

LESSON 1 INTRODUCTION TO CAT CARE

The association between humans and cats—dates back about 5000 years —although this is not long in the history of human life. The exact origin of cat domestication is often debated by historians. It is known that Egyptian populations held cats in high esteem. In fact, cats were an object of worship. Some figures of cats exist in gold and bronze and numerous paintings depict the importance of cats in Egyptian life. The Romans later recognised the useful nature of cats for pest control in grain stores or in military bases for example. It is thought the distribution of cats throughout Europe can be attributed the Roman Empire’s original use of cats.

Cats as pets now outdo their canine equivalents today across the globe, and it is estimated there may be around 90 million cats as pets living in homes in the USA. Cats may be considered a better choice of pet than dogs for people living busier lives or who live in relatively confined spaces (e.g. flats or townhouses), as they require less exercise than dogs, and tend to their

own needs and are generally more independent. The explosion of pet cats over the recent decades has led to the emergence of many cat care industries. There are specialists across veterinary health, rehoming and adoption facilities, pet boarding properties, grooming, breeding and reproductive health and the behaviour and training industry.

Suggested Tasks: ▼

Throughout this course you will be provided with suggested tasks and reading to aid with your understanding. These will appear in the right hand column.

Remember: these tasks are optional. The more you complete, the more you will learn, but in order to complete the course in 20 hours you will need to manage your time well. We suggest you spend about 10 minutes on each task you attempt, and no more than 20 minutes.



BASIC NEEDS - BASIC DUTIES OF THE CAT OWNER

Responsible cat ownership starts with:

- ensuring your cat is de-sexed (neutered) unless being used for breeding, micro chipped and if required registered with a local council authority
- providing a safe, clean and comfortable shelter
- regularly carry out internal and external parasite control measures
- maintaining health with annual veterinary checks and vaccinations
- ensuring the cat is free from pain or suffering
- providing adequate nutrition and access to clean drinking water
- providing an enriching environment such as scratch boards or toys to avoid boredom
- ensuring someone can attend to your cat in your absence
- provide adequate affection and human contact.

If you are going to keep a pet cat, you need to be prepared to provide for its basic needs as an absolute minimum: food, water, shelter, stimulation (mental and physical) and appropriate health care. Additionally, it is responsible to control cats within reason, reducing any impact upon neighbouring property or wildlife. This is called containment.

Food and Water

The cat must be supplied with adequate nutrition and the appropriate diet. This may be a commercial dry cat kibble, wet or canned food, or even a raw diet, however it must be specific for the feline species. Cats are obligate carnivores, therefore require certain amino acids supplied from their food which are vital for their health. Cats should have access to food daily, and never be left days without access to food as this can be detrimental to their health. Food bowls should be kept clean with any excess food removed, and should also be placed as far away as possible from the litter tray. The bowl must be accessible to the cat, and if required raised slightly to avoid over-stretching of the neck and back, which can be painful with old or arthritic cats.

All cats from the age of 8 weeks require access to fresh drinking water daily, and this should be provided in a small bowl. Before 8 weeks old, cats will drink milk from their mother primarily. The healthy average sized cat will drink up to 120 ml of water. On hot days their water needs will naturally increase. Adult cats may also like to drink milk, however, they should only be given lactose-free cow's milk, or a specially formulated milk for cats.

Water bowls should also be placed in an accessible position where they are stable and not easily knocked over. They should be placed away from the litter tray so the water does not get contaminated by debris or faeces. Placing water in a position sheltered from the sun will also reduce evaporation rates. If you plan to be away overnight and are leaving your

cat alone at home, you should leave at least 2 bowls of water in case one gets knocked over. Cats will quickly suffer if sufficient water is not available on a hot day. Bowls should be regularly inspected for damage, and cleaned thoroughly each day to minimise pest and diseases problems. Any automatic watering systems should be regularly maintained, and regularly checked to ensure they are operating properly.

Shelter and Containment

Shelter means providing protection against the elements. You should provide your cat with warmth, and a private, safe place in which to sleep and rest, although it may be worth remembering cats very often make their own arrangements in this regard. Older cats particularly like to be elevated when they sleep. They will climb objects throughout the day, and will be particularly keen to discover a comfortable, safe place above the ground. Keep in mind that the cat's resting place should be draught free. The elevated position allows the cat to maintain its independence and remain safe. Cats are naturally on the lookout for dogs, small children, and anything else which might disturb or endanger them.

Cats are extremely agile; jumping fences and climbing small trees is common. Enclosing a cat from the outside can for this reason be quite difficult. In many areas, however, it is required that cats are contained, due to their ability to hunt native animals. In many countries, domestic cats and natural hunters, have had devastating effects on native wildlife. Cats are

excellent hunters, being very agile, patient, and having very fast reflexes. Some will readily catch small mammals, birds, lizards, frogs and insects. Studies in Northern America and Europe have shown that cats kill mainly small mammals, as well as birds, amphibians, reptiles and insects. Birds that nest on the ground are also at extreme risk of predation by cats. Placing a collar on your cat with a bell on it can help warn wildlife. Cats that are active night hunters should be kept indoors overnight. In some areas this is a legal requirement for cat owners.

Make sure you microchip and register your cat with the local authority (if this is a local government requirement).

Unvaccinated cats can also spread disease to wildlife, other cats and humans. Cats may also be a nuisance in neighbouring properties as they can tend to scratch in garden beds and fight with neighbouring cats. Neighbours may also not wish to have your cat on their property.

If you choose to allow your cat outside, it may be worthwhile considering a cat enclosure. These can be designed to allow the cat to climb, get into shady spots and foliage and to play in larger areas. They will generally consist of interconnecting units and be covered on all sides, to combat the ability of cats to jump long distances and large heights. Another alternative to enclosure, involves running a section of netting across the top of a fence at a right angle to the fence. This prevents the cat climbing and jumping over the fence. This allows the cat to have access to a fully fenced garden/yard space.

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Suggested Task

Search the internet for videos on what is involved in owning a pet cat. Try searching the phrase "Getting a pet cat videos" (or something similar).

Spend 5 to 10 minutes (no more) watching video you find.



Business opportunities exist in manufacturing and retailing cat products; from this outdoor cat run, to cat food, toys and litter trays.

- **Position**—providing shelter for the cat and being securely fixed into place.
- **Access**—to be able to clean and provide food and water.
- **Stimulation areas**—for stimulation and enrichment.

If you want to allow your cat to roam outdoors, you may want to install a cat flap on an external door. This will mean the cat has free access in and out. An advantage of the cat flap is that it can often be bolted closed if the cat is to be kept from roaming (e.g. when on heat, at night, or if injured).

Ensure all bedding is washed weekly at the hottest setting. If the cat comes indoors, ensure the house is thoroughly cleaned and apply insecticide to the corners and cracks, to help eliminate insects. You might choose to clean the yard or garden with insecticide applications every 6-8 weeks, depending on the outdoor activity levels.

Health care for a sick cat

When your cat is ill you must make sure you follow the instructions of your veterinarian as closely as possible. If your cat worsens unexpectedly or you need to take your cat for a follow up examination, ensure you book and get your cat to the veterinarian promptly. While your cat is getting better it must have access to clean water and small palatable meals, high in energy and easily digestible. Warming the food can help entice your cat to eat and even hand feeding might help. If your cat cannot eat, a liquid meal via syringe may be suggested by your veterinarian.

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Suggested Task

If possible, visit a local cat shelter or talk with someone who has been to cat shelter. Look at, or talk about:

Stimulation areas - how the shelter provide the cats with stimulation? Are there multiple areas for climbing?

Access to food and water - where are the bowls located? How are they located in relation to the litter trays?

Outdoor areas - are there any outdoor areas available to the cats? What do these look like?

Safety measures - have any specific safety measures been taken to protect the cats? If so, what are they?

Take notes and spend no more than 20 minutes on this task (you may spend longer if travelling to a shelter).

Any caging or enclosures should be properly built and maintained. Consider the following:

- **Size**—sufficient to cater for the cat's needs.
- **Strength**—sufficient to contain the cat, keep other animals out and to withstand the local weather conditions.
- **Safe**—so no sharp edges, or protruding parts, ensure materials aren't toxic to the cat (treated timbers, rusted metals, asbestos sheeting etc.).

Your cat must have a safe, dry, quiet and warm environment to rest in and a hot water bottle can be provided when cold. The cat will love a litter tray close by, for ease of access. Make sure to keep a close eye on your furry friend and monitor food and water intake, breathing, sleeping patterns, toilet habits, behaviour, any pain, signs and symptoms of illness, medication dosage and report any changes directly to your veterinarian.

Usage of cleaning chemicals in your home must be checked with your veterinarian before use around a sick cat, however it is still important to keep the environment clean and safe for your cat. When your cat is sick, it may stop grooming itself, it is therefore extremely important that you brush or comb your cat twice a day. Use a warm wet cotton ball to clean eyes, nose and ears if need be and to remove any discharge from around the wounds (as gently as possible).

When given medication by your veterinarian, ensure you give your pet the full dosage as specified at the correct times as stated. If you are having difficulties with pills, crush the tablet up and place in a small amount of water and use a plastic syringe to give the cat the medication. If still having trouble, see your veterinarian for a liquid formula.

Grooming

Cats are extremely fastidious, so they usually keep themselves clean. Sometimes however, they do need assistance, particularly if they have long hair. Grooming makes the cat feel better as it stimulates circulation and removes debris such as loose skin cells and hair. Always begin at the head and work towards the tail. You should comb the hair in the direction of the hair growth to remove knots and tangles. Wide-toothed combs are suitable for longer-haired cats while fine-toothed combs suit shorter haired cats.

Regular brushing and combing will help stimulate the skin and distribute the natural oils in the hair more evenly. A wire slicker brush is good for thicker coats or you can use a softer bristle brush. There is also rubber grooming equipment available to help with massaging the skin, and removing any excess loose hair.

Sometimes matting in hair that is not groomed can be so severe that it can become painful as it pulls on the skin. If the coat gets in such a condition, a general anaesthetic may be needed to remove the matted hair.

Aim to brush your cat once a week. Kittens and long haired cats should be groomed daily, the more hair you remove the less that can be licked off and swallowed or shed. This will reduce hairballs, keep the coat free of parasites, avoid skin problems and encourage glowing and sleek coats. Think of the grooming sessions as an opportunity to spend quality time together and communicate, rather than a chore. Ensure you try out your equipment first, to make sure your cat is comfortable.

Claw Trimming

It is good practice to trim a cat's claws from an early age so that it gets used to having its feet handled. It can also save money replacing destroyed furniture! There are nail clippers available for trimming the sharp point of a cat's claws.

Pick the right time to trim the claws, when the cat is relaxed or napping. You will need to gently apply pressure to each toe draw the claw out from the sheath. When trimming, it is important not to cut down too far (close to the sheath) as this is where the blood vessels are located and would cause extreme pain if cut. There are many trimming demonstration videos and step-by-step procedures on the internet which you can watch to learn the best procedure. It is also a good idea to visit a pet groomer or veterinarian to see how it is done.

Always trim the claws on indoor cats, this will minimise injury to itself and others (outdoor cats will be worn naturally and the cat may need them for protection).

Bathing

In general, cats can take care of their own grooming and rarely need a bath. Cats are infamous for their dislike for baths, however sometimes it may be necessary. For example, if the cat has come into contact with a harmful substance. Medicated soaps can also help to treat certain skin conditions.

Many people will generally try to soothe or calm an anxious cat by quietly talking to it for reassurance whilst bathing it.

When bathing the cat:

1. Keep a firm but gentle grip on the neck and shoulders.
2. Soak the cat with water using a wash cloth.
3. Lather the cat's body with shampoo and warm water, washing the neck, body, legs, belly and tail (do not get shampoo in their eyes, nose, mouth or ears – you may use cotton balls to cover the cat's ears).
4. Work the shampoo into the hair as the oils can build up making it hard to wash.
5. After lathering, thoroughly rinse the cat by pouring warm water over its body. Ensure that all of the shampoo has been removed from the coat.
6. Squeeze any excess water off the cat by gently massaging your hands down its body.
7. Gently dry the cat with a soft towel.
8. Short-haired cats can finish drying themselves on a towel, whereas longer haired cats may tolerate a low heat setting on a hair dryer (only if it's particularly cold or deemed necessary).

To clean discharge away from the eyes, dampen a piece of cotton wool and pat gently. Inspect your cat's ears weekly and remove any dirt and debris from them, by applying a few drops of warm mineral oil or a veterinary ear cleaning solution to the external ear canals. This will loosen the debris and excess wax,

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Suggested Task

Have a 5–10-minute discussion with someone who has owned or worked with domestic cats (eg someone you know such as a friend, colleague or family member; or alternatively someone who works in an animal shelter, veterinary clinic or pet shop). Ask them how easy or difficult it is to handle a cat for grooming, travel, or any other reason. Ask them what they consider the best way to control a cat that is difficult to handle.