

Welcome to Darwin Veterinary Centre's second newsletter. We were delighted that so many of you enjoyed the inaugural issue in January, that we've decided to make all back-issues permanently available on the practice webpage, and to post new editions on our Facebook page – so you need never miss an issue! We've really enjoyed hearing your thoughts and feedback from Issue 1, so please keep them coming, and don't hesitate to contact Sonya if you have any ideas for subjects you'd like us to cover. In this issue we've news of a prestigious accreditation which the practice has been awarded, information about pet passports, lots of ideas for ensuring your home is as cat-friendly as it can be, as well as seasonal advice for dog, rabbit and chicken owners – we hope you enjoy it!

## Pet Passports



If you love your holidays but always feel sad at the prospect of leaving behind your four-legged friend, then a pet passport is for you! Getting your pet a passport is now a simple process, and with recent relaxation of the Pet Travel Scheme (PETS) rules, it isn't too late to travel with your pet this Summer.

### So what is involved?

Your pet needs to be permanently identifiable, which in practice means that he or she will need to have a microchip. If your pet is already chipped, then you are already half way there! If not, the chip can be quickly and painlessly inserted in a routine appointment, and will identify your pet for the rest of their lives.



The next step is to have your pet vaccinated against rabies. The UK has been rabies-free since 1922, and it is in all our interests to keep it that way. We're frequently asked by owners if their pet will have any side-effects from the vaccination, and we're pleased to say the answer is an emphatic 'no'.

Once your pet has been vaccinated, a PETS Passport can be issued straight away, as DEFRA no longer requires blood testing to be performed. Your pet is then free to travel after 21 days have elapsed from the time of rabies vaccination.

For more information, visit [defra.gov.uk](http://defra.gov.uk), or speak to any of our staff.

Bon voyage!



## Gold-Standard Cat Friendly Clinic

We're delighted to announce that we have just received a tremendous accolade! At the end of March, the practice was awarded the 'Gold' Cat Friendly Clinic Accreditation by the ISFM, and became only the 39th practice in the whole of the UK to receive this prestigious award.

Trips to the vet can be quite stressful for cats, with most becoming agitated when they see other cats, or when they see or smell the presence of an unknown dog. The Cat Friendly Clinic scheme was launched by the ISFM (International Society of Feline Medicine) two years ago, with the aim of encouraging veterinary clinics to make cats' visits to the vets much less stressful, and to cater for cats more specifically within the clinic. This rigorous accreditation scheme has an extensive list of requirements which each clinic has to meet when aiming to gain either the silver or gold accreditation.

### So what does this accreditation mean for your cat?

Well, at our practice all cats are cared for in a dedicated cattery, away from the sight, sound and smell of other species, particularly dogs. The cages are much larger than those typically seen at other practices – we can literally fit a couple of nurses in them! Having large cages allows your cat to move around freely, exhibit normal behaviour, and allows you to bring any of your cat's favourite beds, toys or litter trays from home, the scent of which can be very reassuring for a sick animal. Our hospitalisation cages also house a 'cat fort', which cats can use to either hide away in or to perch on, to feel secure during their stay.



We also run a cat-only clinic twice a week, currently on part of Wednesday afternoons and Saturday mornings. As most cats are highly stressed by nearby dogs, these clinics make your cat's visit to the surgery as peaceful as possible, and permit us a more thorough examination of your pet. Outside these clinic times, we have a quiet area for cats to wait in, away from dogs and the sight of other cats. Of course, we love seeing our canine patients too, and as many of them are either scared or over excited by the presence of cats, we think these clinics will be of benefit to dogs and their owners too!



Senior Registered Veterinary Nurse Terri Biddle, who will be well known to many of you, is our practice's 'Cat Advocate'. Terri champions cats, and is responsible for ensuring that every cat's stay in our practice is as stress-free as possible, and that every cat receives love and cuddles whilst with us. Terry is also here to answer any questions that you may have about the care of your cat, and to ensure that all hospitalised cats are comfortable, cosy and as calm as can be. Terri is always happy to show you behind the scenes at the practice, in particular, our state of the art dedicated cattery.

Anyone who loves cats knows that they are not always the easiest animals to medicate, so we pay particular attention to prescribing medications which are easier to give to cats. As part of our accreditation, we also had to demonstrate that we had a wide range of specialist and dedicated cat equipment, and that all staff adhere to the gold standard of AAEP-ISFM feline-friendly handling.

We are really proud of the changes that we have made to the practice during the past year, and hope that the special environment which we have created, along with our 15 minute consultations, will allow your cat to relax, making them much more amenable to treatment. We hope you will agree, and that this makes your visit to the vet much less stressful too!

For further information on any of the subjects contained in this newsletter, please contact the practice:  
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**Your cat's happiness is greatly influenced by how you behave and the home that you live in. As cats are a territorial species, to them, the environment is everything! We all know that cats need food, shelter and love, but it is the quality and quantity of each that is important, and taking a little time to get each element right can have a huge impact on your cat's life.**

It may sound obvious, but cats are not small humans! Unlike us, they are 'solitary survivors', meaning that they may enjoy social contact on their own terms, but don't actually need it. This can be difficult for us humans to accept in our much-loved pet. Cats are also 'control freaks', and the perception that they have control over their physical environment and social encounters is vitally important to them. Without control they will be stressed, and exhibit one of two patterns of stress behaviour: **Passive Responder Cats** – these are cats who when stressed, become less active, physically and socially withdrawn, sleep more and may just stare when confronted with inter-cat tension, or avoid it all together. It is really easy to overlook these symptoms, and just consider these cats as laid back or even lazy. The second type of stress behaviour is seen in **Active Responder Cats** and is more easily recognised. These cats may mark their territory (scratching, urinating, defaecating etc), are active in inter-cat tensions, i.e. hissing, and vocalise more.



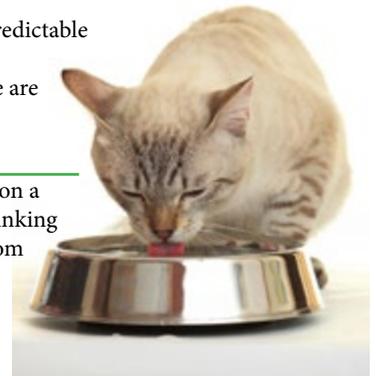
In a multi-cat household it is really important to know how many 'social groups' of cats are in your home, as cats will share amenities such as food and water, with other cats in their social group, but not with those outside it. This frequently means that cats are forced into sharing amenities, a situation that they find very stressful. So how do you know how many social groups exist within your home? Well it's not as difficult as you might think. Cats in the same social group will indulge in mutual grooming and rubbing, known as 'Allo-grooming' and 'Allo-rubbing', and will frequently sleep cuddled up together.

So that's some of the theory, but what does it actually mean in practice? Well, below we have outlined a practical guide to making your home as cat friendly as possible.

## Food

Cats generally prefer scratch-resistant bowls (ceramic, stainless-steel) rather than plastic ones, which give off a slight odour. However, it's best to avoid steel bowls if your cat wears a collar, as the constant click of a disk or bell against metal can be off-putting. Whichever type of bowl you choose, it should be situated in a quiet place, away from cat flaps, water bowls, and litter trays, and there should always be one more bowl than the number of cats in the household.

Cats would naturally spend up to six hours a day foraging, stalking, catching and consuming prey. Therefore the predictable availability of food, twice a day in a bowl in the kitchen, does not represent any kind of challenge! Making your cat forage for food, by hiding dry kibble around your home, or using a food ball, can be much more stimulating. There are now lots of food toys on the market, which may really intrigue your cat and challenge him or her.



## Water

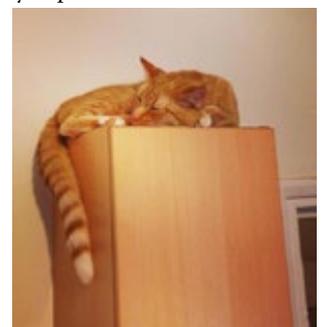
The presence of water near food can actually deter some cats from drinking sufficient fluid, particularly if they are on a dry diet, as cats naturally hunt for food and water on separate occasions. Most cats don't like the fluoride in our drinking water, and will be happier offered cooled boiled water, filtered tap water or rain water. Many cats prefer to drink from running water, so a leaky tap or pet drinking fountain may be ideal.

Water taint can be a big issue with plastic bowls, so as with food, opt for ceramic or steel bowls where possible. Ideally the bowl should be wide enough to permit the cat to drink without its whiskers touching the sides, and filled to the brim, as research suggests that cats like to be able to see the water surface even whilst they drink.



## Beds

Cats spend the majority of their time asleep so it makes sense to focus on what provision you are making for your cat's rest and relaxation. Beds don't need to be expensive, just warm, secure and with a familiar scent. They should be washable, but don't clean them too frequently, as cats gravitate towards familiar scents. If you provide a radiator hammock, ensure the radiator is on a low setting! Ideally your cats should have a bed in both a quiet, and a communal area; beds in raised positions are always popular. Your bed is potentially the ultimate delight for your cat – with the warmth of a duvet and a strong smell of you! However, it can also be a place of conflict if you have a multi-cat household, as individuals compete for the best spot.



## High Resting Places

Cats are natural climbers and it is important for your cat to be able to rest and observe its surroundings from high places. It's hard to beat a staircase, but if you live in a single storey house, then you will need to give more thought to raised resting places. Tall scratching posts with modular units and hidey-holes are widely available, but free-standing cupboards and wardrobes can be ideal. Shelves can be constructed specifically for your cat's use – ensure they have a non-slip surface, as wooden shelves tend to be slippery, and make sure they are ornament-free!

## Private places

For cats, taking time out from social demands is an essential part of daily life, so secret hideaways are an important facility. Spaces under the bed, inside cupboards or wardrobes, or behind the sofa, make ideal private places. Your cat should **never** be disturbed whilst using a private area, unless you believe that it may be unwell.

## Scratching posts

Cats need to scratch to maintain their claws and mark their territory, and if a convenient scratch post to your cat's liking is not available, they will scratch your furniture instead! When choosing a scratching post, go for one that is as tall as possible, to allow your cat to scratch vertically at full stretch. Panels attached to walls can be used if space is at a premium, or even carpet tiles wrapped around the newel post of your stairs.

## Litter trays

Litter trays may be a necessary evil, but the positioning of them is important. They should be located in a discreet corner, away from food and water, full-length windows, external doors and cat flaps, and busy thoroughfares. The last thing your cat wants is to be in visual contact with another cat whilst using the litter tray. As with food and water bowls, you should always have one more litter tray than the number of cats in your household. Polythene tray liners may be unpleasant to your cat, as their nails can become caught, and litter deodorants can introduce a strong alien smell into the litter tray – both are best avoided. Some cats like open litter trays, whilst others prefer a closed in box; before investing in the latter, try experimenting with an up-turned cardboard box over your cat's open tray. You can gradually cut away one, then both ends, to see which your cat prefers. If you have a multi-cat household with more than one social grouping, removing the top of the box will prevent another cat sitting on top, ready to ambush the toileting cat as it emerges.

It's also important to give some consideration to the noise level your cat may experience when using its litter tray. Under the stairs may be out of the way as far as humans are concerned, but if children are noisily running up and down the stairs regularly, this isn't going to encourage your cat to use the tray. Similarly, if a tray is placed near a tumble drier, dish-washer or noisy boiler, you may find your cat opts to toilet elsewhere.

## Cat Flaps

Cat flaps were invented for human convenience, and can be a huge source of anxiety for some cats. Cats often see the flap as a vulnerable point in the defences of their home, where any invader could potentially gain access. Transparent flaps allow invaders to look into your cat's home territory, and can be a huge cause of concern. Flaps which work only for your cat (via a collar or their identichip, such as SureFlap) are now readily available and can make a tremendous difference to the life of a nervous cat. Alternatively, if your cat has restricted access outside, or only ventures out in your presence, it may be preferable to dispense with the cat flap altogether.



If you have a cat flap which opens onto an open drive or patio, consider placing objects such as plant containers close by, to provide shelter for your cat as he or she emerges into their outer territory. This can help prevent your cat from being ambushed by other cats who may be using the area immediately outside your home.

## Windows

Windows are a significant viewing point for the great outdoors but, contrary to most people's understanding, cats usually prefer smaller windows in darker rooms if given the choice, as these offer camouflage and a degree of protection. If you have full-length glass doors or windows, consider positioning something in front of them, behind which your cat can hide. Alternatively, glass etch film (available from most DIY stores) can be used to temporarily obscure the lower portion of patio doors etc.

Fresh air coming into your house will carry challenging and interesting smells from outside and be a great focus of attention for a bored house cat.



## Social Contact

It is best to allow your cat to dictate the level of interaction it has with the humans in the house, and to allow them to initiate that contact. Owners that are constantly approaching their cats for petting can cause irritation, or even distress. A recent study in Zurich showed that owners who allowed their cat to approach them for social contact, rather than the other way around, got to enjoy a longer time with their pet. Predatory play, grooming and verbal communication represents important social contact between owner and cat, and is often better received than 'kissing and cuddling'. Socialising kittens to accept human-style handling from a young age, should permit your cat to be picked up with its four feet off the ground (a very unnatural state for a cat), during adult life.

It's also appropriate to consider the stress caused by cat-cat interaction, as well as that caused by other species, such as dogs. Cats will accept other cats more readily if they are siblings, or when introduced at a young age. Cats also integrate better with dogs whilst still young. After that time, restricting the number of cats within a household to a socially compatible level is much more beneficial. Despite what we may want as humans, sadly there really is nothing to suggest that a new cat will integrate into an existing cat home, even with the best organisation and resources.



## Toys

Every cat is an individual but most prefer toys and games which mimic the natural hunting experience. Toys which move randomly are great, as are those with fur and feathers, and those impregnated with catnip. All toys should be stored away and brought out from time to time to maintain their novelty. As with beds, toys don't need to be expensive, ping-pong balls and rolled up aluminium foil can tempt most cats into playing.

It's good for house-cats to be exposed to new things every now and then, so that they don't find new experiences or situations stressful. New items can be brought into the home on a regular basis to challenge your cat's sense of smell and desire to investigate e.g., sticks, stones, plants, cardboard boxes, or paper bags all make great items for your cat to explore.

Cats have extremely sensitive hearing, so beware playing loud music which may cause them distress.



## Television

No we've not gone mad, some cats really enjoy television! A recent study found that cats' attention to television was at its greatest when small prey animals or other cats in friendly situations were shown. Dedicated cat DVDs have now been produced that put together a sequence of all the sights and sounds that attract cats, and these can be used to stimulate your cat whilst you are out! Of course, with access to a computer and YouTube, you could even make your own!

**The ways that your home can be enriched for your cat are many and varied, and limited only by your imagination! A good understanding of cats' basic needs should ensure that we all have happy, healthy and relaxed feline friends.**



## Rabbiting On...

Rabbits are highly sociable and friendly creatures, so it is unsurprising that these naturally intelligent and inquisitive herbivores have become increasingly popular pets over the last few years.



Although they can be relatively low maintenance pets, we must not forget that in order to stay healthy they require annual trips to the vets just like cats and dogs! They also have a multitude of common preventable ailments of which any good bunny owner should be aware.

Rabbits require yearly vaccination against two potentially fatal diseases, viral haemorrhagic disease (VHD) and myxomatosis. VHD causes a variety of symptoms including fever, depression, anorexia and diarrhoea with some individuals found dead within just 12 hours. Myxomatosis is particularly common in the Biggin Hill area, with symptoms including skin lesions, anorexia, lip, nose, eye and genital swellings, and is often fatal even with intensive veterinary treatment.

Annual health checks are also a great time to discuss feeding and general care of your rabbit, as well as looking for early signs of brewing problems such as dental disease.

Poor diet is something we come across time and time again, and can be the cause of a multitude of health problems in rabbits (e.g. dental disease, digestion problems, bladder stones, blocked tear ducts) so it is worth getting it right from the start! Their daily diet should consist of 70-80% good quality hay, with pellets and muesli not exceeding an egg cup full per day for a medium-sized rabbit. This can be supplemented with small amounts of vegetables such as curly kale, cabbage and broccoli stumps.

Summer is fast approaching and can be a particularly challenging time for rabbits, with flystrike, heatstroke and sunburn being some of the more common problems we see in the warmer months. Rabbits should always have a cool, well ventilated area where they can rest out of the sun. They should also be kept clean and free from urine staining and faeces which will attract flies, and products such as 'Rear Guard' can be used to help protect against fly strike. Please refer to our website at [darwinvets.com/rabbits](http://darwinvets.com/rabbits) for more information.



Did you know that wherever dogs meet, such as out on walks, training classes, and of course in boarding kennels, they run the risk of picking up Kennel Cough? This is a highly infectious disease, rapidly causing symptoms of severe whooping-like coughing, sore throats, loss of appetite and a high temperature. In the worse cases, dogs may cough for weeks and some may get more serious complications such as pneumonia. Even in young healthy dogs it can lead to weeks of coughing.

The condition is caused by a mixture of viruses and a bacterium – *Bordetella Bronchiseptica*. Although your pet's annual booster vaccinations provide protection against the viral components of the cough, only intra-nasal vaccine drops can offer protection against *Bordetella*. We strongly recommend that dogs are vaccinated before staying in a boarding kennels and at other times when the disease is prevalent.

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## Darwin Court Circular

### Alice to sit nursing Finals

After nearly 4 years of training and 2 years at college, trainee veterinary nurse Alice Fleet-Newman will be sitting her final exams this Summer. If all goes well, and we're sure that it will, she will qualify as a registered Veterinary Nurse in the Autumn, and receive her prestigious, and hard-earned pin badge at a ceremony in London. Once Alice qualifies, she will be entitled to wear the dark green uniform worn by our other, qualified, veterinary nurses. We'd all like to wish Alice every success in her finals – and look forward to seeing her in 'dark green'!



## Chickens

Most of us are aware that our pets need regular worming, and poultry are no exception. Keeping chickens in a fixed area, as so many of us do, has the disadvantage that the birds continually contaminate the area with droppings, and then reinfest themselves with worm eggs as they peck around and feed. Chickens should be wormed 2-4 times a year to prevent a build up of worms in their digestive systems, which can cause health problems such as anaemia (seen as pale comb and wattle colour), respiratory disease, anorexia, weight loss and lameness.

There are many widely available products that claim to worm chickens, but sadly most of them don't stand up to scientific analysis. We recommend Flubenvet for routine worming. This product comes as a powder, and needs to be mixed into the chicken's feed at a set dose, but has the advantage of having no egg withdrawal time. It is a medicine, and so its use does need to be recorded in your 'Poultry Medicine Book' (if you don't have one you can download it free from our web page [darwinvets.com/poultry/poultry-medicine-book](http://darwinvets.com/poultry/poultry-medicine-book)).

Practicing good husbandry techniques is also really important in reducing the worm burden in your hens, and there's plenty that you can do. Rotating birds onto a new grazing area regularly will not only ensure your birds get new grass, but will ensure worm eggs on the ground die off before your birds next feed there. Keeping the grass mowed short allows the ultra-violet light from the sun to reach droppings and will kill off worm eggs. Another useful way to manage worms is to add cider vinegar at a rate of 10ml to every 500ml water, and using this mixture as your birds' drinking water one week in every six, will regularly alter the pH (acidity) of your birds' gut, and help prevent worms colonizing it.

