



## Common cat diseases and symptoms to watch for

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Cats are extraordinary animals with many talents, one of which is their ability to hide the signs of illness or injury, often until their condition is advanced. As the owner of a beloved cat, it's important to know when

something is not right with their health so you can seek veterinary treatment early. The following are the signs of common cat diseases you should be aware of:



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## ☐ Arthritis

Arthritis is a degenerative condition of the joints, causing inflammation and pain that reduces mobility and quality of life. Although this is a chronic condition, it can be well managed, but because cats are adept at hiding their pain, arthritis in cats has been less commonly diagnosed than in dogs. We know from [research findings](#) that a high percentage of cats show signs of arthritis, and not surprisingly, this is more common in older cats with between 60% and 90% of cats over 12 years of age showing radiographic evidence of arthritis in their limb joints. One way to both help prevent arthritis and reduce its impact on your cat is to keep their weight within the healthy range. Some of the common signs of arthritis include:

- Reduced mobility: difficulty jumping up or down, using stairs, the litter tray or cat door; stiffness or obvious lameness; resting in an awkward position
- Reduced activity: sleeping or resting more; less play, interaction and exploration; sleeping in spots that are easier to reach
- Altered grooming: less time spent grooming; overgrooming of painful joints; matted or scruffy fur; overgrown claws
- Temperament changes: reclusive; irritable when held or stroked
- Uncharacteristic behaviour, such as hiding, agitation, aggression, excessive vocalisation

## ☐ Cancer

Tumours result from the uncontrolled growth of abnormal cells, leading to masses (or lumps). These can be benign, but if they are malignant, they invade surrounding tissue or even spread to other parts of the body through the bloodstream or lymphatic system.



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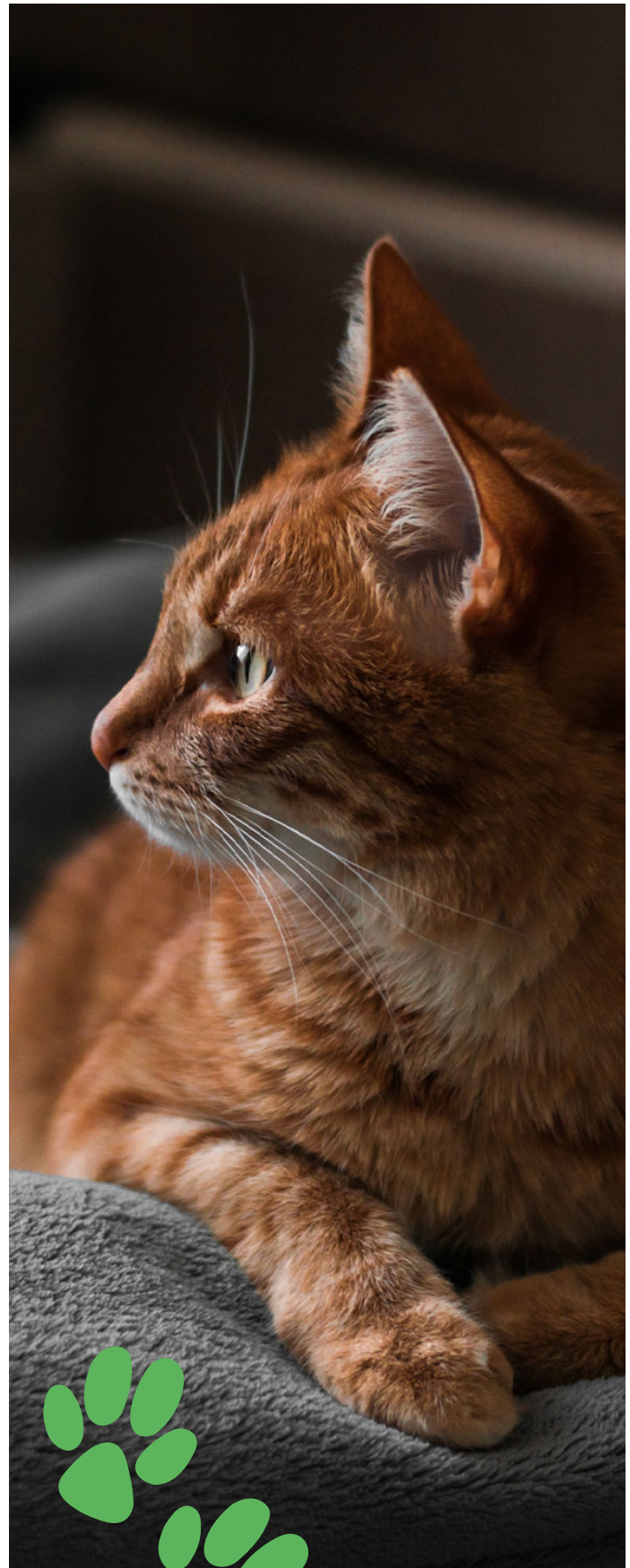
Malignant tumours cause serious disease, and this is referred to as cancer. Although tumours are less frequent in cats than in dogs, they are more likely to be malignant. The [most common sites](#) affected by cancer in cats are the skin, blood cells, mouth, stomach, intestines and mammary glands. Cancer is more prevalent in older cats. Possible signs include:

- Non-specific signs of disease: lethargy, loss of appetite, weight loss
- Lumps in or under the skin
- Vomiting or diarrhoea
- Wounds that do not heal
- Unexplained bleeding
- Eye changes

## ☐ Conjunctivitis

Conjunctivitis is inflammation of the conjunctiva, the thin membrane that lines the inner surface of the eyelids. This is the [most common eye condition](#) in cats and is typically seen in younger cats. It is painful and may affect one or both eyes. The cause is usually viral (for example, associated with 'cat flu') or bacterial infection, but conjunctivitis can also be due to environmental allergens or compromised immunity, such as Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV). Conjunctivitis is treatable but may recur in cats who carry the herpesvirus that is part of the cat flu complex of pathogens. Signs include:

- Squinting
- Frequent blinking
- Discharge: clear and watery or thick and dark
- Redness and/or swelling of the eye





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## ☐ Dental disease

Dental disease is [common in cats of all ages](#) and affects 80% of all cats aged three years and older. This may involve an accumulation of a film of bacteria called dental plaque, the development of tartar (or calculus), where the plaque hardens and covers the teeth, or even periodontal disease – this is inflammation of the gums ([gingivitis](#)) that may progress to the ligaments that support the teeth, often leading to exposed roots, tooth loss and infection (periodontitis). [Regular home dental care](#) and annual dental checks by a veterinarian are the best prevention. Signs of dental disease can include:

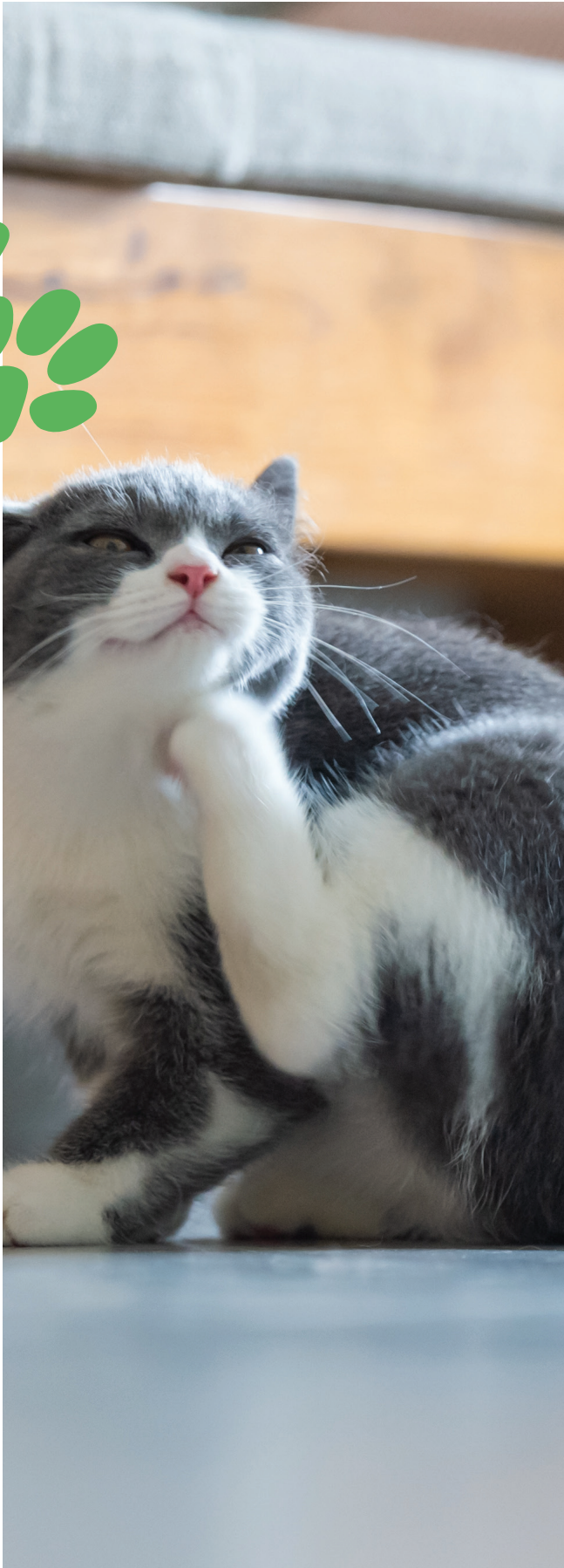
- Bad breath
- Difficulty chewing
- Weight loss
- Inflamed gums that may bleed easily
- Loss of interest in food
- Excessive drooling

## ☐ Diabetes

[Diabetes mellitus](#) is a common endocrine (hormonal) condition in cats. It is caused by lack of or insufficient insulin, a hormone produced by the pancreas. Insulin regulates the flow of glucose (dietary sugar) from the bloodstream into the body's cells. Without enough insulin, blood glucose levels rise and the body is unable to use glucose as a source of energy. Instead, it starts to break down body fat as an alternative source. This condition can usually be managed successfully with ongoing medical treatment. Diabetes must be diagnosed promptly and treated early. Cats with diabetes are at risk of other conditions such as weakness of the hind legs, liver enlargement or bladder infections.



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The most important way to prevent cats from developing diabetes is to keep their weight within normal limits and provide them with opportunities to exercise. Signs of diabetes can include:

- Increased urination
- Increased thirst
- Weight loss
- Increased appetite
- Poor coat
- Lethargy

## ☐ Feline allergic dermatitis

Like dogs, cats can be affected by [allergies](#) to a number of substances in the environment that cause itching and scratching, leading to skin disease. This requires treatment with medication and sometimes dietary management. Cats with allergic dermatitis are most often reacting to the saliva from flea bites, but other allergens may include dust mites, ear mites, other insect bites, pollen, mould or food ingredients. [Fleas](#) are the most common cause of skin disease in cats, so the best way to prevent allergic dermatitis is to make sure your cat receives regular flea control. Signs of feline allergic dermatitis include:

- Scratching
- Over-grooming
- Inflamed skin
- Scabs or crusts
- Thickened skin with discolouration
- Hair loss or thinning hair
- Infected or inflamed ears

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## ☐ Feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV)

FIV is a viral infection of cats that is present throughout the world and is estimated to affect between [14 to 29%](#) of cats in Australia. This virus is spread from cat to cat through saliva, so cats who live outdoors and are involved in cat fights are at high risk. Like human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) in humans, FIV reduces immunity, so infected cats are susceptible to other infections and diseases that may not be as responsive to the usual treatments. The risk of infection remains moderate even with annual FIV vaccination, so the best prevention is not to let your cat roam but to [keep them indoors](#) with supervised outdoor access or entry to a secure cat enclosure or garden that other cats cannot access. Some of the [common signs](#) of FIV infection include:

- Weight loss
- Recurrent fever
- Lethargy
- Enlarged lymph nodes
- Inflammation of the mouth and gums
- Chronic respiratory, skin, eye or intestinal disease
- Neurological disease

## ☐ Feline lower urinary tract disease

Feline lower urinary tract disease refers to a [number of conditions](#) affecting the bladder or urethra (the tube that carries urine from the bladder to outside the body). These can include inflammation of the bladder, bacterial infection of the bladder, obstruction of the urethra (by cells, debris or bladder stones) which is a medical emergency, or rarely, bladder cancer. Some of the risk factors include stress and obesity. Signs of feline lower urinary tract disease can include:



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- Straining to urinate
- More frequent urination
- Bloody urine
- Vocalising while urinating
- Excessive licking of the genitals
- Urinating outside the litter tray

## ☐ Hyperthyroidism

Hyperthyroidism, which means an over-active thyroid gland, is very common in older cats. This is caused when the thyroid glands produce too much thyroid hormone, which regulates many body processes including the body's metabolic rate. Cats with this condition burn more energy than they can restore through eating and can become seriously ill. This condition can be cured or medically managed, but uncontrolled hyperthyroidism can cause kidney disease, damage to the heart and hypertension. The [signs of hyperthyroidism](#) can include:

- Weight loss
- Increased appetite
- Increased thirst
- Increased activity, restlessness or irritability
- Unkempt fur
- Increased heart rate
- Intermittent vomiting and diarrhoea

## ☐ Kidney disease

[Chronic kidney disease](#) is one of the most common conditions experienced by older cats. It is most common in cats over seven years of age and is estimated to



# Common cat diseases and symptoms to watch for



affect up to 30% of cats over the age of 15. The cause is usually unknown and although there is no cure, there are ways to slow down its progression and improve the cat's quality of life. Early diagnosis is important, so it is important that mature cats have at least annual veterinary check-ups, when they will likely also have blood and urine tests recommended by your veterinarian. The kidneys have many roles in the body, such as regulating electrolytes (including salt), maintaining water and acid balance, producing hormones, maintaining normal blood pressure and removing waste products from the blood through urine. For this reason, there is a wide range of signs of chronic kidney disease:

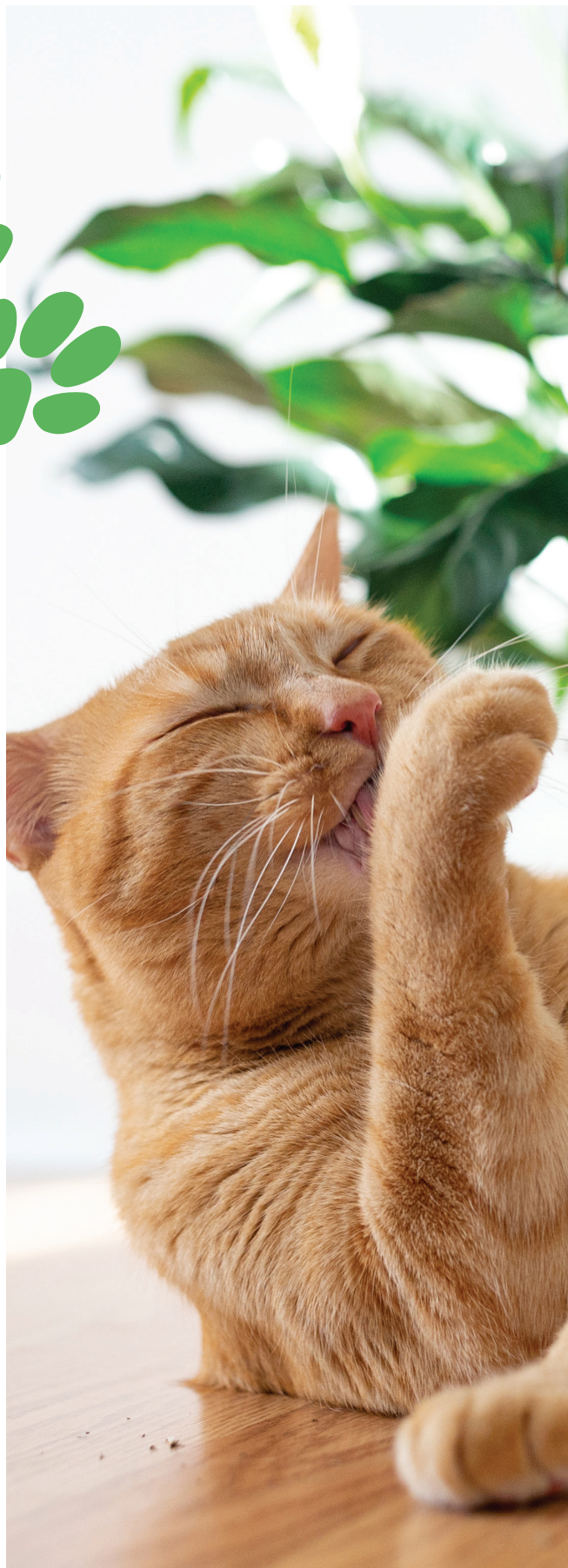
- Weight loss
- Poor appetite
- Lethargy
- Increased thirst
- Increased urination
- Poor coat
- Hypertension
- Vomiting
- Bad breath
- Weakness
- Anaemia (pale gums, increased breathing rate)

## ☐ Obesity

Australian research has estimated that [33% of cats](#) have been classified by veterinarians as overweight or obese. Obese cats are at least 20% above their ideal weight due to excess fat. This condition severely shortens life expectancy and leads to a [range of health problems](#) including diabetes, lower urinary



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tract disease, arthritis, non-allergic skin disease and fatty liver. It also reduces a cat's quality of life and ability to exercise. The good news is that obesity can be both prevented and treated through veterinary advice, a balanced diet, exercise and monitoring of body weight and body condition. The [signs of obesity](#) in cats can include:

- A rounded stomach
- Excess fat cover
- Little or no waist
- Difficulty feeling ribs or spine
- Lack of grooming
- Reduced mobility
- Panting

## ☐ Ringworm

Ringworm (or 'dermatophytosis') is a highly contagious fungal infection of the skin that is most common in cats under one year old and in long-haired cats. This condition is treatable through medication and bathing. Cleaning of the environment is also important to stop the spread of ringworm to other cats, and to humans. The [signs of ringworm](#) can include:

- Circular areas of hair loss, especially on the head, ears or legs
- Broken hairs
- Inflamed or scaly skin

## ☐ Upper respiratory tract disease

Upper respiratory tract disease is common in cats. This may be caused by viral or bacterial infection. Luckily, the risk associated with some of the main viral and bacterial causes (feline calicivirus,



# Common cat diseases and symptoms to watch for



feline herpesvirus and chlamydia felis) can be reduced through routine vaccination of kittens and adult cats. Vaccination is essential as these infections can damage the nasal passages which predisposes cats to chronic upper respiratory tract disease from secondary bacterial infections. Other causes of chronic upper respiratory tract disease include fungal infections, nasal polyps, cancer, foreign bodies, dental disease and allergic rhinitis. The [signs of upper respiratory tract disease](#) can include:

- Sneezing
- Nasal discharge
- Nasal congestion
- Difficulty breathing
- Snoring or noisy breathing
- Coughing
- Ulcerated lips or mouth
- Red or swollen eyes
- Discharge from the eyes
- Fever
- Reduced appetite
- Lethargy



# Conclusion

## Early detection is key

Recognising when your cat is unwell and seeking veterinary advice early is one of the most important things you can do to help keep them healthy. This is where Pet Insurance can also help give you peace of mind knowing you will be covered for a portion of eligible vet expenses when your

furry friend unexpectedly needs it the most. If you are with [RSPCA Pet Insurance](#), you are also supporting other animals in need with a portion of first-year premiums going to help the great work of the RSPCA.



**For more information call 1300 855 150  
between 8am - 8pm Monday to Friday AEST.**

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