

How Modern Life is Affecting Our Cats' Health



Foreword

Cats can bring joy and comfort, often being seen as friends, companions, and members of the family. Most owners try to do what's best for their pet; however, as lifestyles change so too can the way owners interact with their cats, which can have an impact on their cats' health and wellbeing.

NutriCat, a new brand of advanced nutrition for cats, has commissioned a survey of over 1,000 UK cat owners to obtain an understanding of current views and lifestyles, and how this might have an impact on cats' health.

To analyse the survey findings NutriCat has partnered with the Feline Advisory Bureau (FAB), experts in the promotion of the health and welfare of cats. Together they have identified how modern day views and lifestyles of owners might be affecting cats' health, and developed some 'top tips' to help owners ensure their cats are happy and healthy throughout the different stages of their life.

This report provides an overview of the survey findings, showing how many cat owners 'humanise' their pet's diet, their relationship with veterinary practitioners, and the financial considerations of keeping their cat. Owning a cat can be expensive – but an unhealthy cat can be far more costly. The report therefore concludes with ways for owners to recognise signs of ill health, and tips to keep them in good health moving forward.

Veterinarian, David Helliwell BSc BVM&S MRCVS



The Humanisation of Cats' Diets

The UK pet industry has grown rapidly over the past twenty years. Latest research shows that there are now a total of 26 million pets on which we spend around £14bn a year.¹ Pet cats are particularly popular, with twice as many cats now owned than in the 1960s and the figure continuing to rise.²

In these modern times, we are increasingly turning to our pets for companionship. In the UK we have an ageing population and many people are living alone³ and often pets fill the emotional and social void formerly filled by people. Our research has found that many cat owners humanise their cats, by giving them human food as part of their daily diet, treating them at special occasions such as Christmas and birthdays, and talking to them regularly.

The role of the 'treat'

Today most people feed their cat prepared cat food which is not only convenient but provides a complete and balanced diet. However, some owners demonstrate their love for their cat by giving them extra food, often in the form of table scraps and human treats.

Our research found that a third of owners surveyed feed their cats treats and 20% provide them with table scraps, whilst 17% of cat owners give their cats extra food to make them happy. A recent report from the PDSA also revealed that 13% of cats (around 1.5 million) are fed on scraps or leftovers as one of their main types of food.⁴

Of those surveyed, some of the calorie-rich treats and scraps given by owners included extra mature cheddar cheese, cake, crisps, chocolate and biscuits. One cat was even partial to crème caramel! Marmite was another favourite and a number of owners said they feed their cat meat covered in gravy. Full fat milk was also a really popular treat.

Katie Newstead from West Yorkshire admits to feeding her cats human treats saying, "One thing I particularly like to do when I'm on my own is to share my chicken with them. It eases that temporary feeling of loneliness when I'm on my own. And one of the most pleasurable things to do in the week is to have some cake or some nice cheese and biscuits, and give them a little nibble."

Sue Constable from Gloucestershire loves treating her cat Ren, saying, "I feed Ren cheddar cheese and smoked ham around three to four times a week as a treat. My dad used to give our cats cheese so I've grown up with it. The smellier cheese the better and he loves Stilton at Christmas! I'll sometimes give him spare ribs when I have Chinese too."

Talking about his cat Simba's love of treats, *Darren Richardson from Leeds says, "Simba loves any human food - chocolate, peas, pizza, biscuits. In fact he likes anything but fruit, with croissants being his ultimate favourite."*



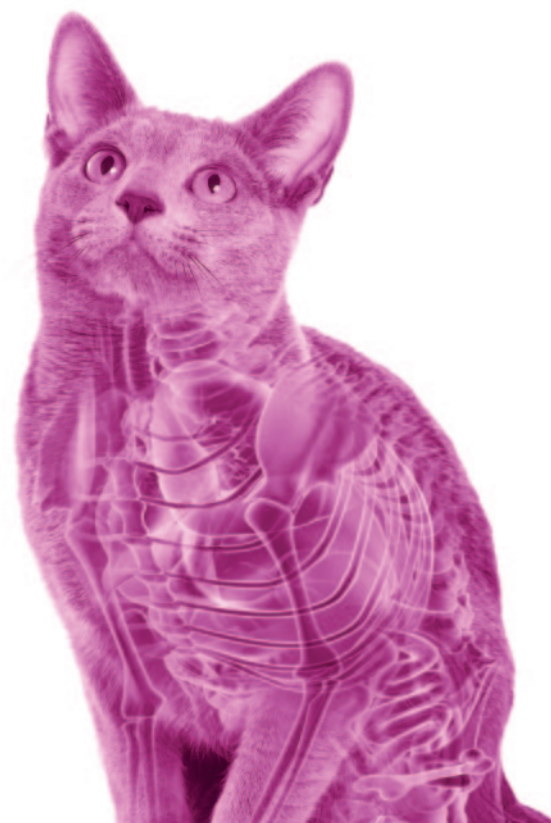
Claire Bessant, CEO of the Feline Advisory Bureau (FAB) comments:

"For many people, feeding is a time for interaction with their cat and a way to show love and affection. While modern complete cat foods provide all that a cat needs, owners often want to give more and end up not only feeding more cat food, but adding to the interaction opportunities by giving their cat scraps and treats as well.

Obesity is as unhealthy for cats as it is for humans. Owners need to adjust what they feed to take into account all of the food the cat is given. While scraps or treats may seem small in human terms, they can be relatively large for cats. Sometimes treats are inappropriate foods which can be detrimental to cat health."

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The most common nutritional problem in UK pets is the over consumption of calories⁵, which can result in obesity and contribute to problems such as arthritis, diabetes and heart disease.

Many cat owners may not know how to judge if their cat is overweight. Only 12% of cat owners surveyed said their cat was overweight, whereas latest figures suggest that one in four cats in the UK are carrying too much weight.⁶



“Because cats are rather graceful animals which are often asleep and because we do not take them out for walks with us every day, we may not actually notice if they are becoming overweight. In addition cats are often depicted as large and cuddly to emphasise their appeal, so we may be complacent about just how overweight our cats are.”

Sadly, overweight cats are three times more likely to be diabetic than cats of a healthy weight. One in 230 cats in the UK is now diabetic, but diabetes is a growing problem that owners could avoid.⁷

Liz Telford from Oakwood in London used to have a cat called Dipsy but he recently died from diabetes. Liz believes it was because she used to often treat him to gingerbread and shortbread. Since Dipsy has died, she is very careful with her other cat Charlie and only gives him cat treats or the occasional piece of cooked chicken with no sauce or coating.



“Many cats have interesting drinking habits – some preferring running water or drinking out of ponds outside; however all cats need access to clean water. This is especially true if their diet consists of dry food. Cats which have no access to the outdoors are totally dependent on their owners for their water intake.”

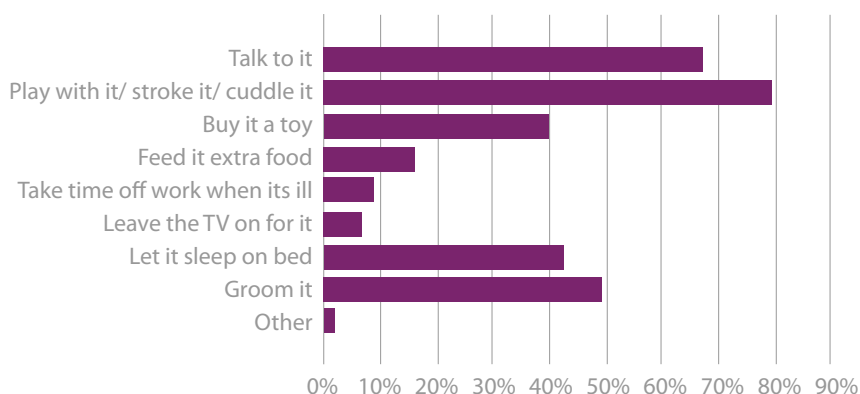
It’s also very important for a cat’s health for it to drink water, but many cat owners overlook the provision of water for their pet. 54% of cat owners surveyed said they don’t provide their cat with access to drinking water.

Cats are human too

Our survey findings show that the humanisation of cats goes beyond their diet. 54% of owners surveyed believe that their cat shares similar emotions to them. What’s more, over a third consider their cat to be a better listener than their partner and 68% admit talking to their cat.

Just as some owners seek companionship from their cat, some become companions for their cat when it’s unwell. Nearly 10% of cat owners surveyed said they take time off work to be with their cat when it’s unwell and nearly half of female (32% of male) cat owners surveyed say their cosy up to their cat at night and let it sleep on their bed.

What people do to keep their cats happy and healthy



Too Much Work and No Play

Modern-day busy lifestyles can impact the wellbeing of our cats' health.

Another aspect of modern-day life is a busier lifestyle. Our hectic lives mean we are spending longer hours out of home and, coupled with the rising number of cats that are kept indoors all the time, many receive little stimulation when their owners are out. Domestic cats need interaction with humans to keep mentally stimulated. These two factors could affect overall cat health.

Our survey showed that 12% of people don't interact at all with their cat, and unfortunately this lack of interaction can lead to boredom and behavioural problems. However, 80% of owners said they regularly played with their cat, which suggests that they are making a point of spending time with their cat when they are at home.

A number of toys and games have been developed to keep cats active, and to make up for them not playing outside. There are even games to make cats work for their food as a way of exercise. Our survey found that 40% of owners buy their cat toys.

In addition, some owners are making provisions for whilst they are out of home, with 8% of female owners saying that they leave the TV on whilst they are out in order to keep their cat company.

Natalie Smith from Central Scotland bought her cat Rio to keep her company when she stopped working and she turns to him for companionship and comfort. She often leaves the radio or television on whilst she's out so that he doesn't feel lonely.

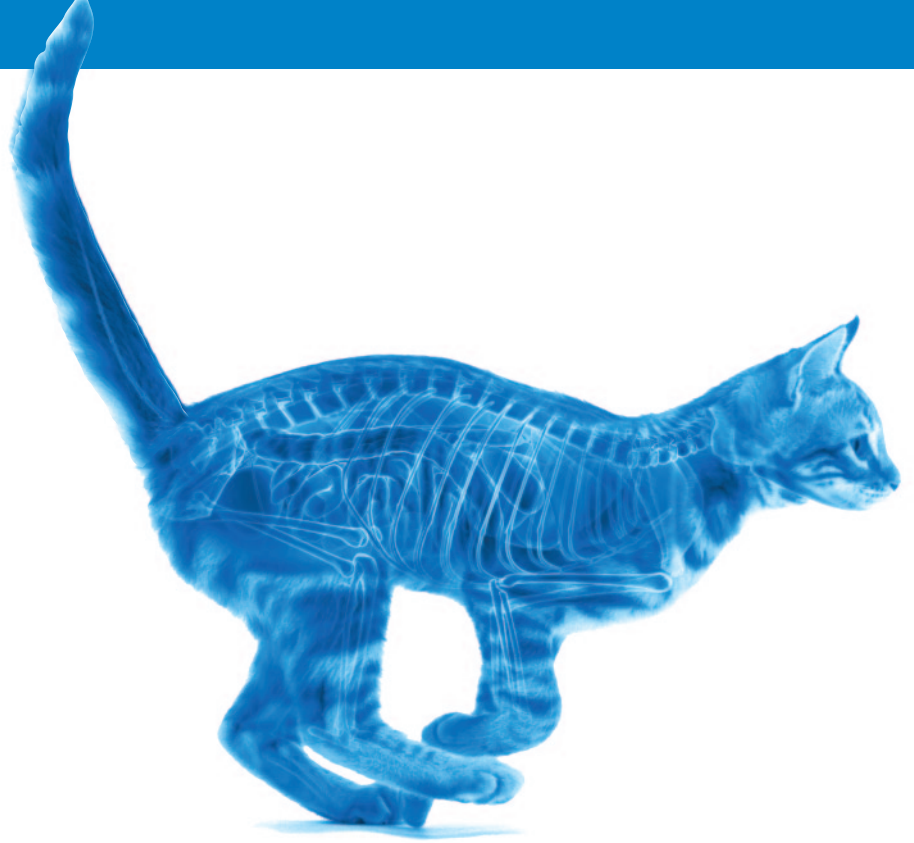


"Cats are considered to be playful animals and play is a great way to bond with your cat, give it exercise and keep its mind sharp. Even older cats can be encouraged to play and some cats will even solicit fetching games with their owners."

Jenni and Mike Smith from London bought their house cats Zippy and Tinks a cat climbing frame for Christmas because they didn't want their cats to get bored whilst they were at work. When Mike was assembling it he took extra care not to let Zippy and Tinks see it before it was finished because he wanted it to be a surprise for them!



The BSAVA states that to be a responsible pet owner, owners need to take their pet to the vet at least twice a year for regular check-ups



Fewer Trips to the Vet

The Feline Advisory Bureau says that it would be brilliant if all cat owners took their cat to the vet annually for regular check-ups (more frequently for kittens, older cats, or cats with health problems). Modern medications have made flea treatments and worming treatments more widely available and easier to apply at home, whilst advances in vaccinations mean that we can protect our pet cats very successfully against parasites and common infectious diseases.

Despite two thirds of owners surveyed saying they would seek dietary advice from their vet, only 28% said they take their cat to the vet for regular check-ups. Just a third take their cat to the vet once a year, and over a quarter take their cat to the vet only when it's unwell. It can, however, be more financially beneficial to take your cat to the vet regularly to prevent and identify potential health issues before they become serious.

When asked what health problems they think their cat has suffered from in the last year, just 7% of owners mentioned treating their cat for worms and only 7% mentioned dental problems, both of which are known to be very common in cats. A minimal 3% mentioned arthritis.

When asked what age they felt cats could live to, owners were optimistic. 46% of those surveyed expect their cat to live to between 16-20 human years old, despite 80% of their cats being less than 11 human years old at present.



"Intestinal worms are parasites that very commonly affect dogs and cats, although you may not be aware of their presence. Not only can these worms cause disease in cats, some can also cause disease in humans so it is vital they are controlled. Regular worming of your cat with a product recommended by your veterinary surgeon is the best way of ensuring your cat remains worm-free.

Dental disease is extremely common in cats, and can be a significant cause of pain and discomfort and may affect the ability of your cat to eat. While wet and dry cat foods both have advantages, feeding dry food can help to keep teeth cleaner by the natural process of abrasion that occurs while crunching on the food. Just as humans benefit from regular dental checks, we recommend that all cats are checked at least once a year, and that this includes a thorough dental examination."



"Cats are masters of disguise when it comes to hiding the fact that they are unwell. Therefore owners need to be able to pick up sometimes subtle changes in their cats' behaviour and take the cat to the vet if they feel something is wrong."

The Financial Implications

“Prevention of illness is always better, and usually cheaper, than the cure.” *Claire Bessant, CEO, The Feline Advisory Bureau*

Owning a cat is becoming increasingly expensive. Recent research estimates that cat owners spend an average of £800-£900 a year on their cat including food, litter, insurance, cattery fees and vet fees.⁸

The cost of owning a cat can be expensive, but the financial implications of an unhealthy cat can be even greater.

While owners are happy to ‘treat’ their cats with extra food, some don’t realise that this could be adding to their cat’s health problems, leading to more costly vet bills in the longer-term.

With human healthcare treatment available through the NHS, it’s easy for owners to forget or become out of touch with how much it costs to receive quality health treatment for their pets. Our survey findings show that many people try to diagnose problems themselves, with 11% of owners saying they would seek dietary advice for their cat from the internet.

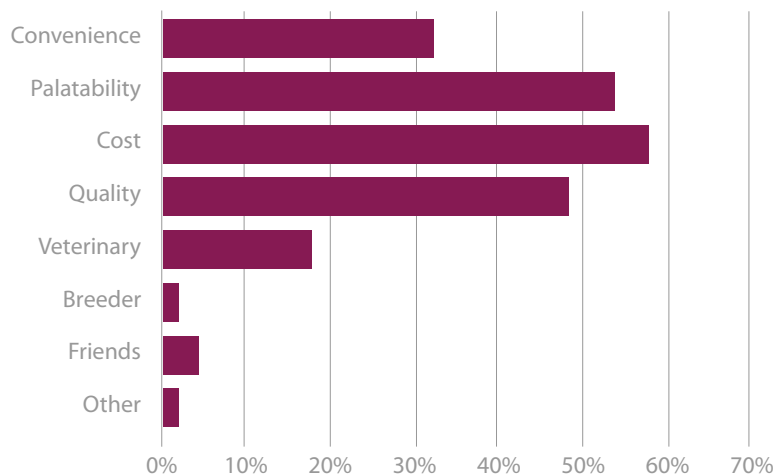
The expense of owning a cat includes the cost of cat food. When choosing a food for their cat 58% of owners say that cost is the most influential factor, followed by palatability/cat’s preference, quality and convenience/availability.



“While the internet is a great source of advice, there is no substitute for an examination of your cat, taking into account its history, behaviours and lifestyle.

Because cats often hide signs of disease or injury, the problem can be quite advanced if owners are not on the ball about checking their cat’s health with their vet.”

The most influential factors when choosing a cat food are:



The Solution

To keep up with modern times, our lifestyles may have changed - but the needs of our cats haven't.

It's important that owners know how to recognise signs of ill health in their cat and understand their needs as animals, rather than assessing their requirements as they would humans.

By focusing on the below areas of diet, preventative healthcare and behaviour, cat owners can help improve and maintain their cats' health and maximise their chance of a long and healthy life.

1. Diet

Cats are complex creatures when it comes to food. Many cats go outside in search of food and water and may even have other homes they visit and where food may be provided. Cats benefit from a good quality complete cat food, which will provide all the nutrition they require. Overfeeding can be an issue, so owners are recommended to follow the feeding guidelines which are featured on pack, and relate to their cat's age and lifestyle, and take into account any health issues.

2. Preventative healthcare

Cats can be protected against many infectious diseases with routine vaccinations. Keeping a cat flea and worm free is also simple with modern medications. A regular veterinary check-up will help to pick up any problems and help assess the cat's changing needs as it enters the different phases of its life. Any health issues which are detected can then be treated promptly and before they become serious – saving money and heartache in the long run. Regularly weighing their cat will also help owners identify any increases or decreases in weight, which can also be a sign of disease.

3. Changing behaviour

Cats are good at hiding disease, but owners can often tell that something is amiss by spotting small changes in behaviour. Owners need to be alert when looking out for changes in their cat's behaviour, such as drinking, eating or toileting habit, and feel confident discussing any changes they notice with their vet.



Top Tips to Keep Your Cat in Purrfect Health

To help owners keep their cats healthy, NutriCat and The Feline Advisory Bureau have developed the below Top Tips to Keep Your Cat in Purrfect Shape. These tips are also available on the NutriCat website at www.nutricat.com

- 1. Ensure your cat is vaccinated**

Always get your cat vaccinated against common cat diseases – cat flu, feline enteritis and feline leukaemia virus. Talk to your vet about regular booster vaccinations to keep your cat safe.
- 2. Take your cat for regular health checks**

An annual health check is recommended for all cats to discuss vaccination, flea or worm treatment and any health or behaviour queries you may have. Cats are masters of disguise when it comes to showing that they are ill or in pain – it can be very easy to miss. Always take your cat to the vet if you are worried about its health.
- 3. Treat your cat for fleas and worms regularly**

Fleas and worms are common in cats, especially those who go outside and hunt. There are many excellent preparations which make treatment easy. Always use a product made specifically for cats. There are some dog spot-on flea products which are extremely toxic to cats. If in doubt ask your vet.
- 4. Ensure you feed your cat a nutritionally balanced diet**

Cats are obligate carnivores with unique dietary requirements and should always be fed good quality diets. If you want to give your cat a treat make sure it is one designed specifically for cats. If you plan to change your cat's diet, do it gradually to avoid causing stomach upset. Changes in appetite can be a sign of illness – check with your vet if you are worried.
- 5. Make sure your cat has access to clean fresh water**

Although cats fed on tinned food are likely to get moisture from their diets, all cats, irrespective of whether they are fed wet or dry diets, should have access to clean fresh water. Some cats enjoy running water rather than still water in a bowl and a pet water fountain may encourage drinking. Changes in drinking behaviour can also be a sign of illness – check with your vet if you are worried.
- 6. Monitor your cat's weight regularly**

Loss of weight may be the first sign that something is wrong with your cat. Ideally cats should be weighed twice a year – this can also be done at a veterinary check-up. Make sure you note down your cat's weight and keep it safe – slow changes can be difficult to spot until you do the sums! Some cats may put on weight after being neutered. Also remember that cats weigh around 3 – 5 kg, so even a change of 300g is large compared to average body weight. The Pet Food Manufacturers Association (PFMA) website has a Pet Size-O-Meter which can help you decide if your cat is over or under weight.
- 7. Look out for behaviour changes**

Cats are excellent at hiding when they are ill, so owners have to be detectives and pick up on small clues. If your cat has changes in temperament, behaviour (such as use of its litter tray) or activity, don't ignore these – always check with your vet. You may pick up problems early before they become serious.
- 8. Understand your cat's preferences**

All cats are different – some love cuddles, others will be stressed if owners try to pick them up; some cats enjoy meeting people, others do not. Some cats do not like other cats and if they are living in a multicat household they may need places to hide and escape to, such as high places to perch. They may need additional resources such as extra places to eat or extra litter trays to reduce the stress of competing with other cats.
- 9. Play with your cat**

Play is great exercise for cats and keeps them lively physically and mentally. This is especially important for cats kept indoors who can become bored and prone to weight gain. Find out what sort of play and toys your cat likes or even make some simple toys – you will both enjoy the game and the interaction.
- 10. Look at your cat afresh**

Cats can live with us for a long time – often 14 years or more. Sometimes they become part of the furniture and changes can be missed. Look at your cat anew; check it over when you groom or stroke it. Older cats can suffer from the pain of arthritis and can be helped with medication. Teeth problems can also be common in cats. Weight changes can be easy to miss because of a fluffy coat. An obese cat can suffer from health problems such as diabetes, osteoarthritis, urinary tract problems and constipation; a thin cat can be losing weight because of a health problem.

Sources

¹ www.bluecross.org.uk Survey, May 2011

² In 2011 the UK Cat population is around 8 million, PFMA

³ 29% of people in the UK live on their own, 12% lived on their own in 1961. ONS Social Trends Household Data 2011

⁴ PDSA Animal Wellbeing Report 2011

⁵ <http://www.fabcats.org/owners/feeding/overweight.html>

⁶ http://www.pdsa.org.uk/about-us/media-pr-centre/news/1218_revealed_-_the-nation's-pet-flab_fighters

⁷ <http://news.sky.com/home/article/1278862>

⁸ <http://www.catclinic.co.uk/findacat/considerations.htm>



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