

## SUPPORTING YOUR CATS AND MANAGING BEHAVIOURS DURING CORONAVIRUS



Cats are sticklers for habit and for many, a change in their routine can induce stress. Due to the restrictions put in place to protect us from the Coronavirus, most people are at home, or have different working hours. The Vetoquinol team have partnered with Clinical Animal Behaviourist Rosie Bescoby, who shares some tips to help during the new situation we find ourselves in.



### IDENTIFYING SIGNS OF STRESS IN CATS

It can be challenging for us to identify signs of stress in cats – they can be very subtle in their body language. Signs include withdrawal from social interaction, reduced desire to play, spending more time outside (for cats with access to outdoors) or escaping (for indoor cats), overgrooming or lack of grooming, excessive vocalisation, changes in eating or sleeping patterns, scratching in new locations or increased frequency of scratching behaviour in the home.

Flattening, skulking, sudden grooming, dilated pupils, and staring are also indicators that a cat is feeling vulnerable. Signs of overt conflict include stalking, hissing, raised fur, swatting and fighting. Silent conflict may involve the threatened cat spending more time away from the family or attempts to interact with family members only when the perceived threat is not present.



### OTHER SYMPTOMS OF STRESS

Urine spraying is a marking behaviour used by cats when they perceive a threat in their environment. Changes to your cats urination may also be linked to stress, but can also be a sign of other problems, some of which can be an emergency so always contact your vet if you notice any change in your cats urination. Pain and discomfort due to illness or other conditions will increase stress due to both anticipation of pain and lowering thresholds for coping with additional stressors (we're all less tolerant of daily challenges if we are suffering physically).

Your vet should always be the first port of call with regards to any behavioural problem. They will be able to consider potential medical causes. You can also request a referral to a Clinical Animal Behaviourist who will be able to work remotely with you through the current lockdown period (see [www.apbc.org.uk](http://www.apbc.org.uk)).

### TIPS FOR HELPING CATS WITH THE CHANGES RELATED TO ISOLATION

#### HIDING AND HIGH PERCHES

The cat's home should enable and encourage hiding behaviour. Hiding places at both ground-level and elevated levels can be provided. Domestic cats are classed as both a predator and a prey species, and they naturally climb for observation and safety. High hiding places enable cats to better survey the environment for potential intruders and other threats (e.g. children, dogs, loud noises, other cats in the household).



## PREDICTABLE ROUTINE & INTERACTIONS

If your cat is usually an outdoor cat, continue providing them with access to the outdoors. An environment that ensures a reasonable level of consistency and predictability over which the cat perceives it has control, will reduce potential for stress. For example, ensure that cats have the choice about whether to approach people and other animals – this will allow them to choose the type of interaction they feel comfortable with. Some cats may prefer to be stroked whereas others may prefer play interactions with their owners. Attempts to befriend or handle a cat without their consent can cause stress – this is particularly relevant to households with young children.



### PLAY

Play behaviour is essential for reducing stress - providing an outlet for natural predatory behaviour and helping to reduce pestering behaviour at times you need to get things done! Examples of appropriate toys include wand toys, balls inside a box, catnip-filled toys and laser pointer games (that must always end with a physical item the cat can successfully catch).

### FEEDING

Feeding cats from bowls removes any opportunity for them to express their natural predatory instincts, which takes up about 70% of a wild-living cat's time and energy reserve. Offering food in puzzle toys specifically designed to release dry food when physically manipulated by cats, or stuffing hollow food toys with wet food, require cats to work to remove the contents.

## REDUCING OTHER POTENTIAL FOR STRESS IN THE ENVIRONMENT

Locating littertrays in quiet areas protected from interruption by people or other animals will reduce potential for stress associated with toileting behaviour. Instead of moving a littertrays, always start off by adding a new one in a quieter location and assessing location preference. Littertrays should also be located away from food and water locations – cats prefer to eat and drink away from where they go to the toilet.

## INDOOR CATS

An enriched environment allows cats to express their natural behaviours, including scratching and chewing. Scratching behaviour maintains claw health and is a form of visual and pheromonal marking. Cats tend to scratch more often when stretching after periods of rest or sleep. Therefore, scratching posts should be placed in proximity to preferred resting places. Undesirable chewing can be avoided by offering a variety of cat-safe plants and grasses such as catnip, catmint, oat grass and rye grass.

## LIFE CAN BE STRESSFUL FOR PETS

Zylkene is a calming supplement that contains a natural ingredient derived from a protein in milk called casein that has clinically proven calming properties to help relax cats and dogs. It is a peptide (protein) molecule, well known to promote the relaxation of new-borns after breastfeeding.

Zylkene has become a valuable support for veterinary surgeons, behaviourists, nurses and pet owners for use in helping pets cope when facing unusual and unpredictable situations or before occasions such as a change in their normal environment.



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