

Cat vet questions



We have a pretty old set of chairs and matching couch that our 3 year-old cat has been sharpening his claws on since a kitten. We haven't really worried about this until now—we're about to get some new furniture and of course we want to get him out of the habit so that our new furniture isn't destroyed. I feel a little foolish asking this since it's a problem we probably should have dealt with ages ago. But how would we get him out of the habit now?

This is going to be tricky! Firstly, it's important to provide your cat with some sort of scratching post that he is allowed to use. Cats can be particular with the texture of the material they sharpen their claws on, so you may need to experiment. If your cat particularly likes the lounge, then providing him with a vertical post with some Hessian or similar may be a good start (some cats prefer carpet or even wood). Be aware that as well as sharpening his claws, the scratching is a form of marking a surface with the glands near the pads on the under surface of the front legs, so most cats like a vertical surface to do this on. Give him plenty of positive encouragement when he does the right thing, but do not punish or yell at him if he does the wrong thing as this may make him anxious and is unlikely to help. When you first get your new lounge, it is probably worth leaving the plastic covering on for a little while as he won't like the feel of this, and ensure he is using his post. After a while, take the cover off and see how you go! Sometimes putting aluminium foil or 'contact' with the sticky side out onto the arms of the couch can be helpful as a deterrent. Something else to consider is the use of a pheromone plug-in diffuser available from your vet—this may be useful in addition to behavioural modification. Good luck!!

When we wash our floor (with bleach) our cat gets all weird and rolls around on the floor on her back and on her sides for ages—until the smell goes away. I heard that bleach is similar to catnip but I don't know how true that is. Is this something that could harm her and should we change the cleaning agent?

I have occasionally heard reports of cats who seem to have a similar reaction to bleach (and other chlorine smells, for example from swimming pools) as others do to catnip, ie rolling and rubbing their face, drooling, and with their third eyelids coming across. I haven't come across an explanation for this phenomenon, although there are some wacky theories around. Most chemicals are potentially harmful (for example they can cause ulcerations on the tongue and in the mouth), and I would suggest trying to ensure your cat doesn't have access to the cleaned floor until it has dried. Once dry, there should be no harm in allowing her to have her fun!

I'm confused as to when is the right age to get a female cat desexed. I'm currently on a waiting list to get a Maine-Coon kitten and I've heard such conflicting information as to when is the 'correct' age for de-sexing. Some people say not until after they're six months and I just got more confused when I tried to research this on the Internet. Obviously I'm going to check in with my vet when I get my kitten her second vaccination but since you are a cat vet, I would like your advice.

The answer to this question probably depends on who you ask—there do seem to be conflicting ideas on this! My strongest suggestion is to accept the advice of your vet who will be doing the desexing, as they will recommend the timing they are most familiar with, which is important. I usually recommend that the queen be desexed before she has her first heat. There is data to show that there is a higher risk of developing mammary tumours when she gets older if the cat has already had a 'season', whereas there don't seem to be any real problems associated with having kittens desexed quite young (most shelters desex kittens at 8 weeks old). There is also the nuisance factor—some cats can be extremely vocal and temperamental during a heat period. Predicting when a cat will come into season is very difficult however, as there are many factors involved—breed of the cat, season of the year, and general health probably being the most important. For example, Burmese kittens have been known to come into season as young as 3 months of age, whereas many of the longhaired breeds are usually considerably older! This is where the experience and advice of your vet will be important.

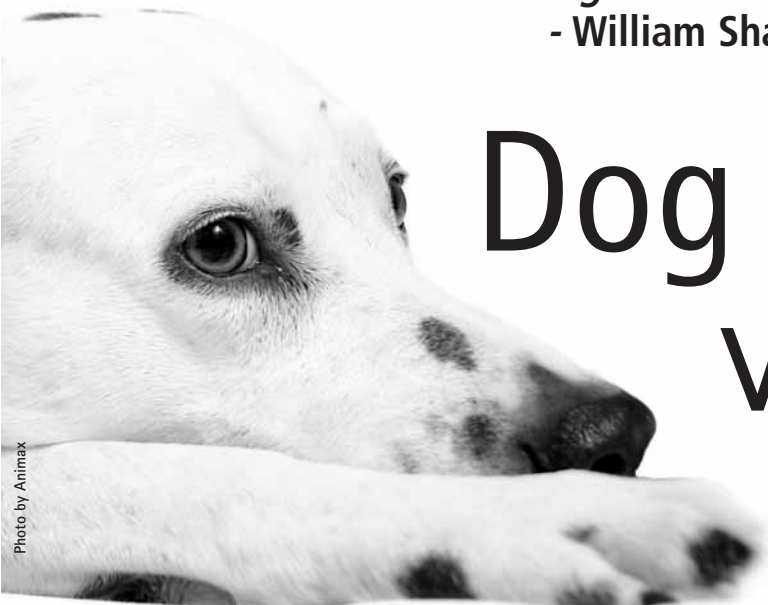
Melissa Catt BVSc
Paddington Cat Hospital

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.

183 Glenmore Road
Paddington NSW 2021



"Thou callest me a dog before thou hast cause. But since I am a dog, beware my fangs."
- William Shakespeare "The Merchant of Venice"



Dog and small animal vet questions

Percy is my 4 year old female ferret and over the last few years she has been progressively losing her hair. Sometimes the hair grows back again, but more recently she has lost a lot of hair and it doesn't seem to be growing back. Also, she has recently developed a swelling of her vulva. I know that this can be bad in some cases. Do you have any ideas as to what might be causing her problems? She seems fine in all other respects— she is bright and happy, and eating and drinking well.

The problem you are describing is relatively common amongst ferrets and is generally caused by disease of the adrenal gland. In this disease, the most common clinical sign is hair loss in both male and female ferrets, and enlargement of the vulva in female ferrets. The adrenal disease may be either an adrenal tumour, or hyperplasia (excess tissue growth) of the adrenal gland, and it may affect one or both adrenal glands. The adrenal glands are involved in production of a number of hormones in all animals, and ferrets with adrenal cortical disease have a dysfunction of the adrenal gland that results in the over-production of steroid hormones. The underlying cause of the changes in the adrenal gland are not known. Typically, adrenal cortical disease causes a progressive hair loss that can occur over a period of 2-3years. In the USA, it has been reported that ferrets lose hair in the winter and spring, and this hair loss continues until the ferret is partially or totally bald. Sometimes, the hair coat regrows during the autumn, only to fall out again during the next winter. Female ferrets frequently have an enlarged vulva also, and sometimes there is a discharge from the vulva. One thing that you haven't mentioned is whether or not your ferret has been desexed. This is important for a number of reasons. Firstly, if your ferret has been desexed and has the vulvar enlargement you describe, then adrenal gland disease would be the main possible cause of her problem. If she has not been desexed (or if some ovarian tissue has been left during the spay operation) then it is possible that your ferret is suffering from a prolonged oestrus and if this is the case, then you are right in saying that an enlarged vulva can be a bad thing. The reason for this is that prolonged oestrus can cause a severe disease called bone marrow toxicity. Remember, though, that the vulva can become enlarged during a normal oestrus (time when the ferret is in season) so it is important to have this checked by a vet.

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Due to the fact that there are a number of serious diseases that may be causing your ferret's clinical signs, it is important that you take her to the vet for a check up. Sometimes adrenal disease can be diagnosed simply by palpating the abdomen, but other times blood tests, radiographs or ultrasound may be needed to confirm the diagnosis. If Percy is diagnosed with adrenal cortical disease, then surgery may be necessary to treat it. However, it would be best to have her checked by a vet to determine exactly what the cause of the problem is, before we go jumping to conclusions.

Our family is considering getting a new dog from a rescue facility. The dogs are all desexed, microchipped, vaccinated and wormed. We think it would be wise to get the dog to our regular vet to check him/her out and was wondering what sort of questions to ask in terms of health, care in the next few months and long term. Can you help us?

As far as ongoing health care for your new dog goes, because you do not know the medical history of your dog you pretty much need to start again. Most rescue dogs are re-homed after they have been vaccinated, microchipped and on occasions desexed. It is important to clarify with the rescue society how many vaccinations your dog has had, and when the next booster is due. It also helps your regular veterinarian if you find out what type of vaccine has been used. Most vaccines require at least two injections, one month apart to be effective, so if your dog has only had one vaccination then she will require a booster. It is also important to start your pet on heartworm prevention. In some cases, a blood test to check for heartworm disease is necessary before you start on heartworm prevention medication. Therefore it is advisable that you take your new friend to the vet to see if a blood test is necessary, and if not then which heartworm prevention would be most convenient for you (trust me, there are MANY different types of medications out there!). Intestinal worming and flea prevention are also preventive medicines that you will need to start your dog on, so discuss these with your vet while you are there asking about heartworm.

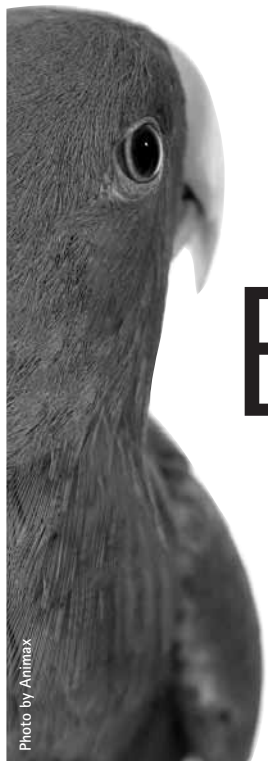
For obvious reasons, it is important that you have your dog microchipped if it has not already had this (microchipping is compulsory in New South Wales). If your dog comes to you microchipped, then it is important to ensure that the microchip registry has you as the new owner, not the rescue foundation, so ask the rescue foundation how you go about changing microchip ownership details. From then on, it is important to keep these microchip details up to date, so if you change house or phone numbers, make sure you change the details on the database also. Finally, it is important to make sure that your dog has been desexed. Desexing not only reduces or eliminates the risk of certain types of illness (like mammary cancer and pyometron in females, and testicular cancer in males) but it also helps to prevent animals from straying from home, and of course it prevents any unwanted pregnancy.

All in all, I think it is wonderful that you are opening your house to a rescue dog. It will take time to get him/her settled into the house and adjusted to her new lifestyle but overall it will be a very rewarding experience. As with any new pet, I strongly recommend that you take your dog to your vet for a check-up and to discuss preventive health care for your dog with them. Apart from the obvious benefits, it will get your pet used to going to the vet and hopefully make her more comfortable at the vets.

Dr Katherine Briscoe
Gladesville Veterinary Hospital

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 at Gladesville Veterinary Hospital.

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"And if you are not a bird, then beware of coming to rest above an abyss."
Friedrich Nietzsche

Bird vet questions

I have a pet 9 month old galah. He seems very bonded to me as he only wants to be with me and does not like other people or birds. I have read that he should be less bonded to me and should have some form of training. I am not sure about this as I want my bird to be happy doing what he likes and I am not interested in him learning tricks. Should he have behaviour training?

Behaviour training is a vital part of bringing your galah up as a happy well-adjusted bird. Often maturing birds develop behavioural problems when they become bonded to their owner and have had no training.

Training is not designed to teach birds tricks but to teach them the rules of socialisation. In the wild their parents and other adult birds teach them how to interact and be part of the flock. While we love our birds, often we give these birds no specific instructions except to eat what we feed them, and to accept and enjoy cuddles and preening from us. The birds are left to decide for themselves what is appropriate behaviour and what isn't. When they try out certain behaviour we either reward them or reprimand them.

These birds learn by trial and error how to act and, if not corrected or steered in the right direction, often learn poor habits.

We can teach birds to adjust better to living with their human flock and be happy living in our environments and with our lifestyles.

For a new young parrot it is important to have its behaviour assessed at its first health check. Advice initially needs to be given by an avian veterinarian on the best early training for each particular species. Your vet may continue training or send you to a bird behaviouralist.

Each year birds should have their behaviour and training assessed, and this knowledge should be built upon. The plan is to teach birds how to act and live with us in order to stop them growing up to be feather-pickers, screamers, cage guarders, biters or chronic egg layers.

My 4 year old cockatiel was wet after being in the shower and I noticed a yellow colouring to her skin on her breast area. She eats good quality cockatiel seed and seems very happy. What could this be?

The yellow colouration on her breast area is commonly a build up of fat. Some of these fat lumps can form fatty tumours called lipomas. These lumps often form when your bird becomes obese (very overweight).

Obesity is the result of taking in more calories than are burned off by the pet. Unlike its wild counterparts, your cockatiel may not be given the opportunity for daily exercise, which includes flying to escape predators and to look for food.

Additionally, most owners incorrectly feed their pet birds by offering a diet consisting almost totally of seeds. Seeds, especially sunflower seeds, are not only deficient in many vitamins and minerals, they are high in fat (which is why birds like them: the fat makes seed taste good). A high-fat diet and no exercise predispose birds to obesity. Overweight birds have an increased risk of many diseases including arthritis, heart disease and cancer. Many overweight birds develop hepatic lipidosis, also called "Fatty Liver Disease". These birds are extremely susceptible to infections and stress; many overweight birds have been known to die just from the stress of an examination at the veterinarian. Finally, overweight birds have a higher anaesthetic risk than normal-weight birds.

Treatment involves an increase in exercise and a change of diet.

Switching your cockatiel from an all-seed diet to a more suitable diet consisting of pellets, fresh vegetables, and fruit will decrease its daily intake of calories. Be patient, as birds that are hooked on a seed diet may not easily switch to the preferred pelleted diet.

If your cockatiel refuses to stop eating seeds it should only be offered budgie seed for 10-15 minutes twice daily and have fresh vegetables available at other times.

Your avian veterinarian can give you tips on slowly switching the diet. A bird's diet should NEVER be switched quickly, as the bird may refuse to eat and literally starve to death.

Dr Alex Rosenwax

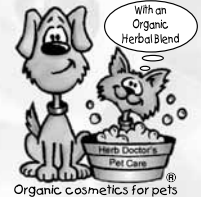
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Bird & Exotics Veterinarian, Green Square.

Alex graduated from the University of Sydney in 1991. He achieved Membership of the Avian Health Chapter of the Australian College of Veterinary Scientists in 1996. In November 1996 he opened the first and only Sydney all bird and exotic pet practice. The Clinic moved to 1 Hunter St Waterloo in 2003 and sees approximately 80% birds, and 20% fish, reptiles and other exotic pets. Alex is the current president of the Australian Veterinary Association Avian Group.



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