

## FACTSHEET

### Caring for the senior cat

Just as we have different needs as we get older, so do our cats. There are signs you need to watch for that may indicate your cat needs a little extra love and care from you to get through the day.

#### **At what age is my cat considered senior?**

The life span of an indoor cat is around 20 years and at 8-12 years of age your cat is considered senior. Keep in mind, a 12 year old cat is approximately physically equivalent to a 65–70 year old human. That said, all cats age differently just as humans do, and one 12 year old cat may be active and youthful while another might show signs of ageing.

#### **Signs your cat shows as they mature**

As your cat matures, look out for signs that they may need assistance with daily activities:

- Disheveled fur – as cats age, grooming can become more difficult as the cat is not so flexible and mobility may be limited due to stiffness. Matted and dull fur can indicate that your cat is having difficulty grooming. You can help them by giving them a brush with a soft bristled brush at least once a week. Keep in mind if your cat is not accustomed to being brushed you may need to do this in short stints to avoid your cat becoming stressed
- Increased appetite with no weight gain – if your cat is eating more than usual but doesn't seem to gain weight, you should take them for a health check with their vet as soon as possible to ensure they don't have an underlying medical condition
- Decreased appetite – it is not unusual for an older cat to have a slightly decreased appetite. An older cat's eyesight and sense of smell will start dulling; this is one of the major causes of decreased appetite as your cat can't smell or see the food as well as they did when they were younger. To ensure your cat gets all the nutrients they need, it's very important that you provide them with a diet specifically for an older cat. To stimulate your cat's appetite, you can try slightly warming their food. If your cat's appetite decreases drastically, or you are concerned by the lack of appetite, you should take your cat to their vet
- Toileting problems - as your cat ages they might develop incontinence. This could result in your cat not being able to reach the litter tray in time when they need to go to the toilet. It's a good idea to get a few extra litter trays and have them scattered throughout the house to avoid accidents. If you notice your cat is having trouble getting into the tray, try getting low sided litter trays or larger trays so the cat doesn't have to climb so high and has more room so they can squat in the tray. An older cat's sense of touch can also be heightened so you may need to change the type of litter they use to a softer one to encourage them to use the tray
- Loss of mobility – you may notice as your cat gets older that they have difficulty moving around the house and aren't as agile as they once were. Just like humans, cats can get arthritis. If you notice a lack of spring in your cat's step, take them for

a vet check to ensure they are not in pain. Medication and nutritional supplements can be given by your vet to assist with arthritic pain. Your cat's bones will also become more brittle with age so again, it is important to give an older cat specially formulated cat food

- Mood swings – as your cat gets older you may notice a change in their behaviour. Super friendly cats may become a little more reserved, and shy cats may become more affectionate. It is important to pay attention to any signs your cat shows that tell you their mood may be changing. Things like a swishing tail or a low growl can indicate that your cat might not want to be cuddled or is not comfortable with you patting them and patting sessions may need to be in short bursts if your cat is becoming more sensitive to touch. Behaviour changes could result from an underlying pain condition, such as arthritis, so it is important to have a vet rule out any medical reasons for your cat's changed behaviour
- More vocal – as your cat gets older you might notice they are becoming more vocal. Your cat's senses will start to dull as they get older, causing them not to be able to see, hear, or smell as well. This deterioration of senses could be the reason for the vocalization, as your cat may be calling to find out where you are. Your cat may also be trying to tell you something is wrong. If you notice your cat is becoming very vocal and appears distressed, you should seek veterinary advice as soon as possible. Calming intervention products such as 'Feliway', 'Zylkene' and calming treats can be helpful to reduce stress levels for your cat as they age
- Increased water intake – it is very important to monitor your cat's water intake as they get older. Kidney disease and diabetes are common ailments in older cats from 10 years onwards and can be easily managed if detected early. If you notice your cat is drinking more than usual it is very important that you take them to their vet for a health check
- Dental hygiene – tartar build up on teeth and gum disease is fairly common in older cats. Ensure a dental check is a part of your cat's routine annual health check. You can also check your cat's teeth regularly yourself and if you notice your cat having any difficulty when eating, or that your cat has very bad breath, you should make an appointment with the vet
- Other pets – if you have other pets living with your older cat, it is important to monitor the behaviour between them, as bullying and irritation can occur.

### **Making life more comfortable for your cat**

There are a few ways you can make your cat's life a little more comfortable as they get older:

- Regular vet checks – all cats should have annual vet checks but at some point, usually between 8-12 years, the frequency should be increased to every six months; this is because medical problems can progress more quickly in older cats. In any case, significant changes to a cat's behaviour, appetite, thirst, or toileting should always prompt a vet check
- Maintain routines – cats are creatures of habit and rely on routine in their daily lives. As they get older this is even more important as routine will help your cat adjust to the changes going on in their body and reduce the likelihood of stress
- Extra bedding – as your cat gets older they will tend to feel the cold more than usual. It is a good idea to invest in a small heat mat to place in your cat's bed as well as some extra bedding. It is also helpful to place a few blankets and cat beds in lower areas around the home because your cat might not be able to reach the

- higher places they did in the past
- Regular grooming – invest in a good quality, soft bristled brush and groom your cat at least once a week to help keep their coat in top condition. Grooming also strengthens the bond between you and your cat. Always be gentle with an older cat and pay attention to signs they are giving you with their body language as to when they have had enough
  - Mobility – Your cat may have difficulty getting up to the places they like to spend time, like the lounge or a windowsill. Try placing steps in these areas if you know they are favourite places for your cat. They do not have to be physical steps, rather different levels of things to help them get up. A foot stool at the front of the lounge, or a scratcher with different levels under a window can all assist with your cat's mobility and help them maintain their happiness.

### **Be prepared**

As your cat gets older it is a good idea to have an action plan in place should the worst happen:

- Keep your vet's phone number, emergency after-hours vet number, and your cat's carrier handy at all times
- Monitor any sudden changes in health or behavior
- Think about what you want to do with your cat's remains when they die and how you would feel about putting them to sleep if they are suffering a terminal illness. Although these are sad thoughts, it is a good idea to talk to your vet about them, because when the situation does confront you, it will be a very emotional time.

**It is very important to remember your cat needs extra love and support from you as they get older. You will need to be tolerant of behaviours that might change and health conditions that will demand more time from you. Your cat can't talk and their behaviour is the only way they can communicate with you. Patience is the key to ensuring a happy life with your older cat.**

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