

# Cats living together

[cats.org.uk](http://cats.org.uk)



**If you already have cats that live together, or are thinking of getting two cats or more, there are some important things to consider about their social nature. Cats are naturally solitary and often prefer being the only pet in the home. This guide has advice to give your cats the best chance of living together happily.**



Cat behaviour can be very subtle. Just because cats are not fighting or hissing at each other, it does not mean that they are friends. Watching them carefully to assess whether they get along and ensuring their essential items are well-placed can help create a peaceful living environment.

## **Understanding cats' ancestry**

To understand cats, we need to look at the behaviour of their ancestors. Today's cat shares common ancestry with the African wildcat, which is still found in North Africa today. African wildcats generally choose to live alone, rather than in a social group with other cats.

The African wildcat lives in the savannah, hunting rodents which are relatively sparse in numbers. Wildcats are widely dispersed to avoid competition for the small amount of food available. They have an innate need to have a territory for themselves without other cats present which they maintain and mark through scent.

## Cat behaviour

Domestic cats are similar to the African wildcat in that they still have an inherent desire to be solitary animals and maintain a territory. However, they can live well together in circumstances when:

- they perceive each other to be in the same social group and
- there are sufficient essential items provided for them to avoid competition

## Cohabiting

Some cats form strong social bonds, but many do not see their housemates as part of the same social group. They may tolerate each other, especially when competing for valued resources like food, attention, or a sunny spot. However, living with an unbonded cat can still cause them stress.

## Social groups

Signs of aggression and conflict are not the only way to tell that cats are in different social groups. The signs can be subtle, so you need to look for the positive signs of social interaction.

Cats are in the same social group if:

- they sleep touching each other
- they rub against each other
- they mutually groom each other

This shares and reinforces their common scent.

If you have more than two cats, you may find you have more than two social groups. This is more likely to happen if they weren't introduced carefully enough, and/or aren't provided with enough essential items. Even related cats may not necessarily remain in the same social group. They may drift apart as they approach social maturity, between 18 months and four years of age, or after a stressful event such as a house move or a vet visit.

Signs that your cats are not part of the same social group include:

- hissing, fighting or the cats being overly focused on each other
- one cat 'blocking' access to food, water or litter trays from the other cats that they live with. This is done very subtly so owners often don't notice. It can be very stressful for the affected cat, sometimes even leading to behavioural problems

- some cats operate a more tolerant 'time share' system. For example one cat uses a particular area in the morning and the other cat then uses that area in the afternoon
- others may live separately in a particular area of the house. For example, one cat may live upstairs, while the other cat lives downstairs
- signs of illness in one of the cats in a household. For example, loss of appetite, a change in toileting habits, spending more time hiding or sleeping

## **The essentials**

Essential items and places for cats are:

- food bowls
- water bowls
- litter trays
- sleeping places
- hiding places
- exit and entry points

Provide one of each item per cat, plus one extra. Space them out within the home to help prevent blocking behaviours. Even cats in the same social group will benefit from items in separate areas to reduce the risk of relationship breakdown.

Cats are happier when they have control over when they interact with each other. Limited essential items or places can lead to conflict and stress.

## **Getting another cat**

If you already have one or more cats, think carefully before getting another cat as it's an important decision. There are many factors to consider.

- Can you afford the daily costs, including veterinary care for which big bills can be unexpected?
- Do you have enough space in your home to provide extra essential items in the right locations to support another cat?
- Do you have enough time for another cat?
- Has your cat responded positively to the presence of other cats in the past?

Cats are all unique and have different characters. Although a cat might have lived with another cat in the past, this does not mean that they will necessarily tolerate a new cat immediately or even at all. If a cat's companion cat has recently died, hold off getting a new cat as a 'friend', at least until your remaining cat has had time to adjust. In many cases, cats seem to blossom once they are on their own and prefer to remain in a single-cat household.

This can be difficult for us to understand as humans are a more social species, but we need to approach it from a cat's perspective.

Cats who have had positive interactions with unrelated cats, when they were under seven weeks of age, may be more likely to live harmoniously with other cats when they are adults.

It is important to understand that getting another cat won't fix any behaviour problems and isn't a substitute for you spending quality time with your cat. If your cat has behavioural issues, consult a vet or behaviourist before introducing a new cat, as this could make the problem worse.

## **Introducing cats**

Unfamiliar cats should be gradually introduced. This gives the best chance that they will ultimately see each other as part of the same social group, or at least peacefully cohabit. Providing sufficient essential items in a variety of different places in the home will help to avoid conflict and perceived competition.

If cats are forced together too quickly, it may lead to lifelong conflict and stress which is difficult to resolve. First impressions are all important. Unfortunately, cats are often introduced without sufficient time and essential items to successfully



integrate. The result can be two cats forced to cohabit under stress. Behavioural problems may result, or they may become withdrawn or intolerant of attention.

The following advice will give you the best chance of your cats successfully living together.

## Initial separation

If you have an existing resident cat, ensure that all their routines remain the same where possible. Shut the new cat in the room that the resident cat uses the least.

Provide each cat with:

- **food and water.** Cats like to drink away from where they eat, so place the food and water bowls in separate areas sited away from litter trays
- **places to hide.** Cats need a few options to hide away, for example, a cardboard box on its side or under the bed. This is particularly important while they are adapting to a new environment
- **a viewing platform.** Cats love to view their surroundings from a height. Offer access to high spots such as shelves, the top of a wardrobe and windowsills. Ensure easy access by placing a stool nearby

- **somewhere to sleep**, such as igloo beds, cardboard boxes and blankets in elevated places
- **toys.** Be aware that a cat may not want to play while they are settling in
- **a scratching post.** Try placing this near to where the cat sleeps as they often like to stretch and scratch after they wake up
- **litter trays.** Placed away from food and water bowls

You can install a pheromone diffuser such as FELIWAY Optimum, in the area where each cat spends the most time.

Introductions can take time, so be patient and don't miss out on any of the steps.

### **Step one: swapping scents**

We've already spoken about the importance of scent to cats. Before introducing your established cat to your new cat face to face, introduce them to each other's scent so they can become familiar with it.

1. Take two clean, soft cloths.
2. Stroke each cat gently around the face with one of the cloths.
3. Dab the cloths around your home and furniture.

4. Put the cloth in the other cat's designated area to sniff when they are ready to investigate.

5. Keep swapping the scents until the cats show no reaction to the smell. If the cats avoid the scent cloth then give the scent swapping stage more time.

### **Step two: seeing each other**

- Allow the cats to see each other while not being able to touch or meet one another
- If possible, place a glass or mesh door between the cats and allow each cat to approach or hide as they choose
- Don't attempt a face-to-face introduction until the cats either ignore each other or show positive signs such as attempting to groom or rub heads through the divider

### **Step three: face to face**

- Ensure easy escape routes are available for both cats, as well as easy access to places higher up, such as furniture or shelves
- Start in a fairly large room where they can stay at a distance from each other
- Supervise the cats when they are together
- Work at a pace that the cats are comfortable with and go back a step if necessary

- Have a blanket or large towel ready that you can hold up between the cats if they show any negative reactions to give them a chance to retreat
- Only introduce for short periods of time, observing the body language of both cats and encouraging them away if they start to look unsure. Return cats to separate rooms
- Gradually start to fuss or play with the cats for a short time, so their attention is on you, before putting the food down

If all the above goes well, then gradually increase the time they spend together.

It can take anything from a day to many weeks for cats to tolerate each other. If there are signs of conflict such as unbroken stares, hunched body posture, or vocalisation, go back a step. They are unlikely to fight but ensure they can both flee to a safe space at all times. Take care not to touch the cats to avoid being bitten or scratched as the cats may be overstimulated. Don't chase or shout at them as this will only lead to them associating each other with bad things. It could also damage their bond with you.

Always remember that, even despite careful introductions, some cats never become part of the same social group. Differences in characteristics play a great part in all social interactions and cats are certainly no exception to this rule.

If your cats are apart for any reason, for example if one has to stay at a cattery or the vets, this may affect their scent and recognition of each other. They may not be remembered as part of the same social group when they return. The longer a cat is away, the harder it can be to reintegrate. On return, it's a good idea to keep the cats apart, so the returning cat can pick up the smells of home. Then slowly reintroduce them. Consider where you place things such as food bowls and litter trays, keeping them apart so they can both use them easily and away from each other.

By taking these simple steps you can often dramatically improve the quality of life for the cats living in your home.

If you have problems, please seek help sooner rather than later. It may be easier to resolve a recently developed problem, than one which has become established over some time.

If cats have been introduced too quickly, you may need to give them separate rooms and start the introduction from scratch. Speak with your vet for further advice. They may recommend referral to a suitably qualified behaviourist, such as a member of the Animal Behaviour and Training Council.

For more information see [cats.org.uk/behaviour](https://cats.org.uk/behaviour)

## **Looking for cat advice?**

The following vet-approved guides are available to download from [\*\*cats.org.uk/information-leaflets\*\*](https://cats.org.uk/information-leaflets)

## Essential guides

**Behaviour: Understanding your cat's behaviour** W84009

**Behaviour: Managing your cat's behaviour** W84010

**Bringing your cat home** W84002

**Caring for your cat** W84001

**Caring for your kitten** W84015

**Cats and people** W84014

**Cats living together** W84011

**Elderly cats** W84016

**End-of-life, grief and loss** W84007

**Feeding and obesity** W84004

**Feral cats** W84017

**Indoor and outdoor cats** W84012

**Keeping your cat safe** W84005

**Microchipping** W84008

**Moving home** W84003

**Neutering** W84006

**Pregnant cats, birth and care of young kittens** W84018

## Veterinary guides

**Arthritis** W83201

**Cat flu** W83216

**Digestive disorders: vomiting and diarrhoea** W83218

**Feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV) and feline leukaemia virus (FeLV)** W83209

**Feline lower urinary tract disease (FLUTD)** W83202

**Fleas and other parasites** W83215

**Heart murmurs and heart disease** W83211

**Hyperthyroidism** W83212

**Infectious disease and vaccination** W83217

**Kidney or renal disease** W83206

**Skin disorders** W83204

**Teeth and oral health** W83214

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## Please see [cats.org.uk](https://cats.org.uk) for more information on:

**Cats and pregnant women: toxoplasmosis**

**Cats and the law**

**Cats with disabilities**

**Diabetes**

**Feline asthma**

**Feline coronavirus (FCoV) and feline infectious peritonitis (FIP)**

**Feline parvovirus (FPV)**

**Hypertension**

**You and your vet**

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