

Why Do Some Cats Live 20 Years and Beyond?

Today, many well cared-for cats live into their late teens and early 20s. What are their owners doing that other cat parents aren't? The answers may be found in this checklist of eight ways to help your cat live a healthy, happy and long life.

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Well-cared for feline family members can live into their late teens and 20s today, since diseases in domestic cats are primarily lifestyle-related and within our control
- To provide your cat with the type of existence that will optimize his health and lifespan, your focus should be on feeding the right diet, keeping him lean and well-exercised, and providing a feline-friendly indoor environment with safe and supervised access to the outdoors
- Crate training, grooming assistance and regular veterinary wellness visits to check organ function are also extremely important in ensuring you're doing all you can to help your cat live a long life in good health

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These days, many well cared-for indoor cats live into their late teens and early 20s. Most domestic feline diseases today are lifestyle-related vs. genetic, which means that cat guardians have a great deal of control over how well and how long their pets live. This is wonderful news, because we all want our feline family members around for as long as possible, and with an excellent quality of life.

If you're hoping to help your own cat live to a ripe old age, there are many things you can do to provide her with a lifestyle that offers her the best chance to grow old with you.

8 Ways to Offer Your Cat a Healthy, Happy and Long Life

1. **Species-specific diet** — Feeding your cat an **optimal diet** is the single most important thing¹ you can do to help her enjoy a long, healthy life. Cats evolved to eat a high moisture, high protein, low carb diet, but the vast majority of cats eat kibble, which is high in carbs and lower in protein and moisture. This affects the body in many negative ways, but foundationally it creates metabolic stress.

The end result is often dental disease, obesity, insulin resistance leading to diabetes and kidney disease. The nutrition that results in the least amount of metabolic stress for most cats, regardless of age, is their ancestral diet, which consists of minimally processed, moisture-rich, organic, non-GMO foods in their natural form. Animal meat should be the foundation of every cat's throughout life.

If you can't feed fresh food (raw or gently cooked), the second-best diet is a dehydrated or freeze-dried balanced diet that has been reconstituted with an abundance of water or broth. Your cat's kidneys and liver

can be stressed as a result of chronic low-grade dehydration, so all foods served dry can pose a problem long term.

I recommend serving your cat food in its natural state (not extruded) to provide needed moisture, and to insure the highest level of biologic assimilation and digestion. That means feeding a nutritionally balanced, antioxidant-rich and species-specific diet that includes omega-3 essential fats, such as krill oil.

2. **Healthy weight** — The majority of cats in the U.S. are overweight or obese. The obesity-related diseases overweight kitties inevitably develop can and do shorten their lifespans and often destroy their quality of life along the way. If you want your cat in good health and able to get around comfortably for 20 years, one of the worst things you can do is help him get fat.

The first step in keeping your cat at a healthy weight is to feed an optimal diet as I described above. It's equally important not to free-feed (which as luck would have it is impossible to do with a species-appropriate diet, because fresh food spoils when left out at room temperature).

It's also important to calculate calorie requirements for your cat's ideal weight, measure his food portions using a measuring cup or scale, and drastically limit treats (be sure to include treats in his total daily calorie count).

3. **Daily exercise** — Consistent daily exercise, including at least 20 minutes of high-intensity activity such as playing and chasing will help your cat burn fat and increase muscle tone. Make sure she has things to climb on, like a multilevel cat tree or tower. Think like a cat and choose toys and activities that answer her natural drive to hunt, stalk and pounce on her "prey" — especially at mealtime.

Walking your cat (if she's willing) in nice weather using a harness and leash can be good exercise, plus it gets her out into the fresh air, stimulates her senses and puts her paws in direct contact with the ground.

An alternative is a safe, fully enclosed porch or patio area (catio) that prevents her from getting out and other animals from getting in.

4. **Indoor living** — While being indoors all the time isn't what most cats would choose, it's by far the safest life we can choose for them. Indoor living isn't an entirely natural environment for your cat (more about that shortly) but letting him run around loose outside actually presents much more risk to his health and longevity than keeping him "captive" in your home.

Domestic cats with free access to the outdoors are much more likely to be exposed to viruses and other pathogens and parasites that cause serious disease. They can also be inadvertently poisoned or become prey for neighborhood dogs and wild animals like coyotes.

Fighting among outdoor cats is common, and someone has to come out the loser. Usually, it's the kitty who doesn't live outside full time and isn't an accomplished street fighter.

Cats with access to the outdoors in winter are apt to look for warmth in potentially deadly places, like the wheel well or up inside the hood of a parked vehicle. Kitties have also been known to dart out into traffic after being startled or because another animal is chasing them.

As I mentioned above, just because your cat lives inside doesn't mean he can't go on supervised daily trips outside to bask in the sun, exercise and ground himself.

Make sure your home living environment is as “green” as possible. Cats are particularly sensitive to the toxic effects of plug-ins, room sprays and other home scenting products, which cause organ damage and endocrine disease. Use organic home cleaning products and get an air purifier if you live in a water damaged building.

Make sure to only offer filtered water from 18-gauge stainless steel bowls (some stainless steel bowls have been found to contain contaminants¹) or Pyrex glass bowls. If you use ceramic make sure it's heavy metal free and avoid storing or feeding food or water in plastic of any kind.

5. **Environmental enrichment** — The term "environmental enrichment" means to improve or enhance the living situation of captive animals to optimize their health, longevity, and quality of life.

The more comfortable your feline family member feels in your home, the lower her stress level. Reducing your cat's stress is extremely important in keeping her physically healthy. Enriching your cat's surroundings means creating minimally stressful living quarters and reducing or eliminating changes in her life that cause anxiety.

The essentials of your kitty's life — food, water and litterbox (which should be kept immaculately clean), should be located in a safe, secure location away from any area that is noisy enough to startle her or make her feel trapped and unable to escape.

Cats are natural climbers and scratchers, so kitty needs approved places for climbing and scratching in her indoor environment. She also needs her own resting place and a hiding place (sometimes these are the same spot) where she feels untouchable.

Cats feel most comfortable when their daily routine is predictable but enriching. Performing little rituals when you leave the house and return can help your cat feel more at ease with the comings and goings of humans in the household. A ritual can be as simple as giving her a treat when you leave and a nice scratch behind the ears as soon as you get home.

Think about things you can do to appeal to her visual, auditory, and olfactory senses. For example, some cats can gaze out the window for hours, while others are captivated by fish in an aquarium. Some even enjoy kitty videos.

It's important for your cat's circadian rhythm that you open blinds and shades in the morning to allow natural light into your home. This allows their bodies to secrete appropriate melatonin, the light-induced hormone that helps regulate the sleep-wake cycle.

Consistently offer new things for your cat to explore and play with. At my house, I leave all of my delivery boxes on the floor after I open them and then pick them up the following morning. The cats spend hours investigating them at night. Most cats suffer from boredom, so regularly engaging in play sessions is also important.

When you're away from home, provide background noise that is similar to the ambient sounds she hears when you're home, for example, music or a TV at low volume. You can stimulate her keen sense of smell with cat-safe herbs or synthetic feline pheromones.

6. **Crate training** — Crate training isn't just for dogs — it's excellent for your kitty as well to reduce his stress level when you need to remove him from his home turf. All the angst associated with veterinary visits and

other outings can be minimized by acclimating your cat to his carrier at home in a nonthreatening manner, and on his timetable.

7. **Grooming chores** — Cats are highly accomplished self-groomers, so most don't need a lot of help in that department. However, it's a good idea to teach your kitty to accept regular gentle brushing or combing. Long-haired cats, in particular, often benefit from a little help removing dead hair and debris from their coats. Brushing your cat every day or a few times a week will also strengthen your bond with her.

Another cat care chore you should absolutely do is **brush her teeth** every day or several days a week at a minimum. I also recommend performing regular **at-home physical exams** on your cat to learn what's normal and what's not. This will help you stay on top of her health and alert you to changes in between veterinary visits.

8. **Veterinary wellness checkups** — I recommend twice-yearly wellness visits because:
 - Changes in your cat's health can come on rapidly, especially in older kitties and especially on the inside where you can't see them, like sudden changes in kidney health
 - Sick cats often show no signs of illness, but early detection allows for early intervention
 - Semi-annual visits give you and your veterinarian the opportunity to closely monitor changes in your cat's behavior, weight and attitude that require further investigation

At a minimum, younger healthy cats should see the vet once a year. Kitties over the age of 7 and those with chronic health conditions should be seen twice a year or more frequently if necessary.

By assessing internal organ health with annual bloodwork, your vet will be able to see subtle age-related changes and address them immediately with appropriate supportive supplement protocols. This allows you to keep tabs on vital organs as your cat ages and have the assurance he's as healthy on the inside as he appears on the outside.

I recommend that you find a veterinarian whose practice philosophy you're comfortable with and whose beliefs about nutrition and proactive wellness align with yours. This may be a holistic or integrative veterinarian, or a conventional veterinarian who understands vaccines should only be given if a titer indicates a cat requires it.

Sources and References

[PetMD July 24, 2018](#)

¹ [Veterinary Practice News, January 4, 2013](#)
