



Cat Vet Questions

Melissa Catt BVSc
Paddington Cat Hospital

Melissa graduated from the University of Sydney in 1990. She worked in a private small animal practice in Adelaide for two years and then in England for a further two years. Melissa continued in private practice on her return to Sydney before starting Paddington Cat Hospital with her husband, Randolph Baral in 1997. Melissa is interested in all aspects of feline medicine and has a particular liking for soft tissue surgery. Of course, Melissa was nominatively destined for feline medicine.



Question:

My eight month old Burmese has developed a weepy eye. She's all up to date on her vaccines so I don't think it's the flu. I'm wiping her eye with a tissue a couple of times a day - is this safe for her?

Answer:

'Flu' in cats is mainly caused by two sorts of infections, Calicivirus and Herpesvirus (luckily, a cat specific herpes that people can't catch). The vaccinations for these will reduce the severity of the disease but not prevent infection. A clear discharge from one eye only is usually pretty typical of herpes virus. The infection can be a new infection or a re-emergence of a previous infection. Just as people with herpes infections can have recurrence of their cold sores (or worse!), cats can have recurrence since the herpes viruses lives in the nerves and re-emerge in times of stress. Stress in people is usually due to working hard for deadlines (for example) but in cats can be set off by such stresses as the plumber visiting, a new cat moving next door or another underlying illness. Each infection is self-limiting, usually within a period of 10-14 days as long as there isn't any secondary infection. If the discharge remains clear and your cat is not too bothered by the affected eye, no treatment may be necessary, although a quick visit to the vet is probably a good idea to check there aren't any problems that will need specific medications. Sometimes, antibiotics are required to manage secondary infections. If infections occur often and are severe, you can discuss L-lysine supplementation with your vet. This doesn't cure an episode but reduces the ability of the herpes virus to replicate so mostly means fewer episodes of reduced severity. Cats that have severe enough episodes to start this are usually kept on it indefinitely. It is important not to use any human anti-virals (such as Zovirax) without veterinary supervision as they can be toxic to cats.

Question:

Our nine year old cat Mouse has been using his litter tray more often than he used to. His litter tray is in the laundry and I've noticed this, as if the door is shut he yowls to get in. He doesn't seem to leave much pee each time he goes. Could this change in his behaviour be due to just getting older?

Answer:

Frequent, painful urination is typical of cystitis, which means inflammation of the bladder. With this condition, every time a drop of urine makes its way to the bladder from the kidney, it really hurts, so your cat is emptying their bladder frequently when it's not very full. Owners will often see pink tinged urine (which is due to blood in the urine) and for some unknown reason, cats will often urinate in the bath-tub to show their owners that they're sore (the cold surface may alleviate the pain). Cystitis can be caused by bladder stones or crystals, infections or even cancers. In many cases, the cause is unknown so we will treat the symptoms. In male cats (and very, very rarely in females), crystals and inflammatory proteins can gel, blocking the cat's ability to urinate (they will sometimes still urinate small drops around the blockage). This is a very serious, life-threatening problem so all cats with urination problems should be seen by a vet as soon as possible.

Infection is usually a rare cause of Cystitis so antibiotics are mostly not needed EXCEPT in older cats like your nine-year-old. At your cat's vet visit, a urine sample should be taken and sent to a lab to be checked for infection (cultured) as well as examined at the practice. For a urinary tract infection to take hold, there needs to be access by bacteria and the urine needs to be dilute (concentrated urine kills bacteria). Dilute urine usually is an indicator of another underlying problem such as kidney disease so it would be most likely worthwhile for blood samples to be checked also. Urinary tract infections are usually treated with quite long courses (at least 3 weeks) of antibiotics.

Question:

Everyone says my tabby is fat - my husband rudely calls him Boomstix (his name is Floyd). I would like to refer to him as being pleasantly plump. He's happy and healthy and only goes to our local vet for annual checks and shots. He gets canned food in the evening and has crunchy cat food during the day. As a treat he gets canned sardines and vegemite on toast. He's a pretty fussy eater and when my husband bought some diet cat food from the supermarket, he turned his nose up at it. If I was to put him on a diet how should I limit the food and should I slowly add it to his current diet?

Answer:

As in people, being overweight can predispose to conditions like diabetes as well as make conditions like arthritis worse. It's often hard to look at your own cat's weight objectively! Try comparing to other neighbourhood cats you may come across as well as assessing things like whether you can feel your cat's ribs well. If your cat has a greasy patch or 'dandruff' just in front of the tail, he may be too big to groom himself. If he actually is overweight, dieting is recommended. In plain terms, dieting is about eating less calories and expending more so measuring out how much you feed him, cutting out treats and having dedicated play times each day for exercise may be enough. Some cats don't tolerate carbohydrates very well. In fact, cats don't have any actual carbohydrate requirement since their natural diet is raw mice or bird. The newest theories for cat weight loss emphasise high amounts of protein and low carbohydrate, sort of like the Atkin's diet (we call it 'Catkin's!'). Whereas there is controversy in people about these diets, there is far less controversy in cats since they are natural meat eaters. Of course, in the wild, cats will eat ALL of their prey (bones, muscle, skin, innards) and not just the muscle so an all meat diet is not balanced for cats. There is a recently introduced prescription diet that is a high protein, low carb diet. There is a tinned as well as dry version (but the tinned version works better since it is even lower in carbohydrates). As well as overweight cats, we put all diabetic cats onto this diet. When changing a cat to a new diet, it's a good idea to change it over a 1-2 week period.

"The Cat. He walked by himself, and all places were alike to him."
Rudyard Kipling



Dog Vet Questions

Dr Katherine Briscoe

Dr Katherine Briscoe graduated from the University of Sydney in 2004 with first class honours and the University Medal. She grew up in Sydney and has always had a keen interest in animals. She is currently working in a small animal practice in Sydney.



Question:

My 2 year old Schnauzer has developed a bald patch just above her tail where she has been constantly licking and scratching. She had the same problem last summer, but it cleared up through the cooler weather. I'm just worried that she has an allergy from something in our local park. What should I look out for and what should I do to relieve the itching?

Answer:

Scratching and licking around the tail base is most commonly caused by fleas. Fleas are more of a problem during the summer months and tend to cause fewer problems in the cooler months of the year. Many dogs become infected with fleas and in most cases the problem is easily solved. There are many products on the market available for flea prevention, Frontline®, Advantage®, Revolution®, and Capstar® to name just a few.

In some cases, however, fleas cause a more complicated disease called flea allergy dermatitis. In this case, the bite from a single flea can cause itchiness for up to two weeks. Treatment of flea allergy dermatitis can be frustrating as it often requires intensive flea prevention and may require treatment of bacterial infections that arise due to the dog licking and scratching itself. It may also require treatment of the dog's environment by washing bedding and "flea bombing" the house.

You mentioned that you are worried about an allergy. Flea allergy is just one of many types of allergies that manifest in the skin. Dogs can be allergic to certain foods, certain plants and pollens, and even insects. While from your description it seems that flea allergy dermatitis is the most likely cause of your dog's problem, it would be advisable to consult your veterinarian to make sure it is not due to another skin disease.

Question:

My daughter is 13 and she has been begging for a pet for years. I am too busy and don't have time for a dog, but recently she's been talking about getting a ferret. I hear they can be really stinky unless they are desexed. Is this true and what other problems can they have?

Answer:

Ferrets and other "pocket pets" make great companions for those of us who love animals but feel we cannot dedicate the time to care for them properly. Ferrets are intelligent and friendly pets, however some people find their musky odour offensive. Male ferrets are often the smellier of the two sexes. This problem may be overcome by desexing. Alternatively, a surgical procedure to remove the glands that produce the odour can be performed. It should always be kept in mind that ferrets sometimes retain their odour regardless of what we do, but this doesn't make them any less suitable as a "pocket pet".

Female ferrets often do not produce the same musky smell as male ferrets, however it is important that they are desexed for a number of reasons. It reduces the risk of an unwanted pregnancy, but it also reduces the chance of the ferret suffering from a disease known as aplastic anemia (or "oestrogen toxicity"), which is potentially life-threatening.

There is another disease that ferrets can contract-canine distemper virus, which almost always causes their death. Fortunately, we are able to vaccinate against this disease and ferrets should be given a vaccine at 6-8 weeks old, 10-12 weeks old, and 13-14 weeks old. This should be followed by vaccination once a year.

Overall, ferrets make excellent pets and would be a great alternative to a dog or cat.

Question:

We are about to take a family vacation over Christmas to Bellingen and we're taking our two Labradors. I hear there's a tick problem around that area and we're not sure about whether to put Millie and Trevor on medication. What alternatives are available and what is really the best prevention?

Answer:

A number of ticks can be found in Australia, but the tick that is of greatest concern is the paralysis tick. Paralysis ticks are very common in northern NSW. In fact, the paralysis tick can be found along the entire east coast of Australia. Ticks thrive in warm, humid weather and are therefore most commonly found during the spring and summer months. The reason that there is great concern over these ticks is that they can cause a potentially life threatening disease, tick paralysis. The signs of tick paralysis are quite variable, but include wobbly back legs progressing to a paralysis of the back legs, coughing, breathing difficulty, and gagging. If left untreated this may progress to a complete paralysis and death.

The good news is, tick paralysis can be prevented as there are a number of products available that help prevent ticks attaching and releasing toxins into the bloodstream. What must first be mentioned is that NO medication is 100% effective, and often they're not as effective as daily, thorough checking of your dog for ticks



"My little dog -- a heartbeat at my feet."
Edith Wharton

Bird Vet Questions

Question:

Our Major Mitchell has developed a screeching problem which is driving the whole family crazy. My eldest son recently moved out (the bird and he were quite close) and I have recently returned to a full time job which means I'm not home until early evening. Her routine with playtime and feeding hasn't changed dramatically so I'm worried that there might be some underlying medical problem we should be aware of.

Answer:

Screeching is often the first observed sign of an unhappy pet bird. The primary cause of sudden onset screeching may have an illness or behavioural base. For this reason, a routine health check with a qualified avian veterinarian is always recommended as the first approach to solving the problem. Once diagnostic tests have been conducted and everything returns normal, it will be possible to investigate for a purely behavioural cause.

It is important to understand that ongoing stress will ultimately predispose your bird to sickness, even in circumstances where disease is not an underlying factor. Parrots are very intelligent, highly social creatures. They are extremely sensitive to changes in household dynamics and regularly pick up on the emotions of their human flock. For this reason the fact that your son who was very close to the bird, has recently moved out of home may be a very likely contributing event. The sudden change in your working schedule quite possibly impacts significantly as well.

Other behavioural considerations may include- boredom, a lack of exercise, lack of consistency in what is acceptable behaviour, plus seasonal changes or the onset of sexual maturity (calling incessantly for a mate).

The longer the screaming behaviour continues the more habituated it will become, making it difficult to reverse. Some suggested strategies are:

The ongoing provision of a general daily routine which will give security during this time of uncertainty for your bird.

Ignore the screeching - any reaction will inadvertently reward attention seeking behaviour. Covering the cage may be necessary if the screaming becomes intolerable but it is important not to make eye contact.

When your bird is being quiet it is important to lavishly praise it. This is called positive reinforcement and teaches your bird acceptable behaviours which will bring it loving attention and praise.

The provision of extra stimulation will assist in diverting the behaviour. Your bird must be sensitively introduced to distractions that it can enjoy independently when it can't be out with the flock.

Finally, the possibility of getting a second pet bird may also be appropriate at this time.

Question:

My two year old Cockatoo has developed a habit of biting me when I try to put him in his cage. He's been a perfect bird and in perfect health until now but he growls and doesn't want to get off me and go back into his cage. What should I do to stop the (sometimes painful) biting?

Answer:

Growling and biting is your bird's way of communicating to you that it is unhappy. At just two years of age your cockatoo is in its adolescent stage of development. This phase is a challenging time; frequently accompanied by attempts to test the boundaries as your bird learns its position in the flock. It is important to gain control of your cockatoo before this behavioural issue becomes difficult to reverse.

that may have attached. Ninety percent of ticks are found from the shoulders forward and a thorough search of all surfaces of your pet (including in the mouth and between the toes) once a day will help find any attached ticks early, and hopefully prevent the development of signs of disease.

Some flea prevention products such as Frontline® also help prevent tick paralysis. Frontline® may be applied as a top-spot every fortnight, or the spray can be applied once every four weeks for tick prevention. Proban® is a tablet that must be given every second day to prevent tick paralysis. Often people forget to give the tablets on time, so sometimes this is not the best option. There are a number of tick collars available for purchase such as Kiltix® and Preventic® which can be worn and are effective for a variable period of time. These collars are effective, but like all treatments you need to remember to replace or reapply them when their effectiveness has worn off. This information can be found on the packet of the product you are using. Permaxin® is another type of tick prevention. It is a solution that can be used as a spray or wash. Permaxin® should NEVER be used on cats.

A combination of the use of one or more of these products, together with daily checking of your pet for the presence of a tick is the best way to prevent tick paralysis affecting your pet. As an aside, you should bear in mind that tick paralysis can and does occur in Sydney (even in the suburbs) so tick prevention should not only apply to times when you are on holidays.

Dr Rob Marshall

Rob Marshall graduated from the University of Sydney in 1975 and established the Carlingford Animal Hospital, a bird, cat and dog practice. Rob's has had a lifelong interest in birds which has led to him writing prolifically on various avian health issues and contributing to a number of magazines. He's lectured at various veterinary conferences both here and in the US.

Talai O'Brien

Talai has spent the past three years studying bird behaviour under Dr Rob Marshall. Talai also conducts consultations for behavioural problems including screaming, crying, biting, feather destruction, regurgitation and excessive egg-laying.



Each time your bird bites signifies continued biting in the future. It is important to learn to read your bird's body language. When you know your bird is going to bite- try placing an object in its mouth, the bird will bite that instead. This ensures no reaction from you.

It is important to teach your bird the "step up" command. Practice this daily for five to ten minutes. Once your bird understands what is expected it will step off your hand with out question. This is called patterning. Basic training teaches your bird what is acceptable behaviour and what will bring it loving attention.

Finally, your bird's cage should not be a prison. It is a safe haven for times when it can not be with you. Regularly rotating toys and providing fresh eucalypt branches for foraging is recommended. It is important to be creative, constantly providing new and interesting items for independent play.

Some suggestions for enticing your bird back into the cage include-

Incorporate going back in the cage with a fun interactive activity that can be enjoyed side by side. For example, dancing to music, singing or a game such as peekaboo. Your bird will look forward to this activity with you each day as part of its general daily routine.

You can provide a special treat- this may be a relished food item such as an almond or a pine nut or a favourite toy.

You can also place the cage in new and interesting locations around the home for visual stimulation eg by a window, by the television, with you while you work, or take your bird outside in the cage for a short period.

Question:

I've been told that aromatherapy candles could be hazardous to my budgies health. Are there any other household products that could cause her problems and how serious can these be to her? We live in a unit and her cage is in our open plan dining room/kitchen.

Answer:

Birds have an extremely sensitive respiratory system. This has evolved to allow for efficient oxygen intake, which is necessary to counteract the physical demands of their capacity for flight.

There are many commonly used household products responsible for the release of toxic gases into air. It is argued that these are not healthy for humans, and for this reason can be potentially fatal to our pet birds as they are quickly absorbed. It's important to avoid the use of aerosol sprays including hairspray, spray on deodorants, air fresheners and perfumes in your bird's room. Household cleaning products may also release toxic chemicals into the air. A safe cleaning alternative is baking soda mixed with water. Plug in air fresheners are also best avoided. Instead, you can best remove odours by providing effective ventilation. It is also very important to avoid releasing smoke from burnt food or cigarettes into your bird's air space.

Carbon monoxide is another poisonous gas- it is given off by car engines, heaters and fires.

Many nonstick cookware items are Teflon (Polytetrafluorethylene -PTFE) coated. It is important to check the manufacturing labels on household products as there are lots of other commonly used appliances containing Teflon like waffle makers, bread makers, coffee roasters, hair dryers and irons to name a few.

While, it is generally accepted that low to medium cooking using Teflon coated appliances does not pose a problem, overheated Teflon coated appliances are however extremely dangerous. It is important never to leave cooking unattended or to allow non-stick surfaces to boil dry. In fact, stainless steel is the safest option as far as cookware is concerned.

Finally, a well ventilated room is the best place for your pet bird. It is important to ensure the room is free from drafts as well as sudden changes in temperature and humidity.

If you have a question to any of our Vets you should send an email to critters@urbananimal.net or to the Urban animal office.