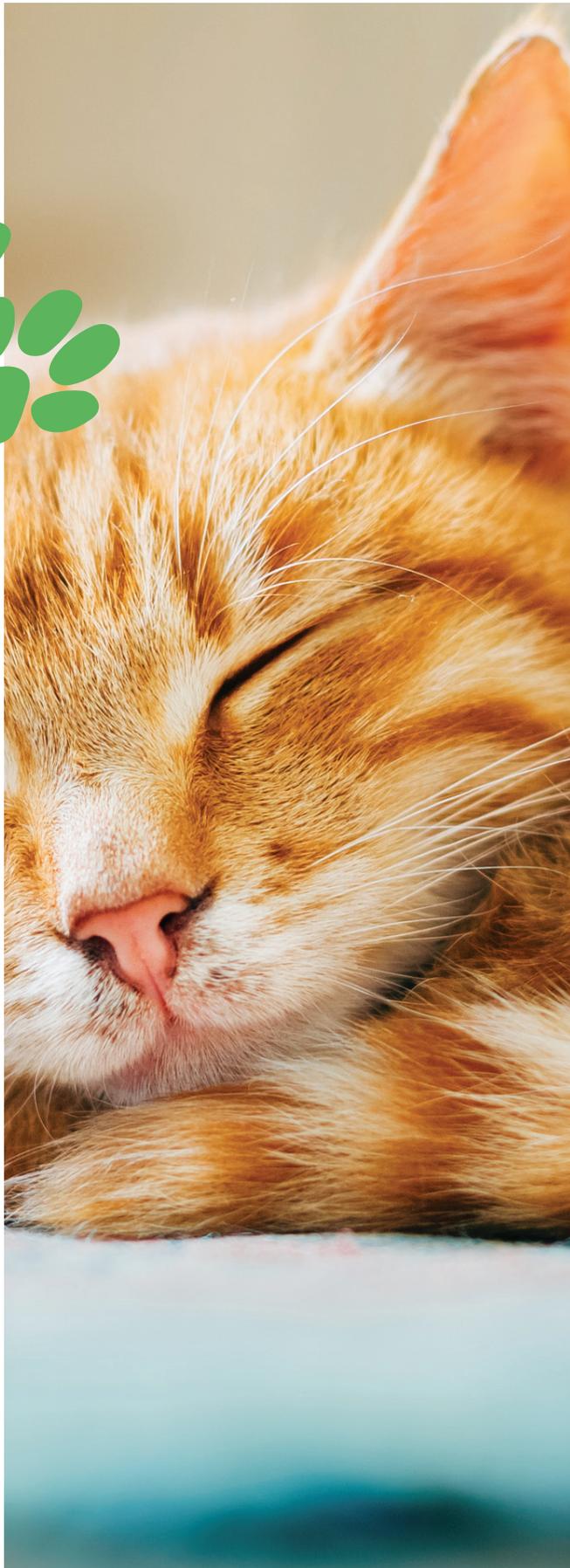
Grooming

Cats love to keep themselves clean but grooming and hygiene can become more difficult for senior cats, particularly if they have arthritis. You can help by gentle grooming with a soft brush and fine comb to prevent and remove any matts, particularly from areas your cat finds hard to reach such as the hindquarters and lower back.

Regular grooming stimulates circulation, prevents hairballs and is an opportunity to check for any lumps or other abnormalities that need veterinary attention. You may also need to wipe any discharge from your cat's eyes, nose or anus to keep them clean, using cotton wool pieces dipped into warm water.

For longhaired cats, trimming may be needed around the anus and hind legs to help keep the area clean and free of discharge. [Grooming for senior cats](#) must be enjoyable and safe. Never attempt to cut out matts using scissors as the thin skin of older cats is easily injured. It's also important to avoid vigorous grooming because older cats have less padding so would find this painful. And don't forget to check your senior cat's claws weekly as they are more prone to breaking or becoming overgrown. Your veterinarian can show you how to trim your cat's nails but always seek advice if you find this difficult.

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Dental care

Keeping up your senior cat's [routine dental care](#) is vital. Your veterinarian will advise you about home tooth brushing, a diet that promotes chewing and any products or dry foods that support oral hygiene. This also involves regularly checking your cat's mouth to identify any abnormalities.

Signs to look out for include bad breath, a change in gum colour (such as reddening), mouth lesions, broken teeth, drooling, pawing at the mouth or loss of appetite. [Inflammation of the gums and mouth](#) is painful and gum inflammation (called 'gingivitis') can lead to periodontal disease, where the teeth loosen due to loss of supporting structures such as bones and ligaments.

The role of routine dental care throughout a cat's life is very important to avoid problems causing pain and infection. Mouth infections can enter the bloodstream and damage vital organs such as the kidneys, liver and heart. Routine home dental care and regular checks by your veterinarian will keep your cat comfortable and may extend their lifespan.

Sensory changes

You may need to make adjustments to accommodate for any [sensory changes](#) in your cat, such as poor eyesight or hearing. Cats who have poor eyesight benefit from having a night light to help them get around. If your cat is blind, you can assist them by keeping their environment the same and not changing the position of items such as litterboxes or furniture.

It's also important to avoid startling your cat, so call their name before picking them up. Likewise, if your cat has trouble hearing, approach them from the front. All cats are safest living indoors with supervised outdoor access, but this

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is even more important for cats with sensory problems, as the risk of injury (such as from cars and predators) is higher.

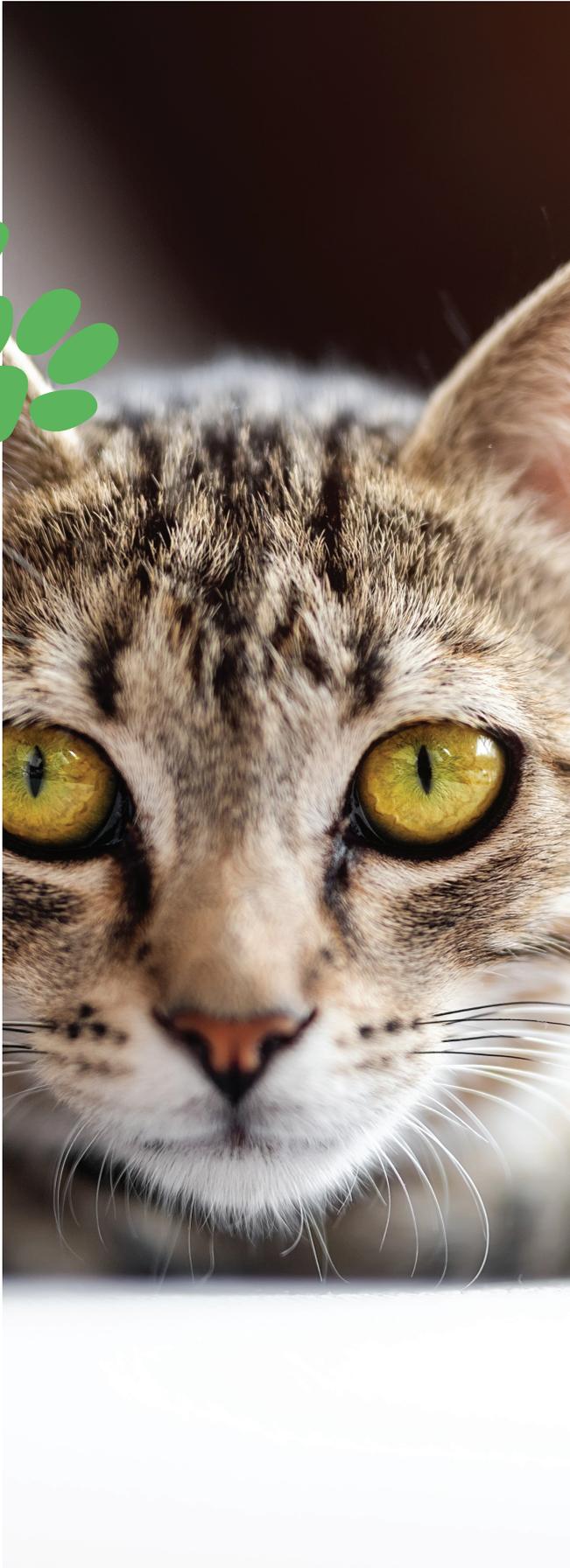
Home comfort

There are lots of small ways you can modify your home to keep your senior cat safe, comfortable and happy. [Cats with arthritis](#) or other mobility problems benefit from:

- A cat staircase or ramp to help them get up to their favourite places (such as a lounge, bed or lookout)
- Carpet covering (or carpet squares designed for pets) on steps and ramps
- A soft well-padded bed, placed somewhere quiet, draft-free and easy to access
- A cat flap that is easy to pass through or with a step to help get in and out
- Litter trays with low entry sides
- Easy access to food and water bowls in more than one location
- Cut-pile carpet runners to prevent slipping on hard surfaces such as wood or tiles, particularly in areas where your cat likes to play
- Food and water bowls placed on [raised platforms](#)
- Horizontal alternatives to vertical scratching posts
- Washable thermal blankets placed in bedding and other favourite spots to help keep your cat warm

All senior cats need their resources to be within easy reach, not just to assist mobility but also to prevent confusion. Senior cats are less adaptable to change, so they rely on us to reduce any form of [environmental stress](#). If your cat's private resting area is no longer accessible, find

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them another spot where they can be uninterrupted.

If in the past you have boarded your cat at a cattery while you are away, with a senior cat it might be best to start having someone who knows your cat stay in the home to care for them. And although many owners assume that bringing a new kitten home will give new life to their cat, this can be a traumatic experience for senior cats and should be avoided.

Behaviour

When cats reach their senior years, a number of age-related behavioural changes are likely to occur. These may be normal but may also be related to health problems that need to be checked out. As the owner of a senior cat, you should also be aware that, like humans (and dogs), cats can develop cognitive decline as they age. This is referred to as feline cognitive dysfunction and affects over 55% of cats aged 11 to 15 and over 80% of cats aged 16 to 20 years.

Being aware of the signs of feline cognitive dysfunction will help you to understand what your cat is experiencing, remain compassionate and ease their distress by following veterinary advice.

The signs of feline cognitive dysfunction include:

- Disturbed sleep patterns (such as sleeping more in the day and being restless and vocalising at night)
- Disorientation and confusion (such as getting lost, stuck or staring into space)
- Reduced activity
- Learning and memory problems (forgetting previously learned habits such as using the litter box)

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- Anxiety
- Aggression
- Changed social relationships (becoming less interactive or overly dependent)

The first step is to discuss any of these changes with your veterinarian, who will assess for a medical cause. If your veterinarian diagnosis feline cognitive dysfunction, they will advise you on management strategies such as environmental changes and keeping a consistent and predictable daily routine. They may also consider medication to reduce your cat's anxiety.

Emotional needs

Most importantly, your senior cat relies on you to meet his or her emotional needs. Part of this is providing opportunities for enrichment through exercise, play, scratching posts, safe lookouts for a view of the outside world, puzzle feeders (providing you monitor food consumption) and secure access to the garden without the intrusion of other cats or animals.

Offering a predictable routine and protecting your senior cat from unnecessary changes helps to reduce their stress and ease any anxiety or confusion. Most importantly is being attuned to your cat's [emotional state](#) and spending time with them when they need company, as well as allowing them privacy when they prefer to be left alone.

Routine veterinary check-ups

Routine veterinary check-ups are one of the best ways to keep your cat healthy and enhance their quality of life. Many owners ask how often they should bring their senior cat to see the veterinarian. The gold standard recommendation for senior cats is for routine six-monthly check-ups (or more frequently if your

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veterinarian advises that for your individual cat's health), as well as consults for any concerns in between.

During these regular checks, your veterinarian will conduct a full physical examination, advise on diet and preventative treatments, and weigh your cat and assess his or her body condition. They will also monitor the progress of any ongoing treatments and may take your cat's blood pressure, blood and/or urine samples and conduct other tests as needed to assist with the early detection or management of disease.

If you obtained pet insurance when your cat was younger, your cat may be insured for life. You will need to check your policy Product Disclosure Statement to see whether it continues to renew each year no matter the age or health of your cat. All policies differ. Some may even include some cover for routine care, or it may be able to be added as an option, which can provide some cover for teeth cleaning, prescription diets and alternative therapies. Be aware that dental procedures, behavioural problems, grooming and certain pre-existing conditions diagnosed before you took out pet insurance may not be covered. If your cat is not insured, it may still be possible to take out a policy, depending on the age of your cat and the eligibility requirements of the insurer.

Conclusion

Your senior cat has no doubt given you many years of love and companionship and deserves the best care possible.

One of the best ways to help ensure your feline friend is happy and healthy is with an

[RSPCA Pet Insurance](#) policy to cover eligible vet bills due to serious accidents or illness, so you can be prepared for the unexpected and provide your furry friend with the care they deserve.



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