

Detecting Illness in Your Cat

Cats can't tell us where or when it hurts. In fact, many animals will try to mask pain or illness. That's why it is extremely important that you get to know your cat's regular habits and behaviors. Any deviation from his or her normal behavior could indicate a problem with his or her health. Some symptoms and behaviors are obvious: diarrhea, vomiting, coughing, sneezing, runny nose or eyes, and trouble using the litter box. There are other, more subtle, physical and behavioral signs that might indicate a trip to the vet is in order. Take note if your cat does any of the following:

- Misses more than one meal
- Shows a sudden change in eating habits
- Stops using the litter box
- Develops puffiness or a lump under the skin
- Hides for more than a day
- Becomes suddenly short-tempered or intolerant of attention
- Shakes his head frequently
- Changes his routine or loses interest in his favorite games
- Stops grooming

Cats: Common Health Problems

Be on the lookout for these common health problems in your cat:

Fleas. Fleas can easily invade your home, particularly if you have a dog or if you let your cat outside. Fleas can cause such health problems in cats as anemia, allergies, skin infections and tapeworms. There is a vast array of flea-fighting products that are highly effective and safe; consult your veterinarian for advice on products to use and an ongoing flea control plan. Avoid using pesticides and over-the-counter flea remedies—they are unnecessary given today's arsenal of safer, veterinarian-prescribed products—and never use flea products on your cat that are intended for use on dogs because such products can be fatal to your cat. Flea collars are not effective against fleas and can even irritate your cat's skin.

Tapeworms. These internal parasites are picked up by ingesting rodents or raw meat or fish, or from adult fleas that are carriers. Tapeworms are passed through the cat's feces. Often you can spot tapeworm segments in your cat's stool or under her tail—they look like small grains of rice. If you see signs of tapeworms, bring a fecal sample to your veterinarian to get worming medication for your cat. You may need to start a flea control program at the same time. Never use over-the-counter worming products. These are usually ineffective and can cause unwanted side effects in your cat.

Coccidia. These internal parasites are picked up from the infected feces of other animals. Symptoms can be nonexistent or quite serious; they include mild to severe diarrhea, weakness, depression, loss of appetite and weight loss. Your veterinarian will need a fresh fecal sample to diagnose the problem and prescribe medication for these parasites.

Roundworms, hookworms, and whipworms. These internal parasites cause symptoms such as vomiting, diarrhea, a pot belly and a dull coat. The symptoms become more serious and debilitating if your cat's condition is left untreated. Your veterinarian can diagnose these parasites by examining a fecal sample under a microscope. The various treatments may involve several doses before these parasites are eliminated.

Ear mites. If you spot a dark, waxy buildup in your cat's ears, he may have ear mites, which are microscopic parasites. These crab-like creatures itch like crazy, and in a futile attempt to scratch that itch, cats will shake their heads or paw at their ears, sometimes scratching them raw. Left untreated, ear mites can cause deafness. Prescription ear treatments are available to eliminate ear mites. Let your veterinarian know if you have more than one pet, because the ear mites will simply move to the next untreated animal.

Toxoplasma gondii. This small parasite may be of concern to humans as well as cats, especially people with compromised immune systems. Toxoplasmosis has traditionally been a reason for pregnant women to think they must give up their pet, but this is not necessary. Safe handling of food and water and precautions when cleaning the litter box can easily prevent the transmission of this parasite; that's why it's best to assign someone else the responsibility for cleaning the litter box. The majority of toxoplasmosis infections in humans have been the result of ingesting raw or undercooked meat. Cats become infested with this parasite through eating raw prey, but only pass contagious feces for approximately two weeks (and the feces themselves are only infective after 24 hours have passed). To prevent infection, keep your cat safely confined and feed him commercial cat food.

Urinary problems. With all cats, and especially males, be alert for any signs of painful urination, straining to urinate or blood in the urine. These symptoms can indicate a condition that is very serious. If a cat becomes "blocked" (unable to urinate), he could die within hours. If any of these signs appear, immediate veterinary attention is necessary. As a preventive measure, talk to your veterinarian about your cat's diet and other factors that relate to urinary problems.