



Department  
for Environment  
Food & Rural Affairs

# Code of practice for the welfare of

# CATS



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# Code of Practice for the Welfare of Cats

Presented to Parliament pursuant to section 15  
of the Animal Welfare Act 2006

December 2017



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Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

17 Smith Square

London

SW1P 3JR

ISBN 978-1-5286-0170-2

CCS1217633138 12/17

Printed on paper containing 75% recycled fibre content minimum


Printed in the UK by the APS Group on behalf of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office


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# Understanding the Animal Welfare Act 2006

## Introduction to the Code

Owning and caring for a cat can be a source of great enjoyment, but you should be aware that cat ownership is a major responsibility. Typically, cats live for about 14 years, but some live much longer than this. Consequently, you should think carefully about all factors that will affect your ability to care for a cat and whether a cat is suitable for you. Would you be able to provide for all of a cat's needs? You will need to consider the size and location of your property, and the financial and time implications of having a cat as a pet. Caring for a cat can be expensive and you should consider whether, for instance, you would be able to afford the cost of routine and unexpected veterinary treatment, or the cost of pet health insurance.

There is no one "perfect" way to care for all cats because every cat, and every situation, is different but they all have the same needs. It is up to you to find out what your cat's precise needs are and how to meet them. Under Section 9 of the Animal Welfare Act 2006 (the Act) you must take such steps as are reasonable in all circumstances to ensure that the needs of an animal for which you are responsible are met, to the extent required by good practice which are set out in the Act as follows:

-  (a) need for a suitable environment
-  (b) need for a suitable diet
-  (c) need to be housed with, or apart from, other animals
-  (d) need to be able to exhibit normal behaviour patterns
-  (e) need to be protected from pain, suffering, injury and disease.

**It is up to you to find out what your cat's precise needs are and how to meet them**

Under the Act you are always responsible for your cat's needs.

Furthermore, if you are a parent or guardian of a child under the age of 16 years old, you are responsible for any animal that child is in charge of. If you are unable to care for your cat at any time, you must make arrangements for another suitable person to look after them on your behalf. It is important to remember that you remain responsible for your cat's needs, even when you are away. The person with whom you leave your cat will also be legally responsible for your cat's welfare in your absence.

If you own, or are responsible for, a cat and fail to meet their welfare needs or cause them unnecessary suffering, you may be prosecuted under the Act.



# How to provide a suitable environment for your cat to live in

All cats, including those that live predominantly outdoors, need a safe and clean environment and protection from hazards. Some examples of hazards include household chemicals, poisonous plants and open windows or balconies in high buildings, which your cat might try to get out of.

All cats need a safe, comfortable place to rest undisturbed. Cats that live outdoors, need access to a safe shelter and a source of food and water. Living in a cold or wet place, without shelter, can cause a cat to suffer. A cat must be able to avoid things that scare them, including other cats and they all need a place to hide where they feel safe. They often feel safest when high up. If unable to hide and avoid threats, your cat may suffer anxiety and chronic distress, which can lead to illness.


Cats naturally enjoy exploring their environment. They are athletic animals and need opportunities to run, jump and climb and if they do not they may suffer. Cats are naturally clean animals and need regular, easy access to an appropriate place to go to the toilet. They do not like to use heavily soiled areas. Some cats need to use an indoor toilet area, for example a litter tray.

Cats are territorial and become very attached to their own familiar environment. They are naturally cautious in unfamiliar environments, including around new places, smells, other animals and people. For example, if you have to travel with your cat to a new home, they may be frightened by the presence of cats that have already established territories in the area.

**Some cats need to use an indoor toilet area, for example a litter tray**







**Cats that live outdoors, need access to a safe shelter and a source of food and water**

## What you should do:

- Provide your cat with a safe, comfortable, dry, draught-free, clean and quiet place where it can rest undisturbed. Ideally, there should be a range of such places available – the cat will choose where it is most comfortable.
- Take all reasonable steps to protect your cat from hazards indoors and outdoors.
- Make sure your cat has constant access to a variety of safe hiding places including elevated resting places, where it can feel safe.
- If your cat does not go outside, make sure it has plenty of activities to do and enough space to exercise, climb and play indoors.
- Your cat should be provided with a suitable toilet area, that is quiet, easily accessible and kept clean.
- Before you move your cat, you should gradually get it used to a secure cat carrier. Putting items which smell like the cat, for instance its blanket, in the carrier and any place you move your cat to can help it feel at ease.
- Any place where your cat is left must be large enough and comfortable with effective ventilation and temperature control so that your cat is able to move around to ensure its comfort, avoiding becoming too hot or too cold. Never leave your cat in an area where this is not possible such as a car on a warm day.
- Your cat should not be routinely kept in a cage.
- If you have any concerns about moving to a new home, or transporting your cat, you should consult a vet or other suitably qualified cat care specialist.





# How to provide a suitable diet for your cat

Cats need fresh clean drinking water at all times. Without water to drink a cat will become distressed and seriously ill.

Cats need a well-balanced diet to stay fit and healthy, and they all need foodstuffs that can only be derived from meat-based products. Individual dietary needs depend on many factors including age, activity and state of health. Some cats have special dietary needs – for example, pregnant and nursing cats, young growing cats, old cats and cats that are ill.

Cats generally prefer to eat several small meals each day. How much food a cat needs depends on their age, the type of food, bodyweight and level of activity. If a cat eats more food than they need, they will become overweight, suffer and this could cause health problems and suffering. If you underfeed your cat, they will lose weight and may become ill. Healthy adult cats should maintain a stable body weight that is neither too thin nor too fat. Your vet can advise on the correct weight for your cat.

Many cats will not eat if their food is placed too close to their toilet site or something they are frightened of.

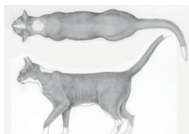
## BODY CONDITION SCORE

### 1 VERY THIN



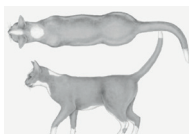
- Very little muscle
- Standing out ribs, backbone and hipbones
- No body fat

### 2 UNDERWEIGHT



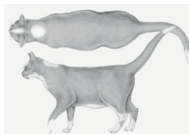
- A little fat over hipbones
- Can see ribs and backbone
- Marked obvious tucked-in waist

### 3 IDEAL



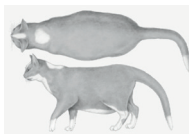
- Can feel ribs, backbone and hipbones, but not prominent
- Smooth tucked-in waist
- Abdominal fat pad just visible

### 4 OVERWEIGHT



- No waist
- Ribs, backbone and hipbones difficult to feel
- Enlarged abdominal fat pad

### 5 OBESE



- Round body
- Cannot feel ribs, backbone or hipbones
- Fat pad hanging under cat

# What you should do:

- Provide your cat with fresh clean drinking water at all times, preferably located away from their food source.
- Make sure your cat eats a balanced diet suitable for their individual needs.
- If you are uncertain of the diet your cat needs, take advice from your vet or other suitably qualified cat care specialist.
- Read, and be guided by, the feeding instructions relating to any cat foods you buy. Adjust how much you feed your cat to make sure they do not become underweight or overweight.
- Feed your cat every day, and allow access to food several times a day, preferably splitting the daily ration into several small meals throughout the day, unless advised otherwise by your vet.
- Position your cat's food and water well away from the litter tray, or things that they find frightening.
- Any changes to your cat's diet should be made gradually.
- Be aware that any change in the amount your cat eats or drinks may be a sign of physical health or stress. If your cat's eating or drinking habits change consult your vet.



Tsekhmister Shutterstock

**Your cat needs fresh drinking water at all times and a well-balanced diet which your vet can provide advice on**



# How to provide for your cat's natural behavioural needs

How a cat behaves depends on their age, personality and past experiences. Most cats are playful animals and enjoy socialising with people. Play with people and toys is a valuable source of interaction and cats should have regular opportunities to carry out this behaviour. Cats that do not go outside may need extra opportunities to play and exercise indoors. However, some cats, especially those that live outdoors, may be less sociable with people and other animals.

Cats sleep for many hours of the day, but when they are awake they need opportunities to exercise and play. Cats enjoy resting in high places where they feel safe. Cats are intelligent and capable of suffering boredom so need opportunities for mental stimulation. Additionally, all cats need an appropriate scratching place, high enough to allow them to stretch out fully, to scent mark their territory and condition their claws.

Cats experience a range of emotions including happiness, anxiety, and fear. How they behave and their body language can help you understand what they are feeling and whether they are physically and mentally fit and healthy.

Any change in behaviour such as changes in activity and hiding behaviour may indicate that your cat is distressed and needs help. If concerned please seek advice from your vet. (You will find more information in section "How to keep your cat healthy and protect them from pain, suffering, injury and disease").

Kittens need to get used to be carefully introduced to the many noises, objects and activities in their environment. They also need to be adequately and carefully introduced to many different animals and people so that they learn how to interact appropriately and behave normally as adults.

**Cats experience a range of emotions including happiness, anxiety, and fear. How they behave and their body language can help you understand what they are feeling and whether they are physically and mentally fit and healthy**

# What you should do:

- You should ensure your cat receives enough mental, social and physical stimulation to satisfy its individual behavioural needs.
  - Provide your cat with safe toys and regular opportunities to play with friendly people and by itself.
  - Ensure that your cat is able to rest undisturbed and has somewhere to hide when it wants to.
  - Make sure your cat has opportunities to exercise each day to stay fit, happy and healthy. If your cat does not go outside, provide suitable indoor activities to keep it active such as high places to rest and toys.
  - If you are unsure how much activity is right for your cat, take advice from your vet or other suitably qualified cat care specialist.
  - Provide your cat with somewhere to scratch, such as a sturdy scratching post.
  - Make sure that your cat can reach all the things that it needs (e.g. bed, food, water, litter or outdoors) without having to get too close to things, people or other animals that may scare it. You should know how your cat behaves when fit, healthy and happy and be able to recognise and interpret your cat's body language.
  - Never shout at or punish your cat. It will not understand and will just become more nervous or scared. You should only use positive reward-based training, such as food, toys and praise and avoid harsh, potentially painful, training methods.
- 
- **If your cat's behaviour changes or becomes a problem it could be distressed, bored, ill or injured and you should seek advice from a vet or other suitably qualified cat behaviour expert who should have a combination of appropriate qualifications, up to date knowledge, skills and experience and who treats cats in such a way that their welfare is protected.**

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# How to provide the right companionship for your cat

Cats show variable degrees of sociability and, although some cats may be friendly with other cats, usually those they have grown up with, others will prefer to be on their own.

Cats that are friends generally groom and rub against each other, and may sleep next to each other. However, many cats are happier living without other cats and can be reluctant to accept new cats. A cat may suffer if they cannot avoid other cats they do not like or has to undertake activities such as sharing food bowls or litter trays. Introducing cats in a patient, careful way can increase their chances of living together happily. However, keeping too many cats together can result in a stressful and unhealthy environment, which may make it difficult for you to meet the individual needs of your animals.

Cats that are well socialised and are treated kindly from before two months of age usually learn to see people as friends. These cats are likely to enjoy and benefit from human company and have regular opportunities for contact such as play or grooming. Some cats may become bored or distressed if they do not have appropriate stimulation and company.

Socialisation with people, and other animals they are likely to come into contact with, is an essential part of early learning for a kitten. In early life, the more kittens get used to people, noises, objects and other animals, the less likely they are to find these frightening as adults. Unless carefully introduced early in life, cats will usually be scared of other animals such as dogs.

**Make sure each cat has its own food bowl, litter tray & bed as sharing can lead to stress. If they choose to share that is fine**







## What you should do:

- If your cat likes people, provide regular contact with them even when you are away.
- Before getting more cats, think carefully how your existing cats will respond to company. Check that you will be able to look after each animal properly and seek advice on the best way to introduce the new cat into the home.
- If you have cats that are not friends, make sure they have the opportunity to avoid each other and that they can access everything they need (e.g. food, water, outside space, litter tray, rest area) without having to pass one another too closely.
- Do not force your cat to interact with people or animals that they do not like, and make sure they can avoid them.
- If more than one cat shares a living space, provide sufficient extra resources (e.g. toys, beds, litter trays and hiding places) and give them enough space so that they can get away from one another if they want to.
- When you are away, make sure your cat is properly cared for by a responsible person. When someone else is looking after your cat he or she also has a legal responsibility to ensure their welfare and you should ensure that the person understands their needs and any special requirements that they may have.
- Never leave your cat unsupervised with another animal or person who may harm or frighten them.
- Ensure that cats in your care are handled properly and are not stressed or endangered by other adults, children or animals.
- Be consistent, kind and gentle in the way you, your family and friends, react to your cat.
- If you are concerned about your cat's behaviour seek advice from your vet or suitably qualified cat behaviour expert.



# How to keep your cat healthy and protect them from pain, suffering, injury and disease

Cats can feel pain. Individual cats show that they are in pain, frightened or suffering in different ways, which can sometimes be difficult to spot. For example, some cats may become withdrawn and hide or change their eating and drinking behaviour, whereas others become restless or aggressive. Others develop unwanted behaviours, such as spraying or not using the litter tray. Other signs that your cat may be suffering from long-term distress include high levels of grooming or pulling hair out, withdrawal and a hunched posture. Cats that are insecure or stressed for long periods are more likely to become unwell as stress can trigger both psychological and physical problems.

Cats, like us, benefit from regular health care. Long-haired cats and some others need help with grooming to avoid a matted coat.

Cats are vulnerable to a range of infectious diseases and other illnesses. Your vet can provide advice on serious infectious diseases. Signs of illness include sudden changes in behaviour, such as restlessness and crying, or becoming quiet and withdrawn. Cats may stop grooming when ill and any changes in eating and drinking habits, such as lack of appetite or excessive drinking, may indicate problems. Changes in weight, either up or down should be investigated. Signs of injury include swellings, limping and evidence of pain, such as sensitivity to the touch. Other signs of illness include discharges from the eyes, ears or nose, difficulty with toilet behaviour, or sickness and diarrhoea. Cats that have

eaten corrosive or poisonous substances often salivate excessively. This list is for guidance only and is not exhaustive.

Microchipping a cat gives them the best chance of being identified and more likely to be reunited with their owner if injured or lost. They are more likely to receive the prompt veterinary treatment they need if injured.

To avoid adding to the over-population crisis affecting cats in the UK, many people choose not to breed their cat. Neutering can prevent your cat becoming pregnant, or fathering an unwanted litter. Good advice about the age at which cats can be neutered, where you can have your cat neutered and the health benefits of neutering is available through the Cats Protection's Kitten Neutering Vet Database ([www.cats.org.uk/kitten-neutering](http://www.cats.org.uk/kitten-neutering)).

Neutering has numerous benefits including a reduction in spraying, lessened risk of some cancers. Un-neutered cats are more likely to fight, to catch some diseases as a result of fighting, and to be lost or run over whilst roaming. Cats frequently enter puberty at a very young age and unplanned early breeding may result in welfare problems.

If you decide to breed from your cat, your vet can advise on the risk of inherited conditions and exaggerated features.

Kittens require care and cannot be sold under eight weeks. Raising kittens is difficult and time-consuming, and the kittens are your responsibility, with the same needs as any cat under the Animal Welfare Act.



# What you should do:

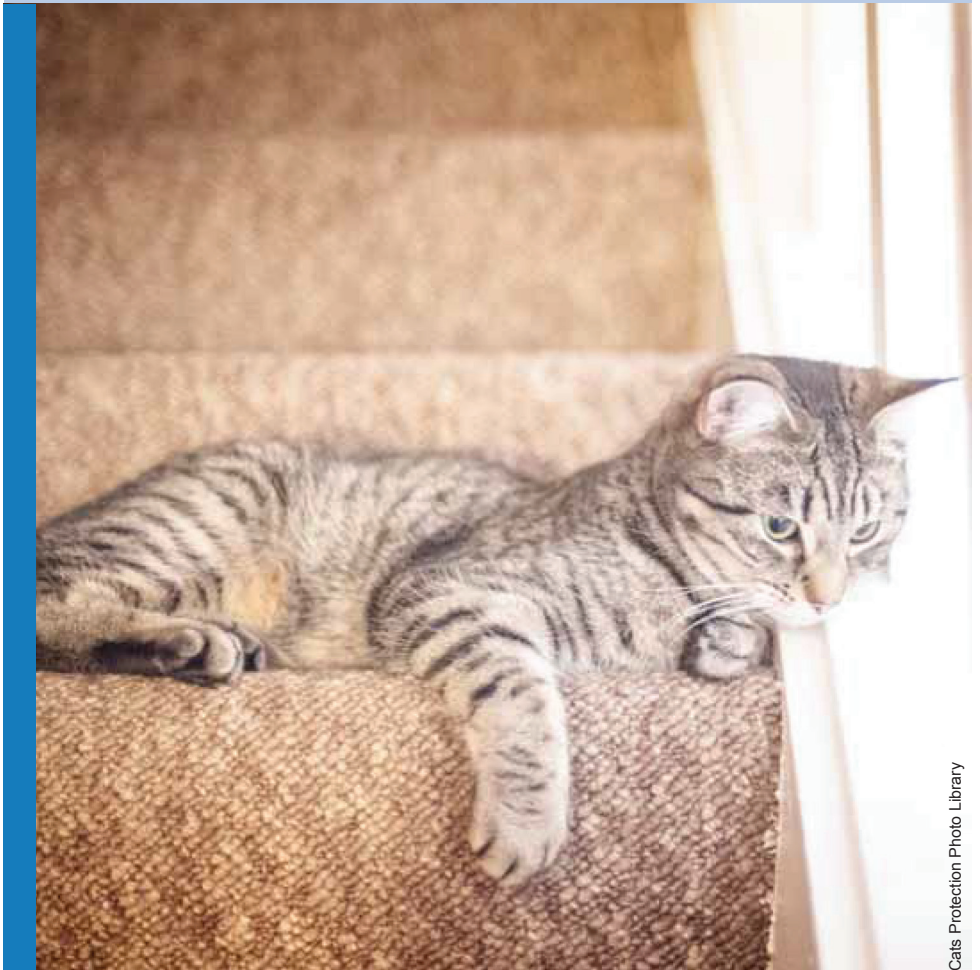
- Check your cat for signs of injury or illness regularly and make sure that someone else does this if you are away. You should examine your cat closely, including their coat, which should also be checked for parasites such as fleas.
  - If you notice changes in your cat's behaviour, you should contact your vet and follow the advice you are given.
  - If you suspect that your cat is in pain, ill or injured contact a vet promptly and follow veterinary advice regarding their treatment.
  - Try to minimise fear and stress in your cat's daily life. By doing so you will decrease its risk of certain illnesses.
  - You should take the advice of your vet on how often your cat needs a health check and about the things that you can do to protect your cat's health including routine preventive health care, such as vaccination, neutering and treatments to control parasites (e.g. fleas and worms), as well as how to deal with any current health problems your cat may have.
- You should follow the advice you are given.
- Make sure that you groom your cat without causing distress if they need help with the care of their coat. If you are uncertain, ask your vet about grooming your cat and how often you should do this.
  - Only use medicines and drugs that have been prescribed for your individual cat.
  - Human products and medicines intended for other animals can be dangerous to cats and sometimes fatal. If you are unsure seek veterinary advice.
  - Make sure your cat can be identified such as by microchipping and ensure any microchip details kept up to date. This will ensure that it can be treated quickly if injured when away from home, or returned to you if lost. Make sure any collars fit properly with a quick release mechanism and are not harmful. If using a microchip as a form of identification.

**Consider neutering your cat to avoid an unwanted litter adding to the over-population of cats in the UK**



Cats Protection Photo Library

- Seek the advice of a vet before allowing your cat to breed and take all reasonable steps to ensure that you will be able to provide the care required during pregnancy and rearing and find suitable homes for the kittens.
- **You should always contact your vet immediately if you are concerned that your cat has come into contact with any chemical or other substance that could be harmful. You should also be aware that cats regularly groom themselves and may ingest or come into contact with a poisonous substance when doing so.**



Cats Protection Photo Library

# Sources of further information

- Your vet. You can contact the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons to find details of vets in your area. The Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS),Belgravia House, 62-64 Horseferry Road, London SW1P 2AF: [rcvs.org.uk](http://rcvs.org.uk) –the website has a“find-a-vet” facility.
- Local libraries and bookshops for up to date books on cat care.
- Websites such as:
  - Animal Behaviour & Training Council:  
[www.abtcouncil.org.uk/](http://www.abtcouncil.org.uk/)
  - Battersea Dogs & Cats Home:  
[www.battersea.org.uk](http://www.battersea.org.uk)
  - Blue Cross:  
[www.bluecross.org.uk](http://www.bluecross.org.uk)
  - British Small Animals Veterinary Association:  
[www.bsava.com](http://www.bsava.com)
  - British Veterinary Association Animal Welfare Foundation:  
[www.bva-awf.org.uk](http://www.bva-awf.org.uk)
  - Cats Protection:  
[www.cats.org.uk](http://www.cats.org.uk)
  - International Cat Care:  
[www.icats.org](http://www.icats.org)
  - PDSA: Peoples Dispensary for Sick Animals:  
[www.pdsa.org.uk](http://www.pdsa.org.uk)
  - Pet Industry Federation:  
[www.petfederation.co.uk](http://www.petfederation.co.uk)
  - Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals:  
[www.rspca.org.uk](http://www.rspca.org.uk)
  - The Cat Group:  
[www.thecatgroup.org.uk](http://www.thecatgroup.org.uk)
  - The Governing Council of the Cat Fancy  
[www.gccfcats.org](http://www.gccfcats.org)
  - Defra, hosted at [www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk), has information on the Animal Welfare Act 2006, Pet TravelScheme (PETS) and copies of the Code of Practice for the Welfare of Cats.



PDSA Photo Library

# This Code of Practice applies to all cats

The purposes of the Code is to provide practical guidance to help you to comply with the provisions set out under Section 9 of the Animal Welfare Act ([www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2006/45/section/9](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2006/45/section/9)). It does not tell you precisely how to care for your cat but it does summarise important things you should know and what to do when making decisions about how best to care for your cat.

Breach of a provision of this Code is not an offence itself but if proceedings are brought against you for an offence under Section 9 of the Act, the Court will look at whether or not you have complied with the Code in deciding whether you have committed an offence.

If you are unsure about anything to do with the care and welfare of your cat, you should always seek advice from an expert such as a veterinary surgeon, mainly referred to as vet. You will also find reference within this Code to “other suitably qualified cat care specialists.” These are people who hold the qualifications and experience to provide expert advice on cat welfare and behaviour.

A list of suitable organisations and places to find help are provided on page 13 of this Code.

You can find out more about the legislation relating to cats at [www.defra.gov.uk](http://www.defra.gov.uk).