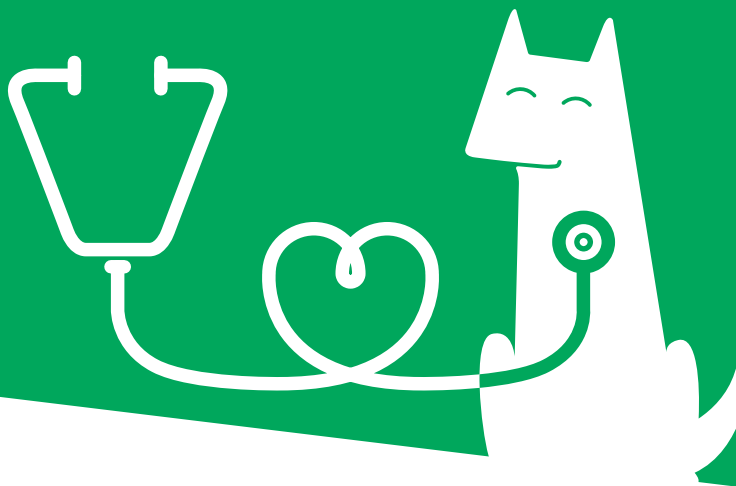


You and your vet



CATS PROTECTION
VETERINARY GUIDE 19



Even healthy cats require regular visits to a veterinary practice. Cats have evolved to be very good at hiding pain and early signs of illness – in the wild it helped to protect them from being targeted by predators when they were sick. Often owners don't notice their cat is suffering because they hide it so well – regular vet checks may help identify early signs of disease, which might otherwise remain hidden until they become critical. Early recognition, treatment and monitoring may prevent suffering.

We encourage you to register with a vet as soon as possible after getting a cat – certainly before a vet is needed in an emergency – and to take your cat for health checks at least once a year, with advice from your vet.

All cats adopted from Cats Protection will have received a mandatory level of veterinary care, which includes:

- a health check carried out by a veterinary surgeon
- treatment against fleas and worms
- at least one vaccination against cat flu and feline enteritis
- neutering if old enough
- treatment as required for any identified medical or behavioural condition that is reasonably treatable and will not cause long-term suffering to the cat
- a microchip to provide permanent identification, for all non-feral cats over 12 weeks of age
- pet insurance

Cats Protection highly recommends that all cats receive similar care to that above to give them the best possible safeguard against future health problems and permanent loss. Pet

insurance can give owners peace of mind and offset the cost of veterinary treatment should problems arise. Routine care often saves money in the long run – prevention is better than cure.

See Cats Protection's *Essential Guide: Caring for your cat* for further information on preventative care.

Choosing a vet

All vets working in the UK have to be registered with the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS). Those vets which have gained their qualifications in the UK will have spent at least five years studying at university. Most practices will also have veterinary nurses, who train for between two and three years. Some practices will employ trainee veterinary nurses and may have other staff including nursing auxiliary assistants, receptionists and a practice manager.

Choosing a veterinary practice that will suit the individual needs of you and your cat may seem a daunting process. Often a recommendation from a friend or neighbour is a good place to start, otherwise you could phone around, or visit your local vets before making your choice. Veterinary practices are also registered with the RCVS and you can find details of your local practices at www.rcvs.org.uk

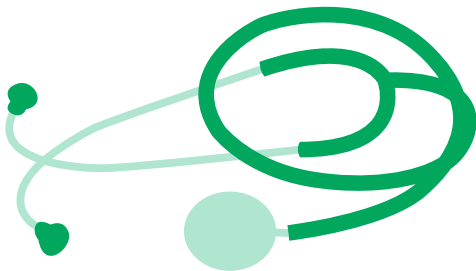
You will want to ensure that the practice you choose has high standards of care, offers good facilities and has kind and knowledgeable staff, ideally with a feline interest. You may wish to consider the following:

- location – this is especially relevant in an emergency. However, be aware that your nearest surgery may not provide emergency care on site – see the section on out-of-hours care below
- caring, friendly, approachable attitude – it is important that you get on with your vet, are able to ask questions and have faith in the care they can offer
- age from which cats will be neutered. Cats Protection recommends that kittens are neutered at four months of age or younger, if suitable
- facilities – many practices will let you look around or hold open days. You may notice equipment for diagnostic tests such as ultrasound and x-ray machines and laboratory equipment. The operating theatre should be clean and look for hospitalisation facilities that are quiet and suitable for cats. It is ideal if the hospitalisation pens have somewhere for each cat to hide, such as the cat's own carrier, which can reduce its stress levels
- any further qualifications of the vets which could be relevant to the treatment of your cat
- cleanliness and hygiene is important – are the reception area and uniforms clean and well-maintained?
- convenience and availability of parking
- appointment system and routine opening hours – check that you are able to get an appointment at short notice for urgent problems. Most practices prefer to examine and treat cats in the surgery where all the facilities and nursing assistance are readily available and this also tends to be less costly for you. However, if you feel that house calls may be important, you should establish the practice policy on this at the outset
- veterinary nurse clinics – eg older pet clinics, or behaviour clinics which you may be interested in attending

- whether the practice is accredited to the RCVS practice standards scheme (PSS). This is a voluntary initiative to accredit veterinary practices in the UK through setting standards and carrying out regular inspections. The scheme aims to promote and maintain the highest standards of veterinary care. See www.rcvs.org.uk for further details

Visit a vet as soon as possible once you have brought your cat home. The vet will examine your cat to ensure they are healthy and discuss routine matters such as neutering and vaccinations.

Clinical records are kept by each practice to keep track of your cat's medical history so it can be dangerous to use more than one vet surgery or change frequently, especially if the new vet is not informed. There could be notes on specific allergies, drug reactions, current treatment and findings that a second vet may not be aware of. When first taking your cat to a vet, if they have been seen by a vet in the past with a previous owner, you may wish to consider registering with this same vet. The vet will already be familiar with your cat and will already have their medical history to hand. If you wish to change vets, your new practice will usually ask your previous veterinary surgery to send a copy of your pet's clinical history when you register.



Cat only practices

Cats are one of the UK's favourite pets and this is reflected in the increasing number of veterinary practices which treat only cats. Choosing a cat-friendly practice can make a visit to the vet less stressful for your cat – you can be sure that they won't encounter any noisy dogs in the waiting room or behind the scenes.

Other practices may designate separate waiting areas or entry and exit points. They may offer separate routine appointment times and hospitalisation facilities for cats and dogs. Some practices are accredited to the International Cat Care's Cat Friendly Clinic scheme, showing that they have met specific criteria to make visits less stressful for cats – see www.icatcare.org for further details.

Cost

Veterinary practices set their own fees and there are usually set costs which are displayed or can be supplied on request for consultations and routine procedures.

Veterinary practices need to cover the costs of running a surgery and this can be expensive. There is no equivalent to the National Health Service for animals and sometimes owners do not realise the costs involved in veterinary care provision.

If your cat requires tests or treatment, the vet should explain the options available along with the likely cost, to ensure you are in a position to give informed consent for the procedure or treatment to go ahead. However, you should be aware that additional charges may arise if complications occur.

Insurance

Pet insurance can prevent the worry of unexpected and costly vet bills and can save a cat's life. Owners sometimes have to make the heartbreaking decision to have their cat put to sleep, or give the cat up to the care of a charity if they can't afford the veterinary care it requires.

Premiums may vary depending on the age and breed of your cat and where you live. If your cat is currently sick or has previously suffered from a condition that could recur, many insurers will exclude the pre-existing condition from your policy. You shouldn't try to hide any existing conditions from the insurance company when requesting a quote, as when claims are made, insurers will look at your cat's veterinary history and you may not be covered if they conclude that the cat has suffered with the condition before.

Avoid having breaks in your insurance cover. A break can make it more difficult to get insurance for your cat, and some insurers have an upper age limit on their policies and exclude cats over a certain age.

The consultation

Once you have found your ideal vet, it is sensible to build a lasting relationship based on mutual trust, so that you can work together for the long-term benefit of your cat.

When your cat has an appointment at the vets, the experience begins at home when putting your cat into its carrier. Always choose a robust carrier – cardboard is no match for a determined cat, especially when it gets damp! Never travel with the cat loose in the car.

Ideally the carrier should become 'part of the furniture' at home so that it doesn't become a signal for a stressful journey. Keep the carrier available in a commonly-used room, if possible – some cats may use it as a place to sleep if you make it comfortable. Place a bit of dry food inside the carrier every now and then so that the cat associates it with a nice treat. If the cat feels comfortable in the carrier, it will lower the stress levels when travelling and while at the vets.

Avoid swinging or bumping the carrier when carrying it and try to take the quickest route to the vets – driving or getting a lift may be preferable to public transport as it is likely to be quicker and quieter. Secure the carrier in the footwell behind the front seat or strap it in using the seat belt. Drive carefully so that the cat is not thrown around in the car and refrain from playing loud music. Covering the carrier with a towel or blanket can help your cat to feel more relaxed, as cats find travelling very stressful.

Try to stay calm yourself, even if your cat is getting upset. Cats can pick up on tension from their owners. Some cats may vomit and others may soil the carrier during the journey, so taking some spare bedding may be useful for the return journey.

Keep the carrier covered in the waiting room and choose a quiet location away from inquisitive dogs. There may be raised places to rest the carrier – cats prefer to be high up when stressed – rather than placing it on the ground. Cats are territorial, so avoid placing the carrier directly next to another cat carrier. The smell will be enough to upset both cats, even if they can't see each other. The more stressed your cat becomes the harder it will be for them to be examined effectively and the more anxious they will be next time.

During the consultation

The vet may ask a veterinary nurse to assist with handling the cat, especially if you are nervous or unsure about how your cat will react.

They will examine your cat as well as ask you some questions about the cat's general health, eating, drinking and toileting habits. It is important that you answer these accurately as this history is vital for the vet when considering the next step in terms of tests or treatment. Your answers may lead onto further questioning if the vet needs clarification or detects a possible problem.

If you have noticed any of the following since your last visit to the vet, it is important that you let them know:

- coughing or sneezing
- runny nose or eyes
- excessive grooming or scratching
- lumps, bumps or wounds
- drooling or smelly breath
- stiff movement, lameness or a reluctance to play, jump or climb
- vomiting or diarrhoea
- change in frequency or difficulty in passing urine or faeces
- any change in water or food intake or weight
- any change in behaviour, such as reduced interaction, or aggression
- increased effort with breathing, or open mouth breathing

Dependent on the reason for your cat's visit, during a routine examination the vet may assess:

- behaviour and demeanour
- breathing and lung sounds
- body condition – whether the cat is the right weight for their size
- whether your cat has any skin problems
- whether your cat has any abnormal discharges
- eyes and ears
- oral health
- heart – listening for heart murmurs and abnormal heart rhythms and feeling pulses
- whether your cat has any internal or external lumps, bumps and the feel of their internal glands and organs
- feet and claws
- any painful areas

Following the examination, the vet may wish to take a blood or urine sample – especially if your cat is senior – take your cat's temperature, examine their eyes in more detail and check their blood pressure. Your cat may be taken away from the consultation room for any of these procedures, especially if the assistance of a veterinary nurse is required. Your cat may be calmer when away from you if you are feeling anxious and veterinary nurses are well-skilled at calming and holding anxious cats.

If a urine or faecal sample is required, your vet may ask you to collect this – your vet will advise how – and bring it back to the surgery for testing.

It is important to ask questions if there is anything you don't understand during a consultation. This is especially important if you are consenting to treatment for your cat or are given some medication to take home.

Medication

If your cat requires medication it is important that you finish the course prescribed. Cats can be difficult to medicate so ask your vet to show you how to give the medication that your cat needs.

If you think you are going to struggle, ask your vet if there is a different form of the same medication available. Some medications are injectable or come in liquid/paste form and this may be an easier option than tablets. Certain flea and worm treatments come in spot-on formulations, which are applied to the skin at the back of the neck. **Remember, never give a medication intended for another animal to your cat.** Many drugs can be toxic to cats – of particular concern is the risk of using some dog flea spot-on treatments on cats as this can be fatal.

If your vet prescribes a course of tablets, you may be able to crush and disguise them in cat food or a small amount of butter. However, always check with your vet first, as some medicines do not work if given this way. If you are able to give the medication in your cat's meal, it is best to feed a little food containing the medication first to ensure it is all eaten, followed by the rest of the portion. Cats are very good at turning their noses up at food if it doesn't smell quite right and if the cat doesn't eat their whole meal you won't know if they have had the full dose of medicine. If you have more than one cat you will need to ensure that only the cat on medication gets the food that has the tablet in it. Feed them separately and ensure any uneaten food is removed before other cats are allowed access.

Tablets can cause damage to a cat's food pipe (oesophagus) if they lodge there for prolonged periods of time. To help prevent this, a small knob of butter or food can be given to the cat or smeared on their nose for them to lick off following tableting, or a small amount of water syringed down after the tablet – assisting the passage of the pill into the stomach. However, again, check with your vet first that this is safe to use depending on the medication and your cat's condition.

Where to source your pet's medicines

In many cases, your vet will provide you with the medication needed. In other cases, you may be given a written prescription in order to source the drugs from a pharmacy or alternative veterinary practice. There are some internet pharmacies offering this service. It is very important if sourcing medicines in this way to ensure you are sourcing from a legal and reliable source. There are some rogue traders offering unauthorised medicines which may not be safe or effective. The British Veterinary Association urges all pet owners to talk to their vet before sourcing medicines from the internet to make sure the right drugs are bought and administered correctly.

Complementary therapies

Complementary therapies like acupuncture are becoming increasingly available for pets. It is important to discuss any treatments or medications with your vet, as not only can some be harmful, the treatment of animals is regulated in law. Some vets have taken additional training in alternative and complementary therapies.

Hospitalisation

If your cat needs to be hospitalised for treatment, your vet will usually provide you with some guidance to follow at home to ensure your cat is ready for their stay.

Anaesthetics are safer when the stomach is empty, so you will be asked not to feed your cat before an operation and keep them indoors so that they cannot get food elsewhere. Make sure you provide a litter tray to prevent toileting accidents. You do not need to restrict your cat's access to water unless told to by your vet.

On arrival at the veterinary practice, your cat will be admitted and checked to ensure that all is well. You will be asked to sign a consent form. This is a good time to find out when you can phone for an update or collect your cat. Ensure the practice has your most up-to-date contact telephone number.

Once the operation or procedure has been completed, your cat will be kept in for a few hours to recover. Some cats may need to stay in for several days. Your practice may have a policy on visiting hospitalised cats and/or providing food, beds and so on for your cat while there.

After an operation, your cat might be a little quiet and unsteady on their feet. They may have a clipped area of skin and stitches. Be sure to follow any aftercare advice provided by your vet including confining your cat to the house if necessary. Ensure your cat has easy access to a comfortable, easily accessible place to sleep, food, water, a litter tray and a scratching post. Although cats don't usually like to eat near to their drinking or toileting area, your cat is likely to appreciate these necessary facilities being nearby while they recover.

It is important that your cat doesn't lick the operation site or pull out any stitches. If this does happen, contact your vet as soon as possible. They may need to readmit the cat or provide you with a special collar that prevents the cat from reaching the site.

If the wound is red, swollen or oozing or if you are worried about your cat for any other reason, contact your vet. Pain is difficult to recognise in cats but signs can include loss of appetite, hiding, being withdrawn or showing aggression.

Your cat may be reluctant to eat on the first night at home. See the Cats Protection *Essential Guide: Feeding and obesity* leaflet for some tips on encouraging cats to eat. If your cat doesn't eat for 24 hours, contact your vet to let them know.

Cats in multi-cat households rely on scent to identify the members of their social group. A stay at the vets can mean individuals are not recognised by other pets when they return home. Your other cat(s) may react differently to the returning patient because they will smell differently to them. This could cause conflict so a period of separation while the patient convalesces, followed by gradual reintroduction may be helpful to maintain harmony. See the Cats Protection *Essential Guide: Caring for your cat* for tips on introducing cats to maintain harmony.

Provision for veterinary care outside of normal working hours – known as ‘out of hours’

A 24-hour emergency service is something that every veterinary practice is obliged to provide to ensure that a vet is available to treat your cat at any time of day or night.

Some practices manage their own out-of-hours service and others share the unsociable hours with other surgeries in the area, or make use of a specialist out-of-hours clinic. When choosing a vet, find out what the arrangements are and make sure that you know the details of the out-of-hours surgery should an emergency arise.

If there is a different contact number, keep it somewhere handy so that there is no delay when you need to speak to a vet in an emergency. Alternatively, you will be directed to another number when calling the normal practice line. Remember that the out-of-hours service is only for urgent matters. While you should always call for assistance or advice if you have an emergency or are very concerned, routine matters should be dealt with during normal hours. There is usually a higher charge out of hours, you may not see your usual vet and there are usually fewer staff on duty.

Referrals

Your vet may recommend that your cat is referred to a specialist practice if the most appropriate diagnostic tests, treatment or specialist knowledge for a condition is not available at your existing practice. Vets working at referral practices are often those with a particular interest, experience and expertise in a specific condition and/or species. Referral may also be carried out within your practice if there are appropriately skilled vets on the team.

When recommending referral your vet should explain the likely cost and possible prognosis. Referral services may be more costly than routine veterinary work. The cases treated are usually more complex and time consuming and may require the use of expensive equipment.

If you choose to go ahead, your vet will usually arrange the referral appointment and send the practice your cat's medical history. Following the appointment the referral practice will provide your vet with a report of the findings or treatment carried out and any information relating to ongoing care. Your cat's care will then usually be passed back to your own vet.

Complaints

If you are dissatisfied with the service provided by your veterinary practice it is recommended that you try to resolve your issues by speaking with the vet in question, another vet within the practice, or the manager of the veterinary practice. Problems sometimes arise because of a misunderstanding during the visit, perhaps during anxious times, and can usually be easily resolved through discussion.

If you are unhappy with the service you are receiving from your vet, you are able to seek a second opinion. Often it is useful to discuss this with the original vet who may suggest seeing a colleague in the same practice or referral to a specialist. If this is unsuccessful or impractical, you can seek a second opinion at another practice, but do remember to explain to the vet providing the second opinion that you have seen another practice, as they will want to source the history from the first vet.

If you feel your problem cannot be resolved, the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons have a complaints procedure on their website www.rcvs.org.uk that you can follow.

Remember, owners have a legal duty of care to provide for their cat's needs, which includes the need to be protected from pain, suffering, injury and disease – see *Cats Protection's Essential Guide: Cats and the law*.

The owner-vet partnership

All owners hope their cat will live a long and happy life. You and your vet will both have your cat's best interests at heart and can work together to improve your cat's welfare. Provide a cat-friendly home, keep routine care up to date, take your cat for regular health checks and be vigilant to the early signs of problems. The relationship you have with your vet is an integral part of ensuring your cat enjoys a good quality of life.

Further information:

The Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons: www.rcvs.org.uk

International Cat Care Cat Friendly Clinic Scheme:

www.icatcare.org

Cats Protection's *Essential Guide: Caring for your cat*.

Learn more about your cat online!

Take a look at our free interactive tool to help you understand cats' origins and their behaviour within our homes. <http://learnonline.cats.org.uk/content/ufo>

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For more information about Cats Protection or to make a donation, please visit www.cats.org.uk or phone our Helpline on 03000 12 12 12.

Reg Charity 203644 (England and Wales) and SC037711 (Scotland)

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