

Cat minding: basic care requirements

Cats need to be safe and secure, comfortable, and cared for. They need a sheltered place to rest, enough room to meet their behavioural and physiological needs, clean water available at all times, daily attention, consistent routines, and lots of love. Cats will be happiest with pet minders who aim to replicate—as much as possible—the cat's home routine. This applies to all routines, including feeding, play, grooming, and family time.



Prepare your home and family

Security and Safety: It is important to ensure your home is secure and safe for any pet. Read the *RSPCA Qld Property guide for pet minding*. Double check that the cat's area is escape proof; check that no holes have appeared in screened doors or windows. If the cat is to have the run of the whole house, start teaching all family members to close the toilet lid after use and empty the bath tub as soon as they get out. Inquisitive cats and kittens can drown in toilets and baths. Carefully inspect the cat containment area for items that might hurt the cat or that the cat might accidentally damage. Remove items such as fragile ornaments, mouse traps, irons sitting on ironing boards, sewing needles and thread etc. Think about what a cat or kitten might jump up on and knock down.



Most pets being minded should be desexed. For animals that are sexually entire, additional security may be needed as these animals will be very focused on escaping the house to mate. Pet minders should carefully discuss security requirements with the owner before accepting such animals into care.



Comfort: If possible, set up multiple areas where the cat can sleep/rest; these areas need to be safe, sheltered from draughts and cold weather, and have clean water available at all times. It is preferable if the owner can provide clean bedding that the cat is accustomed to and has its own familiar scent. Provide a scratching post, toys, and horizontal and vertical space to ensure the cat can get adequate exercise.

Toileting: Set up litter trays away from food and bedding and in clean, private areas rather than out in the open where the cat may feel vulnerable. Ideally, have one litter tray per cat and one spare tray. Not every cat will like every type of litter. If the owner is not going to supply the litter, ask for details about the type of litter the cat is accustomed to using.



Resident animals and children: The needs of children and existing pets must be carefully considered. Children should be closely supervised when interacting with a new cat; both can become overly rough with the other. Existing pets should be introduced

Cat minding: basic care requirements

slowly to the newcomer, or kept in separate areas for the protection of both the existing pet and the newcomer. Review the *RSPCA Qld Guide for introducing animals*.

Basic requirements

Preventative health care: All cats being cared for away from their own home should be fully vaccinated and wormed, and have had flea prevention treatment. In areas prone to paralysis ticks, tick prevention treatment before boarding would also be highly desirable in situations where the cat can spend time outdoors in a secure cat enclosure. Ask the owner to provide you with the flea treatment product they routinely use in case you find a flea on the cat and need to treat it. Also ask the owner to ensure their cat's nails have been trimmed prior to being minded.



Hygiene: All pets need to be cared for in a hygienic environment. Cat litter trays should be scooped out at least daily or twice daily (depending on the number of cats using the tray); food and water bowls, litter trays, and bedding should be washed regularly.

Good personal hygiene is also important when handling animals. Wash hands after playing with the cat and before eating. Pregnant women should avoid contact with the litter box to prevent possible infection with toxoplasmosis.

Transport: If the cat needs to be taken anywhere by car, it must be in a carry cage that is securely strapped onto the back seat or in the boot of a station wagon, not held in someone's arms. In the event of an accident or sudden stop, this will prevent injury to both the cat and human passengers. It is preferable to also cover the cage to reduce the amount of stress the cat experiences.



Never leave a cat unattended in a car. Even with the windows open and water provided, the temperature inside cars can climb very quickly and the cat can die from heat stroke.

Introducing a cat to its holiday home

When a cat arrives for pet minding, it is important that the cat is introduced to its new environment without being overwhelmed. Ideally, this should happen during daylight hours so that the cat has plenty of time to adjust before nightfall.

Initially, confine the cat to one room. Sit quietly with it while it explores the new environment. Show the cat where its food, water, litter tray, and bedding are located. If the cat will be allowed access to more areas in the house, wait a few days before allowing it to explore a new area.

Introduce other family members slowly. Avoid crowding the cat and paying it so much attention that it becomes overwhelmed. New people, especially children, should sit quietly and allow the cat to approach them.

Cat minding: basic care requirements

Review the **RSPCA Qld Guide for introducing animals** before the cat arrives if there are resident pets. Be mindful that the objective is for all pets to be happy co-habitators, not necessarily best friends.

Diet and feeding

Cats require a properly balanced diet that is tailored to their individual needs, based on their size, age, and state of health. When minding someone else's cat it is important to feed them the same diet that they are used to and the same quantity of food that they are used to. Table scraps are an exception; they should not be fed to visiting pets because they will likely be quite different between houses. A sudden change in diet can create digestive problems, at least in the short term, and overfeeding or underfeeding will cause the cat to gain or lose weight during their stay, which is not ideal unless the owner has specifically requested it.

Ensure there is always an ample supply of clean, fresh water.



Feeding patterns: Many cats manage to control their food intake and can be fed ad lib (at all times) or have dry food available for most of the day with tin food given at set meal times (usually twice daily for adult cats). When minding a cat that already has well established feeding patterns, it is best to replicate those patterns as much as possible. Ask the owner about the cat's established feeding patterns.

Type of food: Owners should provide all of the food and treats necessary for the cat's stay as well as specific and detailed instructions about how much, how often, and when to feed each day. If the food runs out (for example, because the owner is unexpectedly away for longer), buy the same brand; don't just offer the tinned cat food in your cupboard or feed table scraps. The feeding of table scraps and other human foods (even if the cat used to getting them) is not recommended because of their potential to create an upset stomach or serious illness. This especially applies to foods high in sugar, such as biscuits, and foods that can be toxic or allergens, such as chocolate and milk. The safest foods are those provided by the pet's owner.

Amount of food: It is especially important to obtain detailed instructions from the owner about how much to feed their cat each day. Ask about snacks, treats, and table scraps that the cat may be used to receiving in addition to its normal meals. These extras can sometimes constitute a significant part of the cat's daily intake and may be inadvertently overlooked by owners when they report what their cat is normally fed at each meal. If the cat regularly



Cat minding: basic care requirements

receives table scraps, ask details about how much and how often and increase the amount of food or treats offered daily in lieu of table scraps.

It can be helpful to use food to coax a timid cat 'out of its shell', or as part of a 'food hunt' game, but be sure to account for such treats when estimating how much the cat should be fed at the next meal. It is perfectly acceptable for a cat to be offered a large proportion of its daily food allowance as treats/behaviour coaxers or in puzzle toys and food hunts to relieve boredom.

Extra treats: Ask before providing the cat with any food that is not supplied. For example, some cats eat bones, and bones are great to combat boredom and help keep the teeth and gums healthy. Always check with the owner before giving 'extras', and be aware that not all bones are safe (lamb and pork chops, T-bones, chicken bones, fish bones, and cooked bones are unsafe for cats). If the cat is used to eating bones, raw chicken or turkey necks and wings are safest.

Daily care

Provide a stimulating environment by opening the curtains so that the cat can catch some sunlight and look out into the garden or neighbourhood. Leave the television or radio on during the day and provide toys. Hide small caches of food around the room, behind and under different objects to encourage the cat to move around and explore its environment.



Provide scratching posts of different textures, such as carpet and cardboard. All cats have an inbuilt behavioural need to scratch, and providing a scratching post is the most effective way to stop them from exercising this need on furniture, flyscreens, and other belongings. Scratching helps to provide exercise through stretching, maintains the claws, and helps the cat feel comfortable in its environment. Most cats prefer vertical surfaces to scratch, but some favour a horizontal scratching post.



Boredom busters are important tools to keep a cat entertained while its carer is away from home for short or extended periods of time. The following list provides ideas for boredom busting:

- Make your own treat bottle. Cut a few biscuit-sized holes in the sides of a milk bottle and show the cat how, with a bit of shaking and rolling, it can get the treats to fall out.
- Use cardboard tubes (toilet paper rolls, empty glad wrap rolls) containing treats rolled up in paper.
- Leave out toys such as ping pong balls, feathers, pom poms, and toilet rolls.
- Set up new obstacles or rearrange the furniture (anything different that the cat can walk up, climb over, or squeeze under).



Cat minding: basic care requirements

- Place various cat treats in an ice-cream container, fill with water flavoured with stock or gravy powder and freeze. Tip the ice treat out into a larger container for your cat to enjoy. A large but shallow container can be great as chasing the ice treat around is part of the fun.
- Set up a couple of cardboard boxes with holes cut in the sides for the cat to jump in and hide, squeeze through, or put its paws through to play with objects left inside.

Cuddles and play time are also important to help alleviate boredom, encourage exercise, and assist in forging a bond with a new cat. Always use a toy or other suitable object—such as a fishing rod toy, a ping pong ball, a feather, or small toy on the end of a piece of string—when playing interactively with the cat or trying to lure it into a game. Never use your hands, feet, fingers or toes as the cat's 'prey'. Normal cat play—where the cat practices hunting—can sometimes manifest as 'Jekyll and Hyde' behaviour: purring and adorable one minute, and then suddenly latching onto your hand and scratching your arm, or ambushing you from behind furniture or stairs. For this reason, it is important to not teach bad habits by rough housing, wrestling, or allowing the cat to mouth your body during play sessions. If the cat does target your body parts during a play session, redirect their attention onto a toy or other suitable object. Do not react by pulling back quickly or squealing, as this may only heighten their enthusiasm for the game. If they become overstimulated, lure them back to their sleeping area with food treats.



Closely supervise children when they are interacting with the cat.

Grooming and bathing are essential care activities, especially for long-haired cats. They help to remove dust, loose hairs, dead skin, and tangles. Grooming sessions need only be short—a few minutes will do—and provide an opportunity to bond with the animal. The cat's owner should provide you with the grooming tools and instructions you will need to groom their cat. These will vary depending on the cat, the length of stay, and the owner's normal care routine. While it might be ideal to groom the cat regularly, if the cat is unused to it or stressed by your attempts at grooming, don't continue. It will, however, be necessary to regularly inspect the cat for fleas (and ticks in tick-prone areas if the cat is allowed outdoors in a cat enclosure).



Unless the cat has rolled in something smelly, it should not require a bath. If a bath is necessary and the weather is cool, wash the cat in the warmest part of the day and towel dry thoroughly. Only use shampoo that is specially formulated for cats and kittens. Bath the cat in the kitchen sink or a small tub with a rolled up towel on the edge for the cat to grip onto. Bath tubs may make the cat feel uncomfortable because they can be too big and slippery.

Cat minding: basic care requirements

Cat handling

RSPCA Queensland advocates the use of positive reinforcement for training and managing behaviour in cats and kittens. Essentially, this means consistently praising and rewarding the cat for appropriate behaviours, and managing inappropriate behaviours by ignoring and withdrawing attention or redirecting. Such training practices take patience and consistency. Never hit the cat, whack it with a rolled up newspaper (or similar), kick or scruff it, push it down, or yell or scream at it.



Be confident and supportive of the cat and communicate this through both body language and tone of voice. Cats recognise when their carers are nervous or apprehensive and will act that way themselves. Be consistent with how you manage behaviour and with which behaviours you allow and don't allow. Don't let the cat walk along the kitchen bench sometimes and then not at other times. Consistently remove it from the prohibited area and place it gently where it is allowed. (Of course, make sure that the bench tops are free from scraps so that the cat doesn't inadvertently get a reward if it jumps up.)

Be aware that cats need space. Give the cat space, especially when it is in a good hiding spot. By bending down to look at it, staring it straight in the eyes and trying to pull it out of its 'happy place', the cat will be more likely to become unsettled and behave inappropriately. When cats are hiding, they much prefer it if you simply ignore them and pretend not to see them.



Be aware of the subtle body language that a cat will use to tell you it has had enough patting: a slight shift in position, a flick of the ear, a turn of the head, or a tail twitch. If these signs are missed, the result may be a more aggressive demand for you to stop: the cat, while seemingly enjoying the pat, may suddenly turn and mouth, scratch, hiss, swat, and growl. This can be avoided if you wait for the cat to ask for attention before offering a pat, and keep the sessions brief so that they end before the cat reacts negatively.

Managing unwanted behaviours

Many inappropriate behaviours can be simply prevented.

- Remove the item that you don't want the cat to play with or scratch.
- Block off an inappropriate scratching spot with another piece of furniture, pot plant, or similar barrier, and provide a suitable alternative scratching post.
- Provide plenty of toys that the cat *is* allowed to play with and chew.
- Ignore bad behaviour. For example, turn your back on the cat and walk away.



Cat minding: basic care requirements

- Praise good behaviour using a happy voice and reward it with a pat or a fun game. Alternatively, use distraction to avert unwanted behaviours.
- Focus the cat on something else. For example, throw a ping pong ball to entice the kitten to chase it instead of pouncing on the two-year-old child.
- Play a big game with a kitten to tire it out before settling it into a room with comfortable bedding to encourage quiet time during the night.
- Try associating 'four paws on the floor' with a treat to encourage the cat off the benches.

More information on managing specific behavioural problems can be found on the RSPCA Qld website under Animal Training Factsheets at the following address:
<http://www.rspcaqld.org.au/what-we-do/training/animal-training-fact-sheets>.

Medical matters

Every interaction with a cat, from grooming and feeding to cuddling and playing, offers an opportunity to look at the cat and assess its health. Strong powers of observation are invaluable for detecting the subtle changes in behaviour and demeanour that will usually precede a medical problem. Knowing normal cat behaviour—as well as what is normal for an individual cat—is very important for early detection of problems.

Signs to look out for

The following are key health indicators that should be closely observed as part of routine daily animal monitoring. By paying close attention to these indicators at all times, pet minders will be quickly alerted to any potential problems that may develop.



- **Eating and drinking:** an early sign of ill health can be a loss of appetite and/or an increase in the volume of water drunk each day.
- **Wees and poos:** urine frequency and colour, and stool frequency, colour and consistency are also sentinel health indicators. Occasional diarrhoea in the absence of other signs (such as lethargy, vomiting, loss of appetite) is not a cause for panic, but should be closely monitored and investigated if it persists for more than a couple of days. Dark urine may indicate dehydration, and frequent small volumes of urine may indicate a bladder blockage; these signs require urgent medical attention.
- **Breathing:** coughing and gagging, difficulty breathing, or rapid labored breathing are clear indicators of ill health.
- **Coat condition:** Are there fleas and ticks? Is the coat glossy and smooth? Are there any areas of hair loss? Is the cat scratching excessively?
- **Skin condition:** Is the skin smooth? Are there any rashes or spots?
- **Ears and eyes:** are the eyes bright and clear? Are the eyes watering? Do the ears smell? Is the cat shaking its head, scratching at its ears excessively, or holding its head on a tilt?
- **Demeanour:** Is the cat bright and alert and active—running around normally? Is the cat lethargic?
- **Gait:** Is the cat moving/running/sitting normally, or is it limping and sometimes crying in pain?

Cat minding: basic care requirements

When to seek veterinary help

As a general guide, the following health signs are an indication of when to seek veterinary help:

- ongoing diarrhoea
- ongoing vomiting
- not eating for more than one day
- frequent attempts to urinate and producing little or no urine
- sneezing
- discharge from the nose and eyes
- weight loss despite worming and correct feeding
- blood in the faeces
- blood in the urine
- significant ongoing lameness
- dirty smelly ears despite regular cleaning
- persistent shaking the head and / or scratching at the ears
- abnormal swellings and lumps
- hair loss
- skin rashes or irritation
- non-life-threatening injury



When it's an emergency

The following health signs are an indication of when to rush an animal in for emergency care. This list is a general guide only and not intended to be exhaustive.

- considerable pain and distress
- extreme weakness, no appetite, difficulty standing, pale gums
- uncontrollable bleeding
- breathing difficulties
- obvious broken bones
- unconsciousness
- seizures
- lethargy, no appetite, and dehydration (very dark urine) in a very young kitten. Young kittens are less resilient and their condition can become life threatening far more quickly than in older cats.
- life-threatening injury

