



7 August 2018

**Timely moment to share great news for NSW cats!
Nine per cent increase in vaccinated pet cats in past year, but risk continues**

The Cat Protection Society of NSW has announced a positive change in owner attitudes to responsible cat ownership, with its latest Ipsos survey showing a 9% increase in the number of vaccinated pet cats since last year. But with kitten season around the corner, it's no time to be complacent about keeping our felines healthy, said Cat Protection CEO Kristina Vesk.

"International Cat Day on 8 August is a timely moment to reflect on the improvements in cat welfare that have been achieved in New South Wales, and to celebrate the joy that our feline friends bring to our lives," said Ms Vesk.

The increase in vaccination rates follows the re-emergence of the deadly Feline Panleukopaenia Virus (FPV, feline parvovirus, feline enteritis) in Sydney in early 2017. It was the first outbreak in almost 40 years, since the introduction of the highly effective F3 vaccine. FPV is contagious and almost always fatal in young kittens; even healthy adult cats are unlikely to survive if they haven't been vaccinated. There is no cure.

Herd immunity requires that greater than 70% of the population is vaccinated. The Ipsos survey conducted in 2017 and commissioned by Cat Protection found that in May last year 78% of pet cats were vaccinated. However, since much of the Sydney cat population is unowned, this didn't mean that 78% of *all* cats were vaccinated, explained Ms Vesk.

Cat Protection's response to the outbreak was swift and sustained. A discounted vaccination program was put in place and a number of free vaccination clinics were held in partnership with **Vanessa Barrs, University of Sydney Professor of Feline Medicine and Infectious Diseases**.

Additionally, along with a number of Sydney vet clinics, from August to October 2017, Cat Protection ran a special program, **Herding Cats**, where vaccination cost just \$10 and participants were invited to allow a blood sample to be taken from their cat. These samples were for a study led by Professor Barrs into the seroprevalence of FPV in cats in Sydney. The results will help the researchers understand why there was a re-emergence of the disease and inform future vaccination strategies.

Finally, Cat Protection invested in public advertising on the importance of vaccination, including a poster campaign on Sydney Trains. In the 12 months to June 2018, Cat Protection's free and discounted programs saw 1,000 cats vaccinated.

"The great news is that the June 2018 survey showed 85% of pet cats are now vaccinated – a nine per cent increase," Ms Vesk said. "This is a significant result and great news for cats, but we can't be complacent and we won't be winding back our efforts. The next kitten season is around the corner and with the risk that FPV is still present in many environments, ensuring a high rate of vaccination is vital.

"Cat owners in Sydney who hold a pension or health care card can get their cat desexed and vaccinated for just \$50 under our current 500 Cats Challenge, where Boehringer Ingelheim Animal Health has donated the vaccines and participating vets have discounted their normal fees. We also provide year-round discounted desexing and vaccination programs.

“With 90% of pet cats desexed, 85% vaccinated and 77% registered, the outlook for feline welfare is positive. But continued community effort and education, as well as financial subsidy to assist cat owners on low incomes, are needed.”

Research by Professor Barrs at the University of Sydney has identified two major strains of FPV. One is responsible for outbreaks in Sydney and the Central Coast and the other caused outbreaks in Melbourne, Geelong and Mildura.

Professor Barrs’ research is now focused on determining whether other viruses are “hitching a ride” in cats affected with panleukopaemia, as well as measuring herd immunity in outbreak and non-outbreak regions of Australia. This information will provide valuable insights into why the disease has re-emerged to cause large-scale outbreaks in Australia.

Health communication key to uptake of early-age desexing

“Understanding the health benefits of desexing has the potential to persuade almost all current and future owners to desex their cats,” said Ms Vesk.

Another key finding of the survey was that most cat owners (90%) have already desexed their cats and 88% of future cat owners would desex their cats.

The survey then provided information about the benefits of early-age desexing:

- Desexing is safe
- Female cats can get pregnant from as young as 4-5 months
- Desexing has health benefits, such as reducing the risk of various cancers
- Desexing has behavioural benefits, such as less wandering, fewer cat fights and cats less likely to ‘spray’ (urine).

More than 60% of owners of *desexed cats* knew of these benefits but fewer than half the owners of *undesexed cats*, and future cat owners, knew of the benefits. After the health communications, when asked again about desexing intention, *almost all respondents stated they would desex their cats*.

“This insight is not a fluke – last year’s survey identified that providing information about the benefits of early-age desexing could increase the rate of cat desexing by up to 11%,” said Ms Vesk.

“Two decades of evidence show that early-age desexing is medically and behaviourally safe. However, many people remain unaware of its benefits. All of us in pet, welfare and veterinary services need to do more to educate people about the benefits of early-age desexing if we are to manage feline population growth.”

Cat Protection Society resources on desexing

Cat Protection’s consumer website (catprotection.org.au) has two videos on the benefits of early-age desexing, one of which includes Auslan interpreters as well as links to veterinary reports and factsheets, including bilingual cat welfare information (Arabic/Hindi/Vietnamese/Simplified Chinese).

Cat Protection’s website for people who work with cats (catcare.org.au) offers a free CPD-points accredited education package for veterinarians on early-age desexing. Cat Protection’s Good Neighbour Project brochure (which promotes all aspects of responsible cat ownership) is available free of charge to vet clinics, pet shops and councils.

“Age of cat and expense were the top two reasons people gave for not yet desexing their cats. Both these obstacles can be overcome with information and discounted services such as those provided by Cat Protection and other animal welfare charities,” said Ms Vesk.

“We are grateful for the support of our members and donors, Professor Barrs and all the vets who work with us. We will continue our efforts to assist cat owners and we’re proud that our concerted vaccination campaign delivered strongly for feline health.”

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About Feline Panleukopaenia Virus

FPV is contagious and can survive long periods in the environment. It cannot be passed on to humans and is preventable through the standard F3 vaccination. All unvaccinated cats and kittens, as well as kittens who have not completed the full immunisation course and adult cats who have not received booster vaccines, are at risk. The F3 is a core vaccine for cats, covering feline herpesvirus, feline calicivirus and feline panleukopaenia virus. There are two types of vaccine: modified live which is fast acting but not recommended for pregnant or sick cats; and killed (inactivated) vaccines.

In young kittens, FPV is almost always fatal, even when treatment is provided. There is no cure but supportive treatment (eg intravenous fluids and treatment of secondary infections) can assist survival rates, particularly in older kittens and adult cats.

All cats and kittens admitted to Cat Protection's shelter are vaccinated on arrival and continue to receive vaccinations according to the appropriate schedule (consistent with World Small Animal Veterinary Association vaccination guidelines).

About Vanessa Barrs

Vanessa Barrs is Professor of Feline Medicine & Infectious Diseases in the Sydney School of Veterinary Science and the Marie Bashir Institute of Infectious Diseases and Biosecurity at the University of Sydney. Vanessa is a registered Specialist in Feline Medicine, is head of Small Animal Medicine and former Director of the busy University Veterinary Teaching Hospital. Vanessa works closely with the Cat Protection Society and other shelter organisations in Australia researching emerging and re-emerging infectious diseases in companion animals as well as fungal pathogens, and she discovered Aspergillus felis, an important cause of disease in cats in 2013.

About Cat Protection Society of NSW

Cat Protection is a registered charity, operating a shelter as well as feline welfare programs, education, research and policy. It was founded in 1958 by a small group of volunteers concerned about the plight of street cats. Over the past 60 years, Cat Protection has helped with desexing tens of thousands of cats and was the first Australian shelter to adopt early-age desexing so that no kitten went to a new home undesexed.

About Ipsos

Ipsos conducted an online survey of 524 men and women aged 18+ years, living in New South Wales. The research was conducted between 25 May and 1 June 2018. The sample comprised 364 cat owners (who collectively own a total of 542 cats) and 160 non-cat owners. Ipsos is an independent market research company controlled and managed by research professionals. Founded in France in 1975, Ipsos has grown into a worldwide research group with a strong presence in all key markets. Ipsos ranks third in the global research industry. With offices in 89 countries, Ipsos delivers insightful expertise across six research areas: advertising, customer loyalty, marketing, media, public affairs research, and survey management.