

Minor behaviour issues – cats



We are regularly contacted by owners wanting to give up their cat in cases where we consider a couple of minor fixes would solve the problem for ever. It's such a shame for this to happen. While some pet owners' minds can't be changed once the decision has been made to give up an animal, others who are more open minded to solutions may appreciate some advice and support.

Our team are not cat behaviourists and we have varying degrees of cat knowledge across our staff. We are happy to provide some basic advice by telephone (please be aware this will be limited). Alternatively your vet may be able to help in the same way.

Prevention is better than cure.

Don't have too many cats. They are solitary creatures who don't cope well with newcomers. Cats don't show unhappiness in an overt way, so please don't assume that this means everything is okay. Make sure you meet their basic care needs especially for hiding places, the ability to get away from other cats, and from people too. Make sure you know as much about the history of a cat before you take it on - all rescue centres are used to providing history and advice, and this is one of the begin advantages of rescuing and animal rather than buying one from a pet shop or free advert! Be aware of their natural behaviours – to run, hide, and to scratch things. Make sure they are neutered.

Consider a medical cause?

Cats becoming uncharacteristically grumpy, fretful or aggressive may well be suffering from a medical condition which is altering their mood. Initially, please get a vet to check the animal. This is especially so with inappropriate toileting cases as well. There is no point in beginning a behaviour change programme if the cat is unwell – you cannot train away a medical condition.



The cat needs too much attention.

We often hear from owners who feel that they haven't got enough time for their pet because they are out at work. In fact, cats naturally sleep up to 19 or 20 hours a day, so may well be resting up while you are out at work. It can seem like they need a lot from you, because in the few hours that you are at home, they will have designed their routines to focus on that being the activity time with their human. It's easy to fall into a trap of thinking they need to be like that all the time, but in fact if they probably don't. It's also fine to leave your cat overnight for one night occasionally, unless they are very old or on medical treatment – just leave lots of dry food and bowls of water down for them.

Toileting in the house

Cats may urinate in the house for two reasons – they may spray (usually when standing upright and spraying high up the wall) or inappropriately toilet (usually on the floor or on bedding). While both can be indicators of upset or stress – the presence of a new cat or dog in the house, or visible outside, a change in the family (such as new family members or babies), there can also be a reason (such as a fear/phobia) causing the cat to be unable to get to the tray or cat flap in time. Cats will defecate in the house mainly because they feel they cannot get to the litter tray or outside access safely, or if the tray is full. Older cats will hold their faeces and urine for less time than younger ones.

You can tackle these problems through:

- Neutering, especially if it's a boy!
- Keep the trays clean
- Have lots of trays (1 per cat plus another) and distribute them well round the house.
- Ensure the cat can get to the tray or cat flap easily without going through scary situations. Cats are not good at “holding” till they are let out in the same way as dogs. In particular, if you have more than one cat, be aware of “blocking” behaviours by one cat which stop the other reaching the tray.
- Provide lots of hiding places.
- If you have unfamiliar cats visiting the garden or entering the house, misting the lower half of windows, especially patio doors, may reassure your cat.
- Neutering the local ferals will also help reduce their likelihood to visit you. Call us for contact details of charities which can help with this.

Never shout at the cat, tell it off or otherwise punish it after any accident. You will only make the cat fearful which can in itself be a cause of toileting issues.

Scratching furniture

Cats have a natural need to keep their claws sharp and ready. This isn't just a physical urge but a basic mental one as well. To do this, they need to replicate the way that they would do it in the wild as much as possible. You need to help them satisfy this need without damaging your house or furniture.

So if they are scratching your prize furniture, you must find them something more satisfying to scratch! Use tree trunks, commercial scratching posts, or bits of wood with rope wrapped round.

If a particular piece of furniture, or section of carpet is being targeted, make sure that there is a scratching post near to it as a decoy, and ensure the main piece of furniture is covered with a throw. As cats like to scratch their claws just as they wake up, placing the post or scratching pad near their bed may attract their immediate scratching urges, and help to stop them scratching furniture.



Bothering the baby

Cats are curious animals who like to know about the humans they live with. They will be keen to meet any new people, especially small ones. Cats will rarely intend harm to children – they frequently have a sense of how to react to young children in a different way from adults. Sometimes if startled when relaxing, they might instinctively lash out, but their instinct is usually to run away.

Many cats appreciate a bit of warmth, a comfy bed and a bit of company. A sleeping human frequently provides this, and a baby or toddler is a much more appealing prospect to share a bed with than a big adult who might squash them!

It's therefore unsurprising to find that they might want to jump on the bed. The easiest way to prevent this is to ensure that children's bedrooms and cots are behind closed doors and don't encourage cats to sleep in the cot or bed – you need to enforce this from the first day home.

Attacking / fighting the children

Cats generally don't choose to attack people! And if socialised well, they won't play rough. However cats will regard any "rough play" (such as waving at them, prodding them and twiddling fingers) at best as a brilliant game, and at worst as an attack. It's important not to encourage your family or children to play rough with cats, pull their legs or tail, or prod their tummies. NEVER hit, shout at or push a cat if it lashes out – they don't learn by punishment (and they might just regard it as the next bit of the game, or an act of war!)



Still not able to keep your cat?

If you have tried and considered the above advice then please get in touch – see below for details.

External information (this will take you to external websites):

The following websites are reliable and all content has been reviewed by qualified feline behaviourists and veterinary specialists in feline medicine and cat welfare:

- International Cat Care & The International Society of Feline Medicine:
www.icatcare.org/advice/cat-behaviour
- Cats Protection: www.cats.org.uk/cat-care/careleaflets/essential-guides

Please remember that in Malta, as in many countries, there is no legal requirement to have undergone any training before you can call yourself an animal trainer or behaviourist. Ensure that before you accept and follow any advice from veterinary clinic staff, trainers and rescue charities, you check their experience and credentials. The MSPCA has UK qualified behavioural and Registered Veterinary Nursing personnel on staff and the information in this document has been collated from other qualified professionals as well.

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