

The Unlikely Healing Journey of a Kitten Named Pinky

Had he been any other cat, Pinky likely wouldn't have survived. A homeless 3-month-old kitten, he wouldn't even have been diagnosed with his rare yet life-threatening condition had he not jumped into the carrier with his brother to tag along on a vet visit. What happened next is truly incredible.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

Jan 14, 2023 • 6 min read

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Thanks to a series of fortuitous events and a large team of caring, talented humans, a precious homeless kitten named Pinky had life-saving surgery and found his forever home
- Pinky had a rare condition called pectus excavatum, which was accidentally discovered by a very observant veterinarian, and thankfully corrected by a talented team of veterinarians at Texas A&M Small Animal Teaching Hospital
- Pinky has made a full recovery and is happy, healthy, and living his best life in his new forever home

Pinky, a strikingly handsome three-month-old kitten, tagged along one day on his brother's veterinary visit. Luckily, the observant veterinarian noticed that Pinky had a rare condition called pectus excavatum that put his ability to live like a normal cat, as well as his long-term survival, in question.

"Pectus excavatum is a congenital disorder in which the sternum doesn't form properly," Dr. Chanel Berns, a first-year resident at the Texas A&M Small Animal Teaching Hospital (SATH), told Texas A&M Today. "Because the sternum is pointed inward toward the chest cavity, it can affect these patients' hearts and their ability to expand their lungs."¹

The unscheduled encounter between Pinky and the eagle-eyed vet was the first of several fortunate events for the kitten. In fact, thanks to the many individuals who teamed up to care for him — from cat rescuers and fosters to a veterinary student and clinicians — Pinky is now on the road to a full, healthy life.

Pinky's Condition Was Discovered by Accident

Pinky's adventure began when Tammy Kidwell, founder of the **Cat Matchers** rescue in Dallas, picked up two stray one-month-old nearly identical kittens named "Pink" (now Pinky) and "Floyd," and took them to a local foster who cared for them for several weeks and coordinated their neuters.

The kittens were almost ready for adoption when Floyd began sneezing, necessitating a veterinary visit. Apparently, Pinky didn't want him to be alone, because at the last minute he jumped into the carrier with his bro. Once the boys were at the clinic, the vet pulled Pinky from the carrier first to get to Floyd, but as soon as she did, she called Kidwell to get her approval for an x-ray — not for Floyd, but for Pinky.

The veterinarian had noticed immediately that Pinky's chest wasn't normal because she could feel his breastbone (sternum) curving up toward his spine. Due to the kitten's tiny size and long coat, the abnormality would be hard to detect for anyone not familiar with pectus excavatum.

Team Pinky Continues to Expand

The treatment for pectus excavatum involves a rare procedure that no one in the Dallas area felt confident to attempt, so Kidwell made an appointment with Texas A&M's SATH in College Station, which is about three and a half hours from Dallas. Next, she set about finding a medical foster in the area so Pinky could return for weekly follow-ups at the SATH.

*"All of my veterinarian friends reached out to their foster contacts but heard nothing," Kidwell said. "On the day I drove him to A&M, I told a friend who heads a rescue group that I had nowhere for this cat to go when I picked him up later that week. She and three other rescue groups all reached out to their contacts in Central Texas that day and, finally, someone from A&M posted it on Facebook."*²

Thankfully, second-year veterinary student Molly Guyette saw the post on the Texas A&M School of Veterinary Medicine & Biomedical Sciences Class of 2025 Facebook group and stepped up immediately, agreeing to spend some of her summer break caring for Pinky.

"It was an amazing way for all of the rescue groups to work together," Kidwell said. "There were lots of moving parts that had to be put together and I was in awe when they all fell into place."

Molly has been amazing, and she and her boyfriend have just been great with Pinky. She even set up a Google Drive just for me and his first foster where we can see his pictures every day," Kidwell said. "I also told her, 'You may not have been able to be in the surgery, but you are helping him recover from something rare and seeing it firsthand. As a vet, that's going to come in handy.'"

Pinky Shows Immediate Post-Op Improvement

The SATH Soft Tissue Surgery Service sees only about two cases of pectus excavatum a year, but even though the corrective procedure is rarely performed, Pinky's care team, led by Berns, was confident they could help the little guy.

"Pectus excavatum really narrows the area where their heart is, and sometimes they can have trouble breathing from it," Berns explained. "What we do in these cases is essentially try to pull the sternum down, which puts his heart in a more normal position and gives him more ability to expand his lungs and live a healthier life."

The surgery team placed an **external splint on Pinky's chest** that was connected to his sternum with a series of sutures. Each week, they tightened the sutures a bit, which gradually pulled the sternum into the correct position. The technique is similar in some respects to the way braces gradually straighten teeth. Since it must be done at no later than three months (while the bones still move easily), Pinky's condition was discovered just in time.

"With young cats like Pinky, their bones are still made up of a lot of cartilage, especially in that area, so the sternum is a lot more pliable," Berns said. "Once cats get older, the cartilage in their sternum starts to get more mineralized, so the procedure doesn't work as well and it's harder to get an immediate improvement."

In Pinky's first set of x-rays, before the splint was placed, he had a very small amount of his lungs functioning normally and his heart was very deviated to the side. Then, in his immediate post-op images, you can see that the splint made a huge improvement right away. His lungs were able to expand, and his heart was in the correct position."

Pinky wore the splint for four weeks (with gradual tightening of the sutures), at which point his vet team felt that his bones had mineralized enough that it could be removed, and the sternum would stay in place.

Pinky Is Now Happy, Active, and in His Forever Home

Not only was Pinky's veterinary team pleased with his physical progress, but they also noticed a positive change in his behavior.

"Pinky has always been pretty happy and active but definitely much more so now," Berns said. "Most of our cats and dogs that have had this procedure seem a lot more energetic after it. They had some exercise intolerance before surgery because they couldn't expand their lungs properly, but afterwards, they just become like new animals."

Pinky may need additional surgery at some point, but for now and the foreseeable future, the splint procedure has put him on the road to happy, healthy kittenhood.

After recovering from his surgery, Pinky's good fortune continued when Guyette decided to adopt him (and her roommate adopted Floyd). This isn't really a surprise because the little dude steals hearts wherever he goes.

"The day I drove Pinky down to College Station, we left extra early and arrived an hour and a half before his appointment," Kidwell said. "We were there so early that I decided to let him out of his carrier in the car."

Cats usually want to explore and run around your car, and then you freak out thinking you're never going to get them back in the carrier, but he immediately climbed into my lap and was perfectly content just lying there. He's just the most laid-back, sweet cat."

The veterinary staff at the SATH agrees. Pinky is one a kind.

"He has got the most personality I've seen from a kitten in a while," Berns said. "He had a lot of fans here, both on our surgery service and in the ICU. We had a lot of people who were kind of hopeful they would get to adopt him at the end of all of this."

Sources and References

^{1, 2} [Texas A&M Today, October 18, 2022](#)