

PetSavers

Kitten Guide



Owni ng a kitten brings its own special rewards and responsibilities and is not a decision that should be undertaken lightly. The Animal Welfare Acts have introduced a duty of care making it the responsibility of the owner to ensure that their animal’s welfare needs are met. Your cat will be a member of your family for many years so it is worth considering how you will provide for each of these needs.

These include the need:

- For a suitable environment (place to live)
- For a suitable diet
- To exhibit normal behaviour patterns
- To be housed with or apart from other animals (if applicable)
- To be protected from pain, suffering, injury and disease

The actual requirements will vary depending on your own circumstances and the type of cat you take on. Factors that you should consider when taking on a cat include:

Type of cat: The majority of cats in the UK are non-pedigree and are often referred to as “domestic shorthairs” or “domestic

longhairs” depending on the length of their coat. Those with long hair will require significantly more grooming so you should consider this in advance. There are also a wide range of pedigree breeds of cat which often have recognisable personality traits as well as physical characteristics. If you are considering taking on a pedigree cat it is worth taking the time to find out more about the breed and their characteristics as well as any particular health concerns.

Exercise: Although cats do not require to be taken for walks they still need to be able to exercise. Kittens are very playful and you will need to provide them with a safe environment to explore. Older cats will exercise themselves if given free access to the outside world but again you need to consider how safe where you live is for a cat. If you live on a busy road you may need to provide an enclosed area or cat-proof fencing in your garden, so that your cat can go out safely. If you are going to keep your cat permanently indoors you will need to consider even more carefully how you will provide for its welfare needs, particularly the need to exhibit normal behaviour.



Companionship: Most cats are solitary animals and do not seek out the companionship of other cats – if you have more than one cat think about how you are going to ensure that they each have their own separate territory and feel safe. Cats also vary in their desire for human contact and many owners become frustrated when their cat wants to spend more or less time in their company than they would like. Think about the time you have available to spend with your cat and how you will provide for those occasions when you are away. If you have other animals, including resident cats, you will need to make the introductions slowly and carefully to ensure that neither the kitten nor the other animal is frightened or injured in the process.

Temperament: When choosing your cat you will need to think about the role you expect her (or him) to fulfil. The majority of cats these days are kept as companions and therefore a suitable temperament, along with appropriate socialisation, are essential if your experience of cat ownership is to be a happy one. A cat's temperament is determined both by its genes and its early life experiences. With the exception of pedigree cats it is common for matings to be unplanned and therefore the father of a



litter of kittens is often unknown. The most influential time will be before the kitten leaves its mother, so seeing the kitten with its mother to assess her/his temperament and the conditions in which the kitten has been raised will be your best guide to future temperament.

This guide is predominantly concerned with kittens but you may also want to consider rehoming an adult cat. It is often easier to assess their personality, although it is important to be aware of the effect of being in a rescue or rehoming environment.

Many people underestimate the costs of cat ownership which are likely to be in the region of £17,000 over the lifetime of the cat, to provide food as well as associated costs such as boarding, grooming and veterinary fees.

Your local veterinary practice is your best ally in keeping your kitten or cat healthy. The team of vets and nurses has plenty of knowledge and experience and will be happy to offer you advice.



Choosing a kitten

Choosing a kitten

Kittens can be bought from many different sources; however, we would recommend that you don't rush into this decision. You want your kitten to be healthy and well-adjusted, so it is worth taking time to research the source of your kitten and to make sure that the breeder has done everything that they can to give your kitten a good start. Whenever possible we recommend that you see the kitten with its mother and litter mates and take the opportunity to ask about the environment in which they have been raised as well as the health care that mother and kitten have received such as worming and vaccination status.

Reputable breeders should encourage you to visit and see the kittens with their mother before making a choice. They will be willing to answer questions but will also want to satisfy themselves that their kitten will be going to a suitable home. The breeder should provide you with details of any health tests carried out on the parents, as well as the socialisation, feeding and preventive health care, such as vaccination

and worming, that the kitten has received. You may also receive details of registration and short term insurance. It is common for breeders not to let kittens go to new homes until they have completed a vaccination course at around 12 weeks.

Many kittens are the result of unplanned matings so it is common for kittens to be offered for sale from a range of sources. It is important to assess how the kittens have been reared and match this to your expectations. Kittens born in a farm environment with little human contact will probably make excellent mousers while those raised in a domestic environment and exposed to handling from a young age are more likely to make good pets. These kittens are likely to be available from 8 weeks of age but will probably not have had any vaccinations.

Rehoming and rescue centres will usually have much larger selections of juvenile and adult cats, but they also sometimes have litters of kittens. They may not know much about the history of the mother of these kittens and you will need to check on the level of health care (worming, flea control and vaccination) that they have received. Again it is useful to see the kittens with the mother.

While the internet can provide a convenient way of researching breeds and locating suitable kittens, we would advise against purchasing a kitten from a website without visiting to see the kitten in its home environment with its mother and littermates. While the offer to deliver your kitten to you may seem appealing remember that this could be hiding irresponsible breeding practices, or even illegal importation.



Choosing a healthy kitten

The parents

Whenever possible it is useful to see the kittens with their mother so that you can assess her health and temperament. If you buy a pedigree cat from a reputable cat breeder you may be able to meet, or at least be given the details of, the father. For certain pedigree cats it may also be appropriate to ask about the results of any genetic tests or health screening that has been carried out. Your veterinary practice should be able to provide you with up to date advice on the tests available.

The kitten

While it is not possible to guarantee the health of an individual kitten there are several things that you can do to maximise the chance that your own kitten will have the best start in life. Wherever possible have the kitten checked by a veterinary surgeon either before or immediately after purchase. A veterinary surgeon will be able to check that the kitten is developing normally, that there are no obvious abnormalities such as hernias, and check for abnormalities such as heart murmurs.

Do not choose a sickly looking kitten because you feel sorry for it, you will only be taking on problems. Some viral infections of cats can lead

to lifelong problems so taking on one of these kittens can lead to health and welfare problems for the kitten and high veterinary bills for you.

A healthy kitten should have:

- Eyes – clear and bright
- Ears – clean and free from discharges
- Mouth, gums and teeth – gums should be firm and pink, teeth should be white and undamaged
- Skin and coat – clean and healthy looking with no evidence of parasites or dandruff

You will also want to know what health care the kitten has received so far in terms of worming and vaccination.

Where a microchip has been inserted you will want to make sure that the kitten is correctly registered to you.



Preparing for your new kitten

It is worth spending some time preparing your home before your kitten arrives. It is also worth thinking about how you will adapt your household routine to accommodate the new kitten and how you will introduce your kitten to other household members (human and animal).

Remember you are now responsible for providing for the welfare needs of your new kitten.



A suitable environment

Before your kitten arrives you will need to make sure that your house and garden are safe and secure. Remember to make sure that anything toxic, dangerous or valuable is kept out of reach. Remember cats can climb and jump.

Your home will seem very strange to your new kitten, so give her time to get to know her new surroundings. Remember that although kittens love to play they need a quiet place to retreat to and to sleep.

For the first few days it is advisable to keep your kitten in one room with her carrier (to retreat into), her bed, food bowls, litter tray and toys. In the first few

days it is best to let the kitten come to you before stroking or picking her up. Cats thrive on routine so feed her at the same time and in the same place each day. Wait until she is confident in her surroundings before gradually introduce her to other rooms, after 'kitten proofing' them. Always supervise her when she is exploring, and if she is in danger of getting into mischief distract her by calling her or offering a toy.

Introductions to other family members (human and animal) should be gentle and supervised: remember to ensure that your kitten always has a safe place to retreat to. If you have a very busy household it may be worth investing in a kitten pen or crate to provide a safe place for your kitten.

Bedtime

Kittens need a quiet resting place, to retreat to and to sleep. You can buy cat beds, but a small cardboard box and an old towel, or piece of blanket, are cosy alternatives. Don't be disappointed if your kitten has her own ideas about where to sleep. Kittens are very active and need plenty of rest. Don't wake her up to play – she'll let you know when she is ready for action.



Litter training

By the time you bring your kitten home she will almost certainly be litter trained. The most you will probably need to do is stand her in the litter tray and gently stroke the litter with her paw, and she will do the rest. Remember to keep her litter tray in the same location, in a quiet place well away from her water and food bowls. Start with the kind of litter your kitten is used to, you can swap to a different kind later by gradually mixing in more of the new litter at each change. Cats are very fastidious, so keep the litter tray clean and if 'accidents' do happen, don't scold the kitten, as she won't understand what she's done. If you already have one or more cats in the house you will probably need to provide extra litter trays, in general you should have one more litter tray than you have cats so they do not have to share.

Going outside

Letting your kitten outside for the first time is always worrying as you are not sure how she will react and you will want to do everything you can to minimise the risks. Before your cat goes out she should have completed her initial vaccinations and be microchipped as a means of permanent identification. In many cases it is better to wait until your kitten has been neutered as entire animals are at greater risk of injury and infection from road accidents and fights. Many veterinary practices now carry out neutering from four months of age.

When you first let your kitten outside choose a quiet time when you are available to supervise it, and preferably shortly before feeding time to make it easier to get her to come back in again.



Preparing for your new kitten

A suitable diet

Feeding your kitten

Your kitten should be fully weaned well before she arrives. Always ask the breeder what they have been feeding the kitten; whenever possible stick to the same diet for the first few days. Wait until your kitten has settled in before making any changes to her diet in order to reduce the risk of stomach upsets. After a few days you can introduce a new food, gradually mixing an increasing proportion of it into the kitten's food over about a week.

The aim of feeding a kitten is to provide complete nutrition for healthy development and growth. Growing kittens have specific nutritional requirements, and the simplest way to fulfil them is to buy a good quality complete diet from a reputable manufacturer.

Most kittens and cats prefer to eat little and often throughout the day. While it is possible to leave some food out all the time, it is important to ensure that any uneaten food is thrown away before it starts to go off and to monitor the overall amount of food being eaten. Many cats will monitor their own food intake to maintain their bodyweight, but some cats will eat any food available (and go next door as well) and become obese. If there is more

than one cat it is important to make sure that they are all getting their fair share.

Never feed your kitten or cat with dog food or a vegetarian diet. Cats need more protein than dogs, and also taurine, which is found only in meat. Cats that do not get enough taurine run the risk of developing serious eye and heart problems.

If you choose to feed a home-prepared diet it is important to get advice from a veterinary nutritionist as it can be difficult to meet all the nutritional needs of a growing kitten. Remember that raw food can be a source of bacteria and other infections.

Water

Always have a bowl of fresh water available; this is particularly important if you are feeding a dry diet. It is better not to place this next to your kitten's food bowl as cats prefer to drink in a separate location from where they eat. Where there is more than one animal in the house it will be necessary to provide several different drinking bowls. Some cats will only drink free flowing water such as that from a tap or cat drinking fountain.

Although many people think that cats like milk, a significant number of cats are unable to digest the lactose (a kind of sugar) in milk and this can cause diarrhoea. If you want to treat her to a saucer of milk, you can buy special 'cat milk'.



Normal Behaviour

Socialisation

A young kitten is a fast and eager learner, particularly in the first weeks and months of life. This is the time when you should try to expose her to a wide variety of new experiences – new sights, sounds, smells and people. This will help ensure that she grows up feeling confident and secure.

Before you introduce your kitten to everyday sights and sounds around the house, like the radio, television, washing machine and vacuum cleaner, make sure that she has a bolt hole to escape to if she gets frightened.

When introducing your kitten to new people, let her approach the new person in her own time. Also let her meet other pets, but again make the introductions slowly, and never force the issue. Don't leave your kitten alone with another pet unless you are certain that the fur won't fly the moment your back is turned.

Exercise and play

Play is the key to kitten learning – and also provides exercise. When kittens are with their mother and siblings, boisterous play develops their physical and mental abilities, strengthens their muscles and increases their social skills. Now that the kitten lives with you, make time to play so that she can continue to develop her 'cat skills' – like stalking and pouncing.

Toys should be small and light enough to bat and carry around in her mouth – but not small enough to be swallowed. Pieces of rolled up paper or a table tennis ball are ideal and a large cardboard box, with several holes cut in the sides, makes a great place for kitten hide and seek. Check toys regularly and discard any that become damaged.

Cats scratch to mark their territory and to shed loose claw coverings. If you give your kitten a scratching post it should help to divert her away from the furniture.



Protection from pain, suffering, injury and disease

It is recommended that you register your kitten with a veterinary practice as soon as possible. While many cat owners select their veterinary practice based on its location, so as to minimise travel time, remember to ask about the facilities they provide such as separate waiting rooms or kennelling for cats. It is also becoming more common for veterinary practices to have shared rotas outside normal working hours or to use a dedicated out of hours service provider. Check what arrangements the practice makes outside normal working hours so that you are prepared should you need to use their services in an emergency.

Remember you will need to be able to transport your kitten safely so it is sensible to have a suitable cat carrier available at all times rather than wait until you need one.



Vaccinations

There are vaccinations available that will protect your kitten from a number of serious and highly infectious diseases. Vaccinations prime the cat's immune system so that if she comes into contact with the disease later, her body is better able to 'fight back'.

All kittens and cats should be vaccinated against:

- Feline influenza (cat flu)
- Feline infectious enteritis (FIE/panleukopenia)

Depending on the circumstances the following vaccinations may also be recommended:

- Feline leukaemia vaccine – this may be considered a core vaccine for all cats that come into contact with other cats (i.e. all cats which go outdoors)



- *Chlamydomphila felis* (chlamydia)
- Rabies – for cats travelling abroad or returning to the UK under the Pet Travel Scheme
- *Bordetella bronchiseptica*

These vaccinations are generally given at approximately nine weeks with a follow-up dose three to four weeks later. Don't allow your kitten to roam where other cats (who may not have been vaccinated) may have been until she has completed her first vaccination programme.

Most vaccinations will need a "booster" at one year of age but after that the frequency of booster vaccination will vary depending on the diseases covered and vaccines used – your veterinary surgeon will be able to advise you. Evidence of up to date vaccinations is usually required if your cat is going into a cattery. Even if your cat doesn't require a vaccination every year, visiting your veterinary practice will enable the vet to give your cat a thorough health check to spot any possible problems early and to discuss preventive health care for the year ahead.



Worms and worming

Kittens and cats can pick up worms, particularly if they catch and eat prey. Your kitten may have worms when you get her as some types of worms can be passed on in the mother's milk; some tapeworms can also be transmitted by fleas. Some worms can be passed to humans, especially young children.

The main types of worms are:

- **Roundworms** – look like tiny strands of fine spaghetti. They can be passed to the kitten in her mother's milk, so kittens should be wormed from three weeks old
- **Tapeworms** – made up of rice grain-like segments forming chains up to 50 cm long. One kind of tapeworm can be picked up if fleas are swallowed and another if cats eat prey
- **Lungworms** – can be picked up from small prey such as slugs, snails, mice or frogs. Some cats are symptomless; others may have a dry cough

If your kitten has a heavy infestation of worms you may see the following signs:

- Vomiting or diarrhoea (which may contain worms)
- Tapeworm segments around the cat's bottom
- Swollen tummy
- Weight loss
- Coughing (in the case of lungworms)

Remember that your kitten can have worms even if you do not see any sign of them or any evidence of them in the faeces. Regular preventive treatment is essential. It is usually recommended that kittens are wormed against roundworm monthly until they are six months of age. The frequency with which they should be treated for other types of worm will depend on a number of risk factors. Your local veterinary practice will be able to advise you on the safest and most appropriate products and their use.

Fleas and other external parasites

If untreated, external parasites can lead to local irritation and more general skin disease; some can also be passed to humans. So if you see creepy-crawlies, or if your kitten is itchy or scabby, seek veterinary advice.

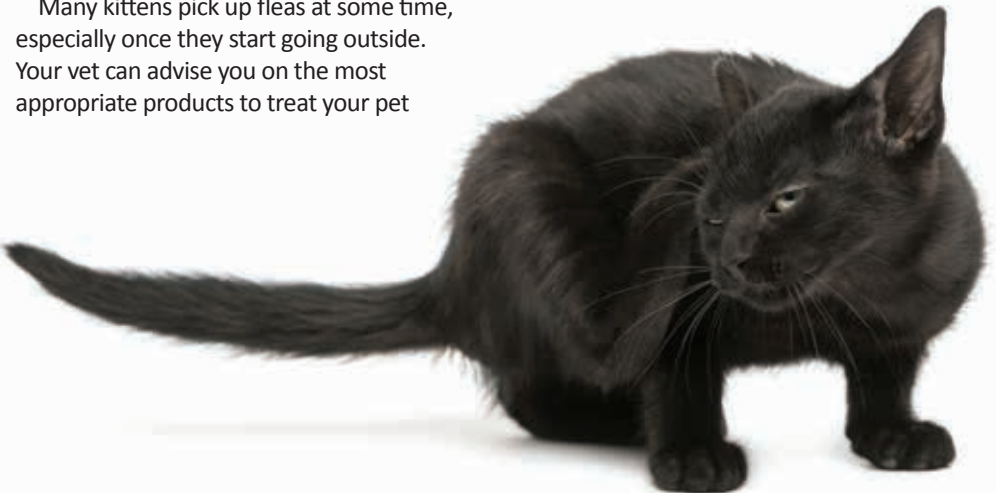
- **Fleas** – dark brown and able to jump! They can cause irritation which can be intense if the animal becomes allergic to their saliva. They can also transmit tapeworm. Severe infestations in small kittens can even cause anaemia
- **Mites** – burrow under the skin and can cause intense irritation but are usually invisible to the naked eye. In cats the lesions may be particularly severe around the ears and head
- **Ticks** – have a small head and large round body which can swell to the size of a pea. They cause little irritation but can transmit a number of diseases such as Lyme disease

Many kittens pick up fleas at some time, especially once they start going outside. Your vet can advise you on the most appropriate products to treat your pet

and your home (to kill eggs and larvae in the kittens' bedding, the carpets, and soft furnishings). While it may not be easy to see the fleas themselves you may be able to see flea droppings. Stand your kitten on a piece of white paper and comb its fur with a fine comb. Dab any dark specks falling on to the paper with a piece of dampened tissue – if any turn a reddish brown colour, they are flea droppings, which contain dried blood.

Many people choose to apply regular anti-flea treatment to their cats (e.g. once a month) to prevent fleas rather than waiting until there is an unpleasant flea problem to fix in their home.

Remember that some flea treatments that are safe for dogs are not safe for cats. Always read the instructions before using any product and follow the advice on application carefully. If in any doubt consult your veterinary practice.



Neutering

Unless you plan to breed from your cat, and can find good homes for all the kittens, then neutering is the responsible thing to do to prevent unwanted kittens.

Additional benefits of neutering cats include:

- Reduction of roaming and the numbers of cats injured or killed in road traffic accidents
- Reduction in fighting which can lead to bite abscesses and the spread of infections such as feline leukaemia virus
- Elimination of the risks of pregnancy and its complications as well as diseases of the reproductive organs
- Significantly reducing the risks of mammary tumours
- Reducing the strong odour of urine in unneutered cats and the risk of urine spraying



The procedure in male cats is called castration and involves removing the testicles, which produce sperm and the male hormone, testosterone. It is a straightforward operation performed under general anaesthetic.

The operation for female cats is called spaying and involves removal of the ovaries and usually the uterus (womb) as well. Many practices now offer spaying before your cat reaches puberty, which usually occurs around six months but can be earlier. It is now common practice to carry out neutering from four months of age to reduce the number of unwanted kittens.



Pet insurance

You may want to consider taking out pet insurance so that you won't need to worry about vet's bills if your kitten has an accident or becomes ill. Although routine procedures such as vaccination, teeth cleaning and neutering, and preventive measures such as worming or flea treatments, are not covered by insurance, insurance can provide peace of mind by covering unexpected veterinary fees.

Shop around when you buy a policy, as they vary and different levels of cover are available. More expensive policies generally provide increased cover, and some cover a wider variety of treatments such as referral for behavioural problems and complementary therapies such as

acupuncture. Check on the exclusion clauses before buying an insurance policy. Remember that conditions that existed before taking out the policy will not be covered.

If your cat develops a long-term health condition, e.g. kidney problems, you will find that some insurance companies will pay for the first year, but in the future you may not be able to claim for that condition, while other companies will continue paying (up to a maximum amount each year).

Discounts

Some insurance companies offer discounts if:

- You insure two or more pets for them
- You pay an annual rather than monthly premium
- You agree to pay a proportion of each vet bill
- Your kitten is non-pedigree
- You live in certain postcode areas



Grooming

Establish a grooming routine as soon as your kitten has settled in. Grooming not only gives you the opportunity to remove dead hairs from the coat, but also reinforces the bond between you and provides the perfect opportunity to check your kitten for any abnormalities. Grooming sessions also give you the chance to check for fleas and ticks and to examine your kitten's coat, paws, eyes, ears and mouth for anything that might require a trip to the vet.

Short-haired kittens only need grooming once or twice a week, but long-haired breeds need at least 15 minutes every day. Until your kitten is used to being groomed, keep sessions short, and stand it on a folded towel to help it feel secure while you brush it.

Hairballs

When cats groom themselves they swallow loose hairs which can form hairballs in their stomach or intestines. These are uncomfortable and have to be coughed up or passed in the litter tray. Regular grooming removes loose hair and helps prevent hairballs forming.

Claws

Outdoor cats generally keep their nails from becoming

overgrown by scratching on trees and fence posts. Indoor cats (and your furniture) may benefit from the provision of designated scratching posts or pads. In older cats, or cats who are unable to carry out normal scratching, the claws may become overgrown and may need clipping to prevent them becoming caught, or in extreme cases, growing round into the pad. This may be a particular problem as cats get older. Your vet or vet nurse will do it for you, or show you how to do it safely.

Dental care

A kitten's baby teeth come through when it is about three to four weeks old and its adult teeth start to erupt at around four months. Cats can be prone to dental lesions especially along the gum line; these can be very painful, so good dental care is important. If you inspect your cat's mouth

regularly you will be able to pick up and get treatment for problems at an early stage. Look for teeth that are dark, loose or chipped and check that the gums are not bleeding, puffy or discoloured. If your cat has difficulty eating it may have a tooth or gum problem, so make an appointment with the vet, who can check whether it needs a 'scale and polish', or any other treatment.

If your kitten will co-operate, it's worth starting a tooth cleaning regime at home to dislodge



food particles and help prevent a build-up of tartar on the teeth. Tartar can lead to dental decay and gum disease. Always use specially formulated cat toothpaste, which often comes with a small toothbrush you slip over your finger. Never use human toothpastes as these are designed to foam, and cats can't 'rinse and spit'. Try to clean your kitten's teeth several times a week to help keep plaque to a minimum. Dried cat foods help to keep your cat's teeth clean. There are special dried foods available that are particularly good at cleaning tartar off the teeth. Ask your vet which diet would most suit your kitten.

Travelling with your cat

The majority of cats and kittens do not travel often, unless it is to the vet or the cattery, so they rarely come to see it as a positive experience. Try to get your kitten used to the cat carrier before she has to travel and include some soft bedding. Remember that if you are intending to take your cat abroad you will need to comply with the Pet Travel Regulations and your cat will need to be microchipped, vaccinated against rabies and issued with a pet passport.



Microchipping

If your kitten or cat goes outside – and even indoor cats can escape – it should have some form of identification. If your kitten can be identified it is much more likely to be returned to you if it gets lost. A microchip is a reliable and permanent form of identification. A tiny electronic device – the size of a grain of rice – is injected under the loose skin at the back of the neck. Each chip has a unique number that is stored on a central computer database with your name, address and contact telephone number. If your pet is found, its chip can be read with a hand-held scanner and checked against the database. Remember if you move house you will need to inform the microchipping database.

You can also use a collar and engraved metal identity disk, or barrel containing a piece of paper with your name and address, so your kitten can be identified. Be sure to buy a collar with a 'quick release' catch so that your cat can escape if it becomes snagged or caught.

Cats are generally subject to fewer legal controls than dogs.



Animal Welfare

The Animal Welfare Act 2006 (which applies in England and Wales), the Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006 and the Welfare of Animals (Northern Ireland) Act 2011 contain provisions to safeguard the welfare of animals.



Anyone found mistreating a cat (or other animal) and causing unnecessary suffering to the animal can be prosecuted and if convicted may be fined or jailed. They can also be disqualified from keeping an animal for a period of time.

Owners are also required to ensure that their animal's welfare needs are met. These include the need:

- For a suitable environment (place to live)
- For a suitable diet
- To exhibit normal behaviour patterns
- To be housed with or apart from other animals (if applicable)
- To be protected from pain, suffering, injury and disease

Other sources of information/links

- PetSavers: www.petsavers.org.uk
- British Small Animal Veterinary Association: www.bsava.com
- RCVS – Findavet: findavet.rcvs.org.uk
- The Governing Council of the Cat Fancy: www.gccfcats.org
- International Cat Care (formerly Feline Advisory Bureau): www.icatcare.org
- Cats Protection: www.cats.org.uk
- World Small Animal Veterinary Association owner vaccination guidelines for dogs and cats: www.wsava.org/guidelines/vaccination-guidelines
- European Scientific Counsel Companion Animal Parasites: www.escapuk.org.uk
- Defra: www.defra.gov.uk



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PetSavers is dedicated to improving the health of the nation's pets. We do this by funding clinical research projects and Master's degrees by research.

Clinical research projects give us a better understanding of pets' illnesses. This leads to improved diagnosis and treatment so that pets can have longer and healthier lives.

A Master's degree by research develops the skills of vets so they can apply the results of the research and their expertise to pets as soon as possible.

No experimental animals are used in PetSavers studies.

In the past 40 years PetSavers has given over £2 million towards these goals. Over this time the need for this funding has become even greater as other sources have dried up. We rely on the support of vets, nurses and pet owners.

By helping PetSavers, you can make sure that our knowledge of small animal medicine and surgery is improved. Please help us to continue funding these important research projects.

- Take part in a running event or physical challenge
- Become a PetSaver by making a regular donation
- Get involved in one of our regional or national events
- Donate online
- Nominate PetSavers as a beneficiary in your Will
- Organise your own fundraising event
- Corporate support
- Volunteer for PetSavers

Go to our 'Support us' page on our website:

www.petsavers.org.uk



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