



The friendly road to pet Wellness

HIGHlands
VETERINARY HOSPITAL

**GENERAL
CARE
OF THE
OLDER CAT**

TABLE OF CONTENTS

GENERAL CARE OF YOUR OLDER CAT	3
THE EFFECTS OF AGEIN	4
LONGEVITY: GENETICS & ENVIRONMENT.....	5
NUTRITION	6
VETERINARY CARE.....	7
DESEXING	7
STRESS.....	8
EXERCISE	8
OLDER AGE IN CATS	9
BEHAVIOURAL CHANGES IN THE OLDER CAT.....	11
PHYSICAL CHANGES AND MEDICAL PROBLEMS IN THE OLDER CAT	13
TEETH AND GUMS	14
DIGESTIVE SYSTEM	15
ENCOURAGING APPETITE	16
PANCREAS AND LIVER.....	17
URINARY SYSTEM	18
CIRCULATORY SYSTEM.....	19
RESPIRATORY SYSTEM.....	20
BONES AND MUSCLE	21
SKIN & NAIL	22
NERVOUS SYSTEM	24
SENSES.....	25
ENDOCRINE SYSTEM	25
CANCER.....	26
IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF LIFE OF YOU CAT-WHAT CAN YOU DO?.....	27
ELDERLY CAT FRIENDLY HOME	29
PLAY.....	29
SCRATCHING.....	30
LOOK-OUTS	30
PUZZLE FEEDING.....	31
LITTER TRAYS	31
BEDS.....	31
PRIVATE PLACES	32
CAT FLAPS.....	32
GARDEN	32
EUTHANASIA	34
CONCLUSION	35
INDEX.....	36



GENERAL CARE OF YOUR OLDER CAT

There has been very little research into the problems associated with old age in cats until recently. Little was known about the behavioural and physical changes accompanying the aging process in cats - primarily because few cats lived long enough to demonstrate these changes. Even now, the majority of cats die before they reach old age. **Cats are living much longer now than was the case 20 years ago, thanks to better nutrition, Veterinary and home care.**

Life expectancy depends on many things. Cats generally live from **12-18 years** of age. Many may live to be in their early 20s with the oldest reported cat living to be an amazing **28 years** old. When caring for older cats it sometimes helps to appreciate their age in human terms. The formula for calculating the equivalent age is fairly simple: the first two years of a cat's life equate to 24 human years and every year thereafter is equivalent to 4 human years. For example, a 16 year old cat would be equivalent to an 80 year old human.

Sound management, modern medicine and preventive health programs, coupled with an increasing desire by both cat owners and Veterinarians to care for older cats is now resulting in much greater potential for longevity in cats.

In other words; there are **MANY** things that you and we (your Veterinarian) can do to give your pet the best opportunity for good health and a long life.

To give your pet the greatest opportunity – start preventative programs from late adolescence or early middle age.

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In this quick primer, we'll share just some simple insights with which you can get started. To learn more about this topic please give me a holler or come in and see me – I'm passionate about 'senior' pets and maximizing their health and long life.

THE EFFECTS OF AGEING

With increasing age there are many changes to a cat's physiology, behaviour and vulnerability to particular illnesses. Physiological changes include reduced ability to smell and taste food, reduced ability to digest fat and protein, reduced hearing, immune function, skin elasticity and stress tolerance.

Remember: this is the time more than any other, when your cat needs some essential care.



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LONGEVITY: GENETICS AND ENVIRONMENT



Both genetic and environmental factors (environmental factors include – dental care, nutrition, exercise, parasite prevention and many other factors) affect a cat's longevity. As a general rule, female cats live longer than males, and neutered (spayed or castrated) animals live longer than intact (unaltered) ones. The most important indicator for longevity is how your cat is housed: indoor versus outdoor habituation. Indoor cats live to a much older age than cats that live outdoors.

Outdoor cats are exposed to many more hazards and contagious diseases and, on average, may live 3-5 years less.

Resistance to disease and the ability to improve survival through efficient adaptation to environmental changes are usually associated with hereditary factors. The capacity to live longer is more pronounced in some cat families, indicating the importance of genetics as a factor.

Although you (as a cat pet parent) have no control over your pet's genetic makeup, you **MOST DEFINITELY** can exercise some control over the environmental factors which promote longevity in your cat. **REMEMBER:** the general condition of an old cat tends to reflect the care it has received throughout its life.

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NUTRITION

A great diet plays an extremely important role in the aging or rather – in the SLOWING down of the ageing process.

Restricted, balanced diets - in addition to helping kittens and younger cats remain healthy and active - may also delay the onset of major diseases, thereby prolonging the cat's lifespan.

On the other hand, a poorly balanced and/or excessive diet which leads to obesity in cats actually accelerates the maturation process and shortens the cat's lifespan.

Let's simplify this; typically, the foods or diets that will help your cat live the longest, are typically the most expensive. It's that old scenario – you get what you pay for.

Also – it's VERY, very difficult indeed to provide an adequate, balanced homemade food for your cat. Commercial diets are generally much better for your pet.

Older cats with specific problems in vital organs (e.g., the heart, kidneys, liver) or with certain other health problems may require specially formulated diets.

These 'prescription' diets are available commercially to optimize the cat's health.

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VETERINARY CARE

The life of the older cat can be greatly extended by regular Veterinary care. Regular vaccination programs for the common infectious diseases prolong a cat's life considerably. Quality sanitation and parasite control programs provide the same benefit. Regular dental care is also important.

DESEXING

Studies show that cats that have been neutered, preferably at an early age, live longer than intact (unaltered) cats. Neutering a cat – castration in the male (removal of the testes), and spaying the female (removal of the ovaries and uterus) – not only prevents unwanted pregnancies occurring, but also curbs unwanted behavioural patterns associated with sexual maturity and reduces the risk of certain diseases like pyometra (infection of the womb) later in life and with mammary tumours.

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STRESS

The amount and degree of stress a cat encounters greatly affect its longevity. Free-roaming (outdoor) cats live far shorter lives than confined ones due to traffic accidents, hostile neighbours and contact with sick animals. The absence of stressful conditions in the cat's home life can prolong its life by reducing the likelihood of the debilitating changes, which often accompany stress.

EXERCISE

Older cats need to exercise and play just like older people! Regular daily exercise improves circulation, maintains muscle tone and improves waste elimination. It also helps with better flexibility, joint movement and mini-

mizes the effects of arthritis.

Each older cat should be assessed individually to determine the exact level of exercise that best suits that particular cat.

Generally, play may include the use of old favourite toys with modifications to accommodate those with less flexibility and stiffness. If your cat has a favourite toy there is no reason to discard it as she gets older. The larger toys can be useful to encourage your elderly cat to lie on its side, grab the toy with the front paws and kick with the back legs. This gives great passive exercise for stiff hind limbs. A cardboard box, modified for the older cat, is a real favourite. Older cats may like the idea of investigating a large box on its side with the opening facing the cat to enable it to walk in. Paper bags can also provide opportunities for exploration, particularly if they crinkle.

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OLD AGE IN CATS

Despite all the beneficial care you and your Veterinarian (me) may give to each individual pet, the aging process will continue. It is vitally important that you are aware of the normal changes that occur in the aging cat.

All living creatures must eventually die, and death is usually preceded by an inevitable series of behavioural and physical changes as old age takes its toll.

While no one - Veterinarians and pet owners included - can prevent death, we can and should make every effort to prevent suffering associated with gradual degenerative changes that signal the transitional phase between life and death. Improved understanding, coupled with better Veterinary capabilities and better owner care at home, can do much to lessen the stress of old age in your cat.

Changes in a formerly healthy and active cat attributed to senility (i.e., the problems associated with old age) are often frustrating and depressing for a cat owner as well as for the animal itself.

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Since senility marks the beginning of the end, those who love their animals may have difficulty accepting the inevitable. This period in a cat's life can be an emotional one for the cat owner. It is a time, however, for you to be as rational as possible; your pet needs you more now than ever before.

The cat can suffer even greater physical and behavioural 'insult' if the owner overreacts to the changes accompanying old age.

Negative behavioural changes may occur before any noticeable physical deterioration takes place in your aging cat. Therefore, any attempts to punish your cat for behavioural changes associated with aging will only make the cat suffer more.

Rather, you need to come in and have your cat assessed. There are many ways in which we can counter the effects of ageing on your pet's brain. For example, nutrition and 'play' are two important factors. Did you know play with your cat can COUNTER the effects of brain aging and senility? Yep – just like the 'games' that most of us humans will have to engage in as we get older.

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BEHAVIOURAL CHANGES IN THE OLDER CAT

Changes in behaviour are quite common in aged cats, often as a result of physiological changes taking place. The elderly cat adapts gradually to these changes and it may not be apparent unless you are specifically looking for signs of ageing.

Older (outdoor) cats hunt less and spend less time outdoors and they are often lazy and apathetic, tending to sleep more during the day. They can have a reduced or fussy appetite, be less keen to play or groom and be more vocal. They also tend to become more insecure and therefore potentially more dependent on you. And there are things that can be done to manage these changes.

Other behavioural changes can be seen as a direct result of disease, for example, increased thirst or appetite or aggression associated with pain.

During periods of hospitalization or boarding, older cats commonly become anxious, over groom, and may be reluctant to eat.

A reduction in the desire for exercise as well as the ability to exercise frequently accompanies old age. The ability to maintain housetraining standards is often lost as well.

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As the cat ages, these behavioural changes may become more pronounced and the problems associated with the changes more severe.

You can assist your aging pet by attempting to alleviate any condition, which promotes these problems.

Thus, if your cat is lazy and apathetic, you should make sure your cat gets plenty of regular exercise without making him or her endure true physical hardship. Plenty of your attention and companionship can help to reduce anxiety, and an understanding attitude rather than a scolding one is in order for any lapses in bladder or bowel control. There are now many new products available which can control/help manage senility and ageing changes in older cats. Often even simple things like multi-vitamin supplements, Omega 3/6 fatty acids, and some great ‘prescription’ diets available to manage the effects of ageing in your older cat.



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PHYSICAL CHANGES AND MEDICAL PROBLEMS IN THE OLDER CAT

As in humans, the cat's body and its supporting systems gradually wear out. These erosive processes usually occur slowly and are often distinguishable only over a period of time.

These changes affect all parts of the aging cat, with some occurring sequentially and others, simultaneously. All represent problems for your pet and can make his/her life shorter, less enjoyable and more painful.

Compounding these debilitating problems is the older cat's decreased ability to respond quickly to diseases and other threats.

Recovery from any particular disease, including stress, boarding, etc. tends to take longer in the old cat. It is estimated that it takes an additional 24 hours of recovery time for each 5 years of age. Much of this delayed recovery time results from the kinds of physical changes discussed on the next page.

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TEETH AND GUMS

Dental problems such as the accumulation of dental tartar, reddening of the gums, oral growths, and infections are commonly seen ailments in the older cat. Studies show that 85% of cats over two years of age will have significant dental disease.

Halitosis (bad breath), drooling, a ‘chattering’ jaw, loss of appetite and pawing at the mouth may all be signs of dental disease, if in doubt, consult your Veterinarian.

Studies show that dental disease is one of the MAJOR reasons why many cats do not get to live out to their full potential.

And that’s a travesty – because dental disease is a disease that can be readily managed – at any stage of the disease process and no matter what the age of the cat.

Obviously, the better your cat’s teeth are maintained from kitten-hood (good dental diet and regular Veterinary examinations), the better.

But do NOT let your cat’s advancing years, nor the severity of your pet’s bad breath or manky teeth put you off having him looked at and treated. It’s never too late to get your pet’s teeth attended to. You may recognise signs of dental disease as Halitosis (bad breath), drooling, a ‘chattering’ jaw, loss of appetite and pawing at the mouth.

By the way – even though a cat with bad teeth and gums won’t show pain, trust me – it’s a VERY painful disease to have. Ask any human who has been so unlucky.

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DIGESTIVE SYSTEM

As the cat ages, she becomes susceptible to a whole host of problems relating to the ingestion of food and liquid. The problems can literally begin at the mouth and end at the anus.

For example:

The salivary glands may produce less saliva as a result of a major increase in fatty tissue in the salivary glands.

A decrease in muscle tone of the oesophagus muscles also commonly occurs.

Older cats are less able to detect the sensation of thirst.

Hairballs are more commonly a problem due to sluggish digestion

Constipation or diarrhoea may occur.

Additionally, poor digestion or absorption of foodstuffs is common.

All of the above can be readily managed by some slight diet changes.

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ENCOURAGING APPETITE

Your cat may have less of an appetite as it gets older as its sense of smell and taste diminishes or there may be occasions when your cat needs a little encouragement. There are various ways that you can stimulate appetite, for example:

Offer food little and often – for example four to six meals per day as a starting point - and choose a quiet area so that your cat isn't distracted by noise and activity. Experiment with both familiar and unfamiliar food to tempt appetite.

Consider the type of bowl used to offer food: your cat may prefer a wide, shallow bowl or one with a rim, for example.

Offer food at room temperature, gently warming food to just below body temperature can increase palatability.

Experiment with the consistency of the food offered. Some elderly cats, especially those with dental problems, prefer soft food to lumps or dry biscuits. You could try adding a small amount of water to the food and mashing with a fork.

Raise the food bowl onto a box, for example, as this may offer more comfortable eating to a cat with osteoarthritis affecting the neck.

Avoid leaving uneaten wet food out for more than an hour and don't be tempted to leave a range of different foods out as this can be overwhelming.

Sitting with your cat whilst talking and stroking can increase appetite, you may even want to try hand feeding.



PANCREAS AND LIVER

The pancreas secretes the hormone insulin and also, the enzymes necessary for digestion. Malfunctioning of the pancreas can cause diabetes mellitus, a metabolic disorder, which is more common after 8 years of age.

Other pancreatic problems can result in persistent loose stools and weight loss despite good appetite and a good diet.

A decrease in liver function also often accompanies old age in the cat.

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URINARY SYSTEM



Some degree of kidney degeneration occurs in nearly all older cats although cats can still function with only 25% of the kidney function intact.

Chronic kidney disease is more likely in old cats and is a disease that we are starting to see much more commonly than we used to.

Again, early detection allows the use of many management strategies, which allow the kidneys to function much healthier and for much longer.

A loss of fastidiousness of waste elimination habits is sometimes the first sign of senility and arthritis in the old cat.

Also incontinence (loss of bladder or bowel control) and bladder infections are increasingly common as a cat ages.

DRINKING

Elderly cats are more vulnerable to becoming dehydrated, especially if suffering from medical conditions such as chronic kidney disease, so always make sure that a variety of water bowls are available in the home in accessible areas away from the normal places where food is eaten.

You may need to experiment with the type of container, for example, ceramic bowl, glass or drinking fountain and even the type of water, such as tap water, boiled water, filtered, spring etc. It may even be helpful to add a small amount of water to your elderly cat's wet food.

Water bowls, like food bowls, may be more comfortably used by the older cat if you raise it off the ground.

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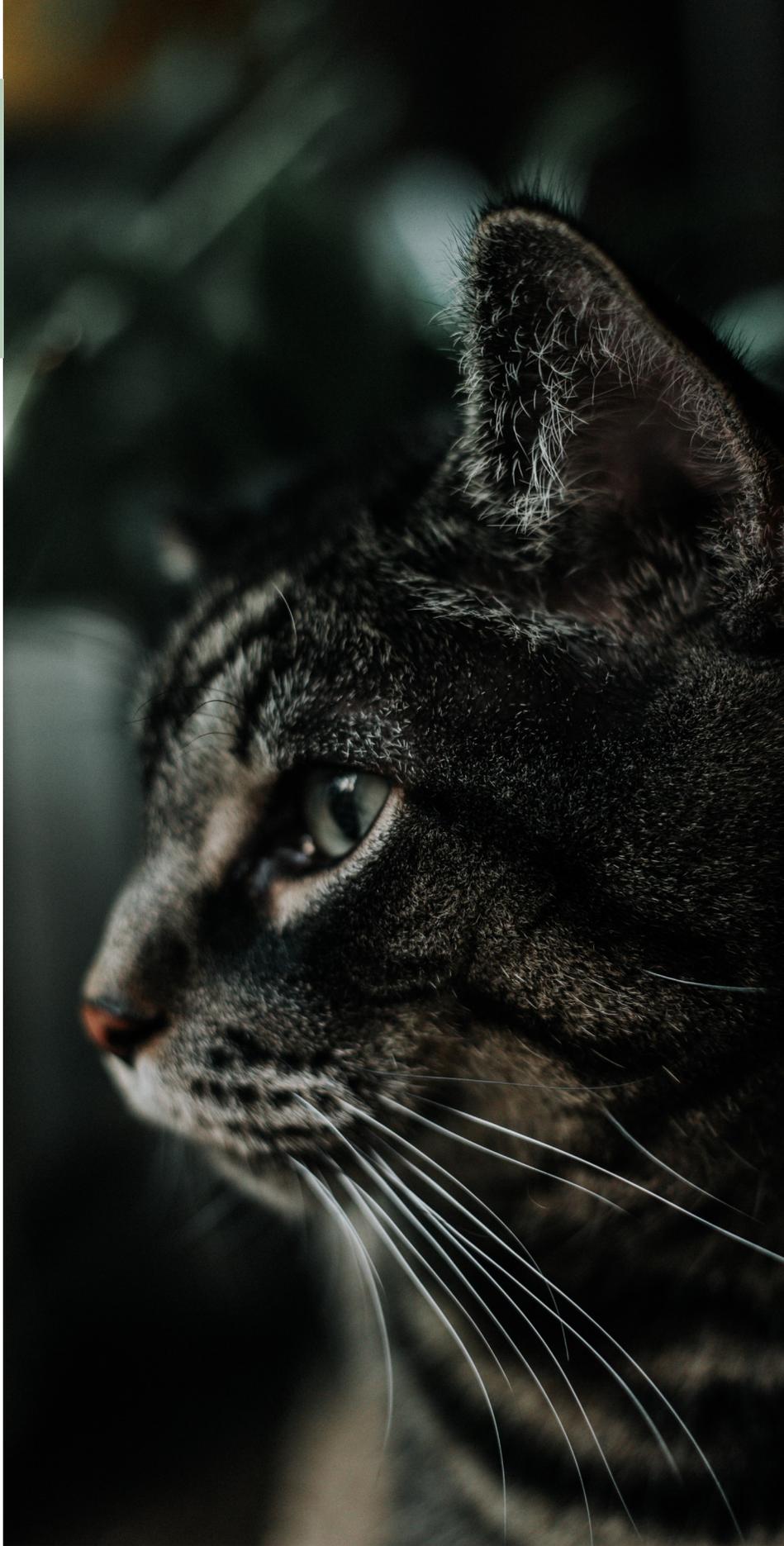
CIRCULATORY SYSTEM

Hypertension and thickening of the heart muscle are common in older cats. Both of these conditions are often the result of ‘other’ diseases (i.e. kidney disease and hyperthyroidism).

Problems of the heart and circulatory system can cause pain, internal bleeding, sudden blindness, and difficulty when exercising and lethargy - in addition to complicating any other condition or disease encountered by the cat.

The good news is that modern medicine has delivered us a HOST of very effective medications that will allow most older cats with heart disease or hypertension to live full, long, healthy and happy lives.

Again – early detection and early treatment gives by far and away the best results.



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RESPIRATORY SYSTEM

The respiratory problems seen frequently in old cats are often secondary to allergies and infection: such as chronic bronchitis, asthma, and cat flu.

Old cats have a poorer immune system and, when stressed, can have complications due to lifelong infection with the very contagious feline herpes virus (many contract this when a kitten or if unvaccinated)

Also, the incidence of tumours increases

In case you are asking, YES – asthma and chronic bronchitis are more common in cats whose owners smoke.

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BONES AND MUSCLES

The changes here are identical to those seen in us humans...

The long bones become thinner, more dense and brittle as your cat ages. And until recently, arthritis in cats was not commonly diagnosed or treated. This may be due in part to the cats' survival instinct to hide signs of pain, and the lack of recognition of the condition by owners. Arthritis (inflammation of joints) is the single most common problem of the skeletal and muscular systems. A recent study reported up to 90% of cats over 12 years old had evi-

dence of arthritis

A general loss of muscle mass occurs with age as the number and size of muscle cells decrease. This process accounts for the postural changes (e.g., bowing of the neck and spine, flabby abdominal wall) and stunted movements often seen in old age.

Old cats find muscle movements more painful and may walk stiffly after periods of rest. Hence, regular, steady exercise is of paramount importance to maintain healthy, fit muscles and joints.

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SKIN & NAIL

As a cat ages, her skin tends to thicken and lose its elasticity. Hair loss increases. Skin tumours and cysts occur more frequently, and nails become more brittle and irregular.

At this stage of their life it becomes more important than ever to provide some essential care. They find it more difficult to maintain their own cleanliness and checking your cat regularly will enable you to detect problems that need to be tackled straight away.

For example, check your cat's nails weekly. Elderly cats are less able to retract their claws and long nails may get caught in fabrics and tear. They can also overgrow into their toe pads. Regular trimming will be necessary at home to avoid these problems. Ask us how if you need help with nail trimming technique.

Old cats are less able to groom efficiently and can develop matted hair and mucky bits. So you may need to wipe away any discharge from eyes, nose, ears, and anus using separate pieces of moistened cotton wool. You should brush your cat using a soft brush and fine comb taking care to be gentle, as older cats tend to be thin and

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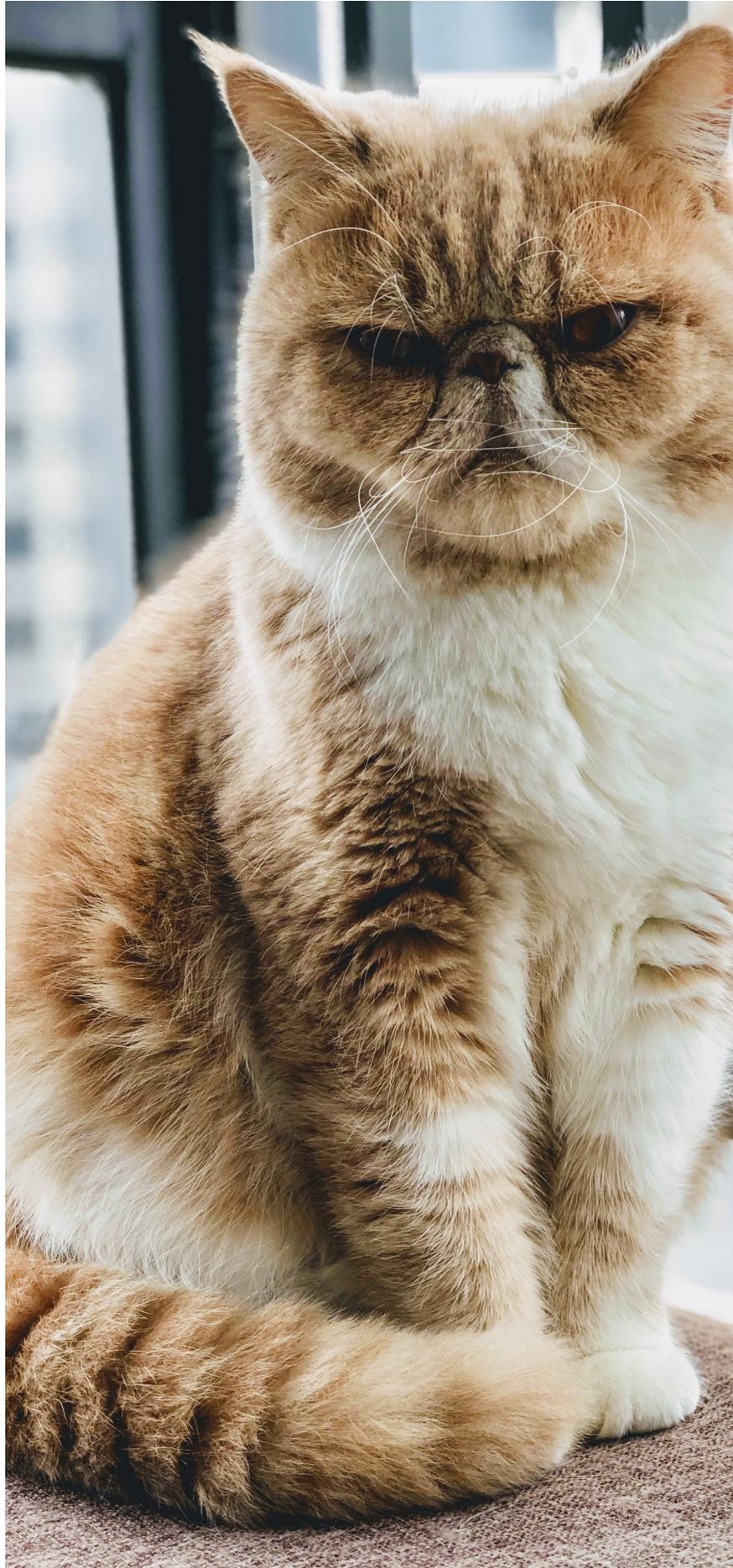
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bony and vigorous combing can be painful. Longer haired cats will need more frequent brushing, especially of their lower spine, tummy, and hind legs (old cats are less flexible and therefore unable to reach these areas to self-groom). If matting occurs, you could try to tease these matts out gently or shave them off. If this is a daunting task, ask us to help.

Grooming your older cat is a good opportunity to feel for lumps and bumps. If you find one then bring her in for immediate assessment. Most lumps will be benign and of no consequence but if a lump is one of the 'nasty' ones, then we can remove it quickly and easily while it's still small.

Hairballs are a common problem due to sluggish digestion and irregular self-grooming habits. They are often responsible for vomiting or constipation and can be avoided with special supplements or foods.

Even if your elderly cat has access to the outdoors, it is wise to provide an indoor litter facility as there will inevitably come a time when your cat just doesn't feel inclined to toilet in cold, damp conditions outside. If you provide a litter tray, then you have the opportunity to check your cat's elimination habits (for blood in the urine or stools) and change in consistency of stools or other indicators of disease.



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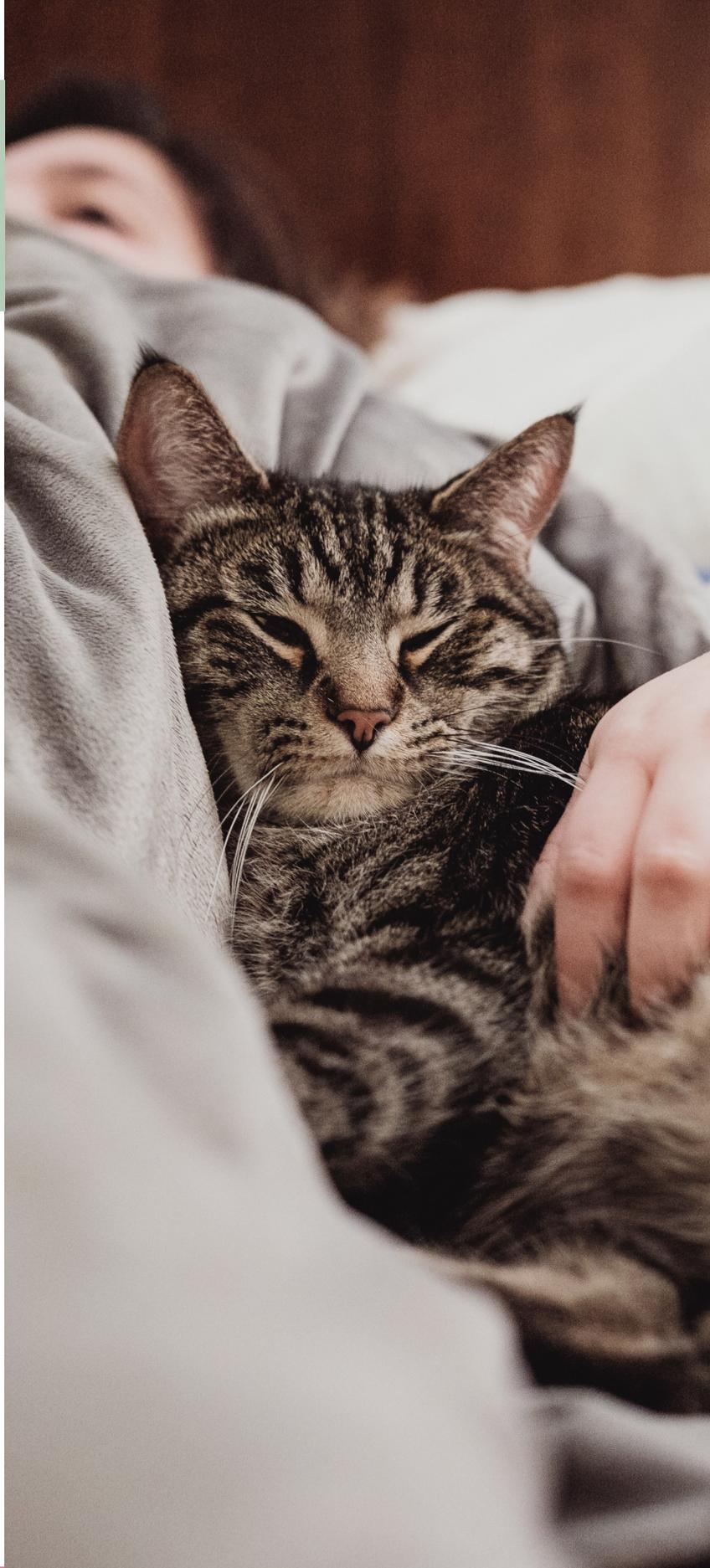
NERVOUS SYSTEM

Neural activity can decrease by 10% in the old cat. Changes associated with the membranes covering the brain (the meninges) can cause a cat to become irritable and 'unusual'. One such issue is a decline in cognitive abilities (e.g., learning, memory, attention, spatial abilities) as a result of these changes in the brain.

A cat affected by these changes may have orientation problems, changes in their sleep-wake cycles, toileting inappropriately, reduced interaction with owners, crying for no reason, changes in appetite, and difficulty remembering learned behaviours (like litter tray training).

However such changes in behaviour can also result from other diseases, such as hyperthyroidism, chronic renal failure, diabetes mellitus and more. Therefore, if you notice any changes in behaviour in your old cat, it is very important to let us know and visit to get a proper diagnosis and rule out any of these other diseases.

As I covered of previously, there are various supplements, medications as well as 'mental exercises' that can maintain a healthy and sound mind in the older cat for much longer than once was possible.



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SENSES

All the senses of your older cat are affected by age, just as in any other species.

The loss of hearing and/or eyesight is common in old cats.

Retinal degeneration and cataracts are not unusual.

The sense of smell also declines in the older cat.

The good news is that rarely do all three of these senses go at the same time. And so a cat, which is losing sight, will come to rely more on hearing and smell, etc. This allows most older cats to continue to remain VERY functional into advanced old age.

ENDOCRINE SYSTEM

Age impairs the ability of a cat's endocrine system to produce normal quantities of hormones.

Degenerative changes and active disease can adversely affect the thyroid, the adrenal glands, and pancreas

The majority of these endocrine changes are eminently treatable.



CANCER

The dreaded ‘C’ word – it’s something that we can’t escape. As our feline companions continue to live older and longer, they become more predisposed to various cancers.

The most common disease found in cats 15 years old or more is neoplasia (cancer).

Overall, cats suffer with cancer half as frequently as dogs. However, when cats do develop tumours they are much more likely to be malignant (4 times more likely than in dogs) and therefore much more likely to cause serious disease. The most common sites of cancer in cats include the skin, the white blood cells (leukaemia and lymphoma), the mouth, the stomach and intestines and the mammary glands.

In part, this results from the reduced functioning of lymph nodes, which impairs the ability of the old cat’s immune system to combat disease agents.

Diagnosis of cancer is made by symptoms relating to the area involved, physical examination, laboratory examination and biopsy.

Sometimes surgery (taking a biopsy) is needed in order to make a diagnosis or to determine if surgical removal is possible.

Radiation and drugs are other methods of treatment if the prognosis is good (i.e., if the tumour has not spread to other areas).



As with us humans, truly, old cats can suffer greatly with the combination of physical and behavioural changes commonly associated with aging. But it does NOT have to be so.

While the maximum lifespan of a cat probably cannot be increased beyond its present limits, there is much we can and should do to improve the quality of an older cat's life.

To help increase the lifespan of your pet and to improve the quality of his or her life in old age, I recommend you do the following:

- Avoid stress and excessive restraint; allow your older companion to be itself as much as possible.
- Feed a commercial balanced ‘senior’ diet two or more times a day.
- Locate all resources (litter tray, food and water bowls) close to each other to avoid confusion
- Check your pet’s water intake and urine output daily.
- Exercise & Play two or three times a day.
- Come in to see me twice a year (more often if needed) for Veterinary check-ups.
- Groom your pet frequently, cleaning the eyes and ears regularly. If you do not want to do this yourself – there are plenty of great groomers around.
- Provide plenty of warm, comfortable bedding in winter and appropriate bedding in summer. Use ramps, steps to enable reaching raised surfaces (her favourite widow sill, your bed).

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF LIFE OF YOUR AGING CAT - WHAT CAN YOU DO?

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- Outside cats may need protection from other roaming cats – secure your garden with fencing or a cat run.
- Maintain a calm, empathetic, warm and loving attitude.

There are a number of general ‘warning signs’ which mean that you need to come in and see us right away. These include:

Loss of appetite

Weight loss

Drinking more often or drinking a larger amount per day

Stiffness, lameness or difficulty in jumping up or down

Lethargy

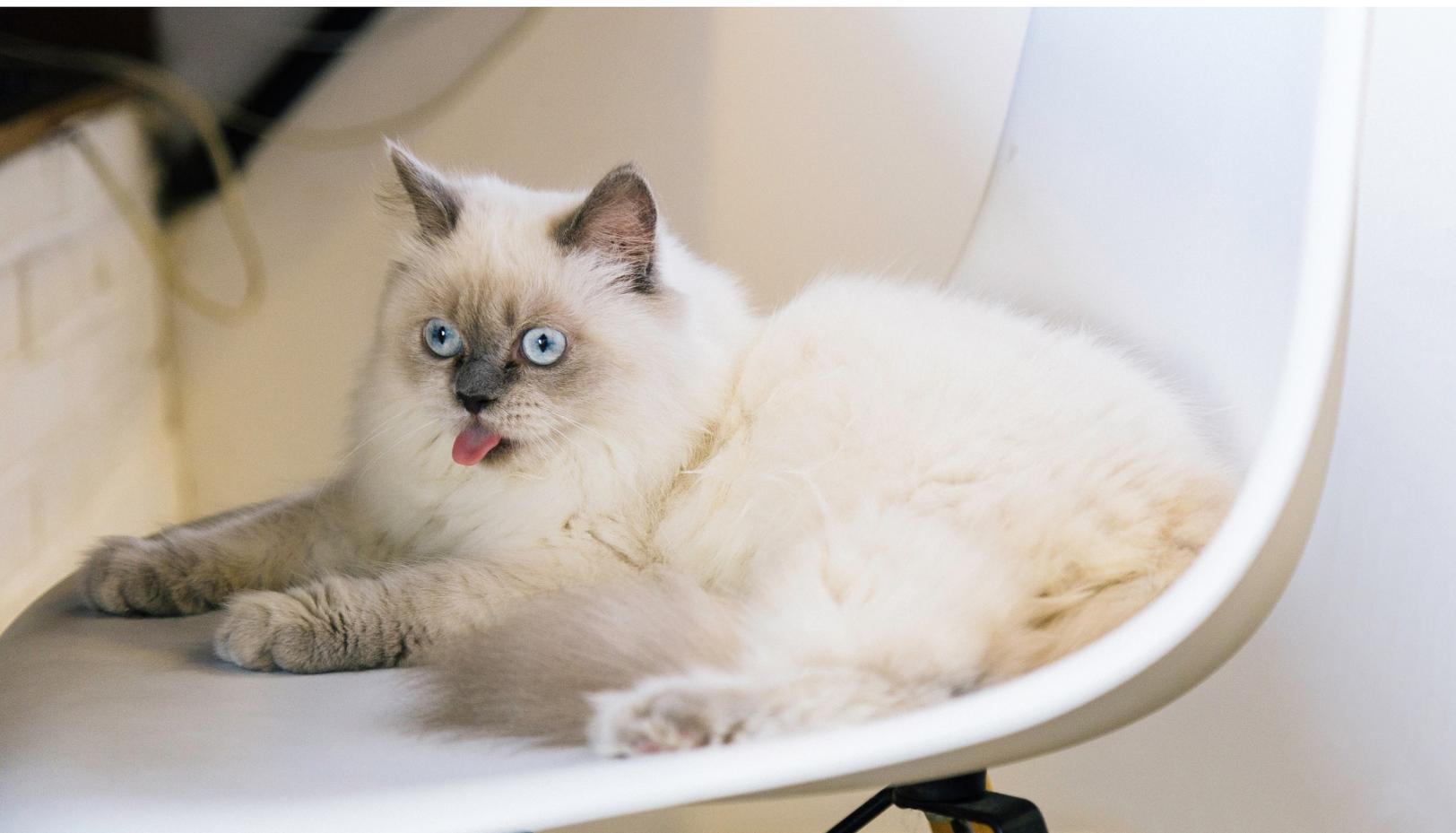
Lumps or bumps anywhere

Balance problems

Toilet accidents or problems in passing urine or faeces

Disorientation or distress

Uncharacteristic behaviour such as hiding, aggression, excessive vocalisation



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ELDERLY CAT FRIENDLY HOME

All the recommendations for a cat friendly home will work as well for the elderly with a little modification. There is rarely the need to make drastic changes to the home to accommodate your cat as it gets older but small adaptations to the existing cat resources can make a significant difference to the quality of life. If your cat is finding stairs difficult to negotiate, for example, then it may be spending prolonged periods on one level, either up or down stairs. Ensuring that all your cat's needs are met on that one level will avoid any risk of being unable to access important resources.

In order to make activity and movement in general easier for your older cat it is important that it feels comfortable walking. Laminate, tiled or wooden flooring can be slippery and old cats can become unstable on slippery surfaces making them less inclined to be active. Equally, carpet can catch on your cat's claws that overgrow easily without regular stropping and remain protracted as the muscles weaken. Cut pile carpets are more comfortable for your cat than loop pile so if your flooring is the latter you can compromise by providing cut pile runners throughout the home to enable your cat to walk in comfort. This is also the ideal surface on which to play, particularly if your cat likes to lie down in the process.

PLAY

If your cat has a favourite toy there is no reason to discard it as he gets older. The larger toys can be useful to encourage your elderly cat to lie on its side, grab the toy with the front paws and kick with the back legs. This gives great exercise for stiff hind limbs and is a type of play enjoyed by many. The ideal 'kick toy' is rectangular or cylindrical, be-

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tween 6 and 8 inches long (15-20cm) and made of a durable fabric such as drill cotton or towelling.

The cardboard box is a real favourite for the cat but the principle may need adapting for the elderly. Older cats may like the idea of investigating but lack the flexibility to jump in and move around. Placing a large box on its side with the opening facing your cat will enable it to walk in and investigate. Carrier bags and paper bags can also provide opportunities for exploration, particularly if they crinkle, but handles should be removed to avoid any accidents as cats can easily get them caught round their necks.



SCRATCHING

Elderly cats are less likely to use the tall activity and scratching posts as the stopping action on vertical surfaces can put strain on arthritic joints. Offering similar horizontal surfaces can satisfy those that still enjoy scratching and the action provides important exercise for the muscles of the forelimbs.

LOOK-OUTS

Cats love to view outdoors and most enjoy sitting on high windowsills but jumping up can prove difficult if not impossible for some elderly cats, so provision should be made for easy access up to and down from these favourite look-outs. A series of shallow steps offer the best solution, ramps can be used but comfortably only if they are angled to represent a slight incline rather than a steep slope.

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PUZZLE FEEDING

Your older cat may enjoy the challenge of puzzle feeders but it's important to monitor food consumption to ensure that the extra effort doesn't dissuade your cat from eating. If this is the case, stick to bowls that are placed in your cat's favoured spot.

LITTER TRAYS

Litter trays should normally be located well away from other resources, such as food and water but for the very elderly or those cats suffering from cognitive dysfunction it is appropriate for all its resources to be located in easy reach to avoid confusion.

The trays should probably not be the covered variety as these can be difficult to negotiate. Open trays with low sides are ideal and they should be firmly fixed to prevent them from being tipped up if your cat is clumsy when using a tray. Polythene litter liners should be avoided as they can catch in your cat's claws and any indoor trays should be cleaned regularly. If your cat is suffering from a condition that causes increased thirst and urination you may need to fill the tray to a depth exceeding the recommendation of 3cm – probably as much as 5cm in some cases. Trial and error is required as your cat may prefer a more shallow litter that is cleaned more frequently.

BEDS

Many favoured locations for sleep are on raised surfaces, such as your bed or a window sill, so it may become difficult with time for your elderly cat to access these special places. The positioning of ramps, steps and platforms will enable it to reach the area in gentle stages rather than giving up due to stiffness or weakness in the joints.

If your cat uses your bed, chair or sofa you may wish to provide a thermal blanket that is warm and washable. If your cat likes to sleep on window sills



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or other narrow platforms it is advisable to place a soft padded object underneath to prevent injury as many older cats have impaired balance and could easily fall. Ideally elderly cats should be encouraged to use secure or wider surfaces for sleep.

PRIVATE PLACES

Your cat needs to be able to have uninterrupted rest so any areas chosen should be kept accessible and new ones created if lack of mobility prevents your cat from using those previously favoured.

CAT FLAPS

Some elderly cats will reduce the frequency of excursions outside as a result of difficulty negotiating the cat flap. It may be helpful to build a step, inside and outside, to make it easier to use but eventually it is almost inevitable that the cat flap will be replaced by escorted trips into the garden via the back door. When this occurs, if no other cats in the household are using the flap, it would be advisable to block up or remove the flap to prevent invasion from other cats outside which would be distressing for your cat.

GARDEN

There are a number of reasons why your cat may stop going outside as it gets older. A significant influence is undoubtedly going to be the presence of other cats in the territory and a sense that your cat is no longer able to actively defend its patch. If you are able to secure your garden, you can exclude other cats and contain your own cat within the safety of your own property.



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HOLIDAYS & CELEBRATIONS

If your cat has always gone into a cattery when you are on holiday then there is no particular reason to change the routine. However older cats don't cope particularly well with changes to their routine so there may come a time when your cat may prefer to stay at home with someone visiting or staying over, to provide the necessary care. Ideally the cat-sitter should be someone with whom your cat is familiar.

Older cats can find parties and general festivities at home a little overwhelming so you may find your cat benefits from a secure and quiet place to retreat to, where it has everything it needs, while the activity is happening in another part of the house.



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EUTHANASIA

Always a difficult topic and an even harder decision...

A decision regarding euthanasia (putting to sleep) is difficult for ANY devoted cat owner to make alone and certainly one in which I will be helpful.

There is a 'Highlands Veterinary Hospital Quality Of Life' chart that I share with owners of older cats to fill in. This chart is for them to complete and it allows them to make a rational and balanced decision about the quality of life of their companion.

Euthanasia is a reasonable course of action in cases where the prognosis is hopeless or in cases where the continuing life of the animal would be painful and miserable.

However, there are circumstances where we can offer treatments to keep the older cat alive while the owner, for one reason or another, does not wish to do so.

In these cases the owner must make clear the reasoning behind such a decision because we will not put an animal to sleep if the reason is not, in our opinion, justified.

Euthanasia is a privilege of the Veterinary profession only. It is one which Veterinarians do not wish to abuse. This practice is devoted to saving animals' lives so please do not come to us if this is not your philosophy.

The majority of Veterinarians use an intravenous injection of an overdose of barbiturates to euthanase an animal. This is quite painless and the animal dies immediately by going to sleep, often before the injection is even completed.

Some cat owners are concerned that their cat will not be euthanized and/or properly disposed of if they are not present. They worry that the cat may be kept alive for research or experimental purposes.

A Veterinary practitioner is legally bound to euthanase a cat when you request and pay for this service.

We ask that you sign a euthanasia request form. Feel free to ask to be present while the procedure is being carried out or even to see the cat after the euthanasia (if you have not been present and thereby set your mind at rest).

Owners may, of course, take the body with them if local city ordinances allow. If not, we can tell you how the body is disposed of. Pet cemeteries and cremation facilities are available.

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CONCLUSION

Cat care requires your dedication throughout the cat's life, beginning in kitten hood and continuing through old age when even more patience and understanding are required.

Informed owners who are compassionate and responsive to the needs of older cats can do much to lessen the stress of old age and to enjoy their pets more fully in their declining years.

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INDEX

- Ageing p.4
- Bed p.31
- Behaviour p.11
 - Behavioural Changes in The Older Cats
- Bones p.21
 - Bones and Muscles
- Cat Flaps p.32
- Cancer p. 26
- Circulatory p.19
 - Circulatory system
- Conclusion p. 35
- Coronary Arteriosclerosis p.15
 - Circulatory System
- Dental Problem p.11
 - Teeth And Gums
- Desexing p.7
- Digestive System p.15
- Endocrine p.25
 - Endocrine and Reproductive Systems
- Environment p.5
 - Longevity: Genetics and Environment
- Euthanasia p.34
- Exercise p.8
- Garden p.32
- Genetics p.5
 - Longevity: Genetics and Environment
- Kidney Disease p.14
 - Urinary System
- Gums p.14
 - Teeth and Gums
- Litter Trays p.31
- Liver p.17
 - Pancreas and Liver
- Look-Outs p. 30
- Medical Problem p.10
 - Physical Changes And Medical Problems in The Older Cats
- Muscles p.21
 - Bones and Muscles
- Nervous System p.24
- Nail p.22
- Nutrition p.6
- Pancreas p.17
 - Pancreas and Liver
- Play p.29
- Physical Changes p.13
 - Physical Change And Medical Problems in The Older Cats
- Private Places p.32
- Puzzle Feeding p.31
- Reproductive Systems p.20
 - Endocrine and Reproductive Systems
- Respiratory System p.20
- Scratching p. 30
- Stress p.8
- Skin p.22
- Senses p.25
- Teeth p.14
 - Teeth and Gums
- Urinary System p.18
- Veterinary Care p.7