

Understand Normal Feline Behaviours

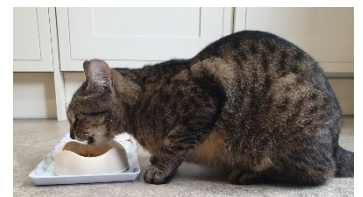
Introduction

It is important to be familiar with what behaviours are normal for our feline patients in order to recognise any abnormal behaviours that may be presented.

It is also important to fully understand why cats behave in the way they do and this can be as a result of historical influences originating from the origin of the feline species and these instincts continue to shape and influence cat behaviour today.

Eating

- Cats are obligate carnivores, which means they **have** to have a meat-based diet to survive.
- They need high levels of protein and there is little to no requirement for carbohydrates.
- They will hunt regularly throughout the day (not each hunt is successful) and eat 10-20 small meals a day.
- Their teeth are specially designed for gripping prey, tearing meat off the carcass and slicing through the meat. When kept as pets we usually offer cats wet food (from a sachet or tin) or dry food (biscuits).
- Preferences develop during weaning and kitten-hood so a broad exposure to different foods is best at this time.
- Compared to a human, a cat's sense of taste is poor, and smell is far more important. Humans have over 9,000 taste buds to a cat's 470.
- They prefer food at body temperature so warming food in the clinic can help encourage them to eat.
- Cats naturally drink water not milk.
- Many cats cannot tolerate milk as the enzyme needed to digest milk, lactase, decreases as they leave kitten-hood and therefore should not be offered.
- Cats also preferentially drink in a separate area to where they eat and certainly a separate area to where they toilet.
- Trickling water is preferred as it is fresher and ensures it is not stagnant.



Toileting

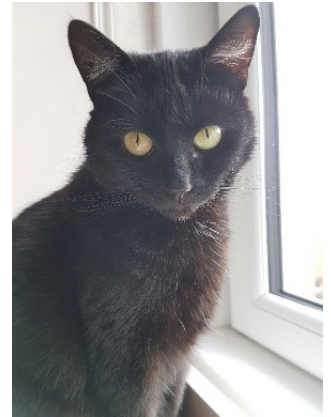
- Cats are naturally fastidious when it comes to toileting.
- Free roaming cats and cats given outdoor access will dig in the sand or soil for 4-5 minutes before eliminating and the majority of cats will bury their faeces or urine.
- When kept as pets, the litter substrate provided for the cat should allow for this natural digging and burying behaviour.
- There should be an adequate number of litter trays available for the cat - 1 tray for each cat plus one extra.
- Just like humans, cats don't like to go in a dirty toilet so the litter trays should be cleaned out regularly.
- They prefer a bit of privacy so litter trays should not be placed near windows or doors and certainly not near their food.
- When in the clinic, cats may refuse to use a litter tray as the environment is unfamiliar, and not even toilet for several days but one must always be offered.
- Cats will use their urine and faeces to mark their territory, and this is normal cat behaviour.



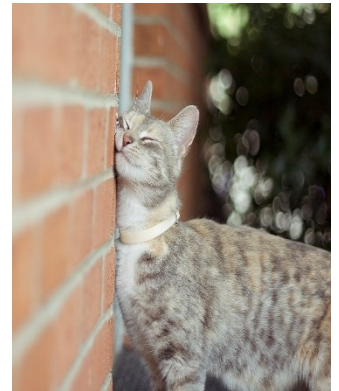
- Neutered and un-neutered cats, both male and female, are able to spray urine and it leaves a strong scent informing other cats whose territory this is.

Hearing, seeing and smelling

- Cats have incredibly well-developed hearing that is 4 times better than humans.
- This allows them to hear the movements of small prey and compensates for their short sightedness (2-6 metres).
- Cats have excellent night vision and can see in colour but there is a decreased sharpness and less contrast to a cat's vision when compared to a human's.
- They have an increased peripheral vision however and everything appears lighter so that their vision is optimised to see movement.
- They have a good sense of smell and 5 times more olfactory epithelium than humans.
- This should be appreciated when they are in the clinic and when being handled as adverse smells like disinfectant and perfume can be unpleasant for a cat.



- Cats use pheromones (a chemical substance produced and released into the environment affecting the behaviour or physiology of others of its species) to mark their territory.
- The pheromones can be found in their head and paws which is why you will often see cats rubbing their faces on furniture, walls, posts, shopping and why they will often scratch key areas around their home or garden; they are marking their territory, giving a clear signal to other cats that it is theirs.
- Head rubbing is often mistaken as a sign of affection and scratching or clawing at furniture or wallpaper is often not well tolerated, but both of these are normal territorial behaviour.
- When in the clinic (a very strong smelling, noisy, alien environment) synthetic pheromones can be used to try to reassure the cat.



Reproduction

- Depending on the breed, cats usually reach puberty at 4-6 months old.
- Female cats are seasonally polyoestrus (have more than one oestrous cycle during a specific time of the year) starting in spring when there is an increase in day length.
- They will have repeated episodes of being in season and in this time, they are fertile and receptive to being mated.
- The behavioural signs are often so dramatic and loud that many owners may mistake it for illness. They can include:

“Cat Calling” – Howling and loud vocalisation to attract males.

Affection – Even normally very affectionate cats will begin paying extra attention to people, other pets, and furniture! Increases in rubbing her head and bottom, rolling on the floor, and weaving between legs can be seen.

Mating Position – When stroked, the cat will assume the mating position, dropping her head, laying her front half low, and raising her hindquarters with her tail pushed aside. Her rear legs will tread up and down.

Spraying – Urine spray on vertical surfaces. She may back up to a wall, raise her tail, tread her back legs, and spray. Her urine will be heavily scented with oestrogen and serves to attract a male.

Licking – She may over-groom and lick her genital area, which will appear swollen and moist.

- This cycle will repeat every two to three weeks until the day lengths shorten in Autumn or until the female is mated.
- Cats are ‘reflex ovulators’ and it is copulation that induces the female to ovulate.

- Unneutered male cats have little spines on their penis, so mating is often extremely noisy as well!
- She will be pregnant for around 63 days (59-70) with an average litter size of 2-8 kittens. They are totally dependent on their mother for warmth, protection, and milk and born with their eyes and ear canals closed and which will normally open after 5-14 days.
- Kittens will usually be eating completely solid foods by 8 weeks.