

The Subtle Signs of Sickness in Cats

1. Inappropriate Elimination Behaviour or Litter Box Use

Inappropriate and annoying elimination behaviors by your cat can often indicate an underlying medical condition and do not mean your cat is trying “to get back” at you. These behaviors can include urinating or defecating outside the litter box or other problems. A cat with these behaviors may have any number of conditions, including lower urinary tract disease, kidney disease, urinary tract infection and diabetes mellitus.

2. Changes in Interaction

Cats are social animals and enjoy interactions with their human family and often with other pets. Changes in those interactions may signal problems such as disease, fear and anxiety. It may also signal pain, which can cause aggression.

3. Changes in Activity

A decrease or increase in activity can be a sign of a number of conditions. Discomfort from joint disease or systemic illnesses can also lead to a decrease in activity. Increased activity is often seen with hyperthyroidism. It's important to understand cats don't usually slow down just because they are old.

4. Changes in Sleeping Habits

The average adult cat may spend 16 to 18 hours per day sleeping. The key to differentiating abnormal lethargy from normal napping is knowing your cat's sleeping patterns and noting any changes.

5. Changes in Food and Water Consumption

Most cats are not “finicky” eaters. Look for changes, such as a decrease or increase in consumption and how the cat chews its food. Increased water intake can be an early indicator of thyroid problems, kidney disease, diabetes or other illnesses.

6. Unexplained Weight Loss or Gain

Weight changes often go unnoticed because of a cat's thick coat. A change in weight does not necessarily correlate with a change in appetite. If your cat goes to the food dish and then backs away from it without eating, nausea may be the source. On the other hand, obesity has become a serious health concern in cats, with increased risk of diabetes mellitus, joint disease and other problems.

7. Changes in Grooming

Cats are typically fastidious groomers. A decrease in grooming behavior can indicate a number of conditions, including fear, anxiety, obesity or other illnesses. An increase in grooming may be a sign of a skin problem.

8. Signs of Stress

Your cat can feel stress despite having an “easy” life. Boredom and sudden changes are common causes of stress in cats. Stressed cats may demonstrate decreased grooming and social interaction, spend more time awake and scanning their environment, hide more, withdraw and exhibit signs of depression, and have an increased or decreased appetite.

9. Changes in Vocalisation

Increased vocalisation or howling is more common in older cats and is often seen with some underlying issue. Many cats also have increased vocalisation if they are in pain or anxious.

10. Bad Breath

Since dental disease is considered a silent disease, it is important to have your cat's teeth checked to help prevent it. One early indicator of an oral problem is bad breath. Regular home teeth brushing and veterinary dental care prevent bad breath, pain, tooth loss and spread of infection to other organs.

BEHAVIOUR ASSESSMENT

Let your veterinarian know if you answer **YES** to any of the following:

1. Does your cat urinate or defecate outside the litter box?
2. Does your cat show signs of aggression, including hissing, biting or scratching people?
3. Does your cat exhibit any fearful behaviors?
4. Has there been any change in your cat's behavior or disposition?



What Diseases



can humans get from Cats?

There is always a big concern over the sharing of diseases between the species – that is why the big concern over Bird Flu. However, although the list of POSSIBLE diseases that a cat can share with its owner (this group of diseases are referred to as Zoonoses) is quite long, the actual number of diseases that a cat can infect a human with on a regular basis is small. Ironically, it works both ways. We can give cats some diseases too, and cats can even be infected by some strange things like tomato fungi. None of the viruses that cats get – except Rabies (which we do not have in Australia) can infect humans, so that lets us off the hook for most of the infections that a cat will get in its lifetime! That includes Feline Aids, Feline Leucaemia, Feline Herpes, Corona virus and Parvovirus. And several more!

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What Diseases can humans get from Cats?

The most common zoonosis to cause concern is **Toxoplasma**, especially for pregnant ladies. The details are complex, but the reality is – Toxoplasma is a small parasite that lives in the muscle of sheep, rabbits, rats and kangaroos and multiplies in the intestines of young cats if they eat that meat.

It is spread to the herbivores out on the fields and pastures contaminated by feral cats faeces. Only young cats pass contaminated faeces usually, so once past the kitten stage, very few cats will pass on the eggs (called oocysts) which can infect other mammals, including humans. The upshot of this is that most people in Australia become infected with Toxoplasma oocysts by gardening without gloves, and in France, by eating undercooked lamb or rabbit.

Being infected with the oocysts is only a problem for pregnant women if they have not been in contact with the Toxoplasma oocysts before they got pregnant, because then the baby gets infected as well, with debilitating effects. So, because cat faeces are involved, it is only right that pregnant women should not handle cat faeces. However, bear in mind it takes a few days for the oocysts to develop enough in the faeces for them to become infective, so daily cleaning of litter trays removes that risk as well.

Toxoplasma oocysts do not hang around on the cat's coat either (in fact their skin has 30 percent fewer bacteria on it than yours because of all that grooming!). So the risk to an owner of an adult cat, with a regularly cleaned litter tray, is low. Interestingly, vets and vet nurses have no higher levels of exposure to Toxoplasma than the general population, which would indicate that cats are actually a low-risk source of infection. Precautions for women then, are to use gloves when gardening (and wash hands after handling any soil or sand outside) and to cook lamb, rabbit and kangaroo meat well, and wash hands after handling those meats raw.

Pretty simple really. Blood testing your cat for Toxoplasma is not going to be very revealing, as most cats will have been exposed and be immune from quite a young age. The ideal is to actually have both expectant mother and

cat having high levels of toxoplasma antibodies prior to the pregnancy! That way, no one is going to be infected! An excellent read is on our website: www.catclinic.com.au

Ringworm is also a very common infection. It is not a worm but a fungus, which grows in a ring formation like mushrooms do! It is usually the fungus called *Microsporum canis* and it lives in the soil as well as on skin. It is as easy for children to get ringworm from another child (at preschool etc) as it is to get it from a kitten. Ringworm usually only infects the young, the pregnant and the elderly or those whose immune system is not working very well. It is easy to treat with creams (on humans) and shampoos and tablets in kitten. Again, adult cats rarely carry the fungus unless their immune system is compromised.

Giardia and **Cryptosporidia**, both of which cause diarrhoea, are often water-borne, and you can get them from the same source as your cat might. You can transmit them to your cat, too. However, once again, litter tray hygiene is usually sufficient to limit the problem. Similarly **Salmonella** comes from bad meat, same as for humans but then can be transmitted if hygienic methods are not practised.

So really, the biggest problem you can get from your cat is a cat bite, and these are not to be ignored. While the frequency of cat bites is much less than dog bites (after all, cats give lots of warning and will try to get away rather than bite), they are very infective and not to be taken lightly. Some people are very susceptible to blood poisoning from just one bite.

The bacteria in a cat's mouth are actually not as toxic to people as the bacteria in other people's or monkey's mouths, but because the cat tooth injects the bugs under the skin, the bacteria have an ideal place to grow. Cat scratches can transmit a bacteria called *Bartonella* which causes lymph nodes to swell. It usually only inhabits young cats, and most people get over it without being treated specifically for it.

So, in a nutshell, there are lots of possible diseases, but few common infections that cats and their humans share. Most of the diseases are transmitted by young cats, in the same way as young children harbour most of the viruses and infections in the human population. Even once infected, most people can be cured of most of what a cat can give them, unlike some of the viruses we share between ourselves such as HIV, Herpes and Hepatitis. So think of it as your cat giving much more affection than infection!

CAT'S and Kids

Cats view babies and toddlers as different species to adult humans.

Remarkable perception really, though a bit confusing now that cats are living longer and can see them grow up! Cats will usually tolerate significantly more in the way of sticky fingers and uncoordinated proddings from a young human, and as long as they have an escape route they will use that in preference!

The key to managing the return of a new baby to the household, is to understand that the biggest concern for your cat is the changes in routine and smells. It is essential to manage the cat's natural curiosity, while protecting the baby and the cat from each other's unexpected actions. Cats don't smother babies (that was the traditional explanation for SIDS deaths), and they get into the cots because it is SOFT, WARM AND HIGH UP!

You have to decide BEFORE the baby comes home whether or not your feline friend will be allowed into the baby's bedroom. If not, then the time to install the screen door and start preventing access is NOW. Cats will learn not to go into rooms if they are NEVER allowed in there - they do not understand 'sometimes you can and sometimes you can't'. If you are going to allow access to the nursery, then if you can provide a shelf with a view of what is going on nearby, your cat will probably be happier to sit there, as they are not big on the way babies move around in bed anyway, and they can take on a supervisory role!

It is a good idea to install the shelf and get your cat used to it before the baby arrives and everyone is pushed for time and energy. Many cats will keep their distance from babies and toddlers, but some cats really blossom with the arrival of the new baby, especially as it means someone is at home with them more! However, try to establish a routine that the cat can count on with feeding and playtimes for them as well, and always ensure they have an escape route to lessen their anxiety should the small human become too boisterous.

