



Let's look at some pertinent **health tips** for every stage of your cat's life.

By SANDY ROBINS

# *Furry &* **FABULOUS** *at Any Age*

**A**s a result of great nutrition, grooming, lifestyle products that mimic human lifestyle trends and state-of-the-art veterinary care, our cats are living well into their teens and not uncommonly into their 20s. Addressing key issues at every life stage, from kittenhood through the golden years, goes a long way to improve your cat's overall general health and well-being.



## **SPAY OR NEUTER EARLY**

Timing is everything.

Organizations such as the American Association of Feline Practitioners, The Catalyst Council and the American Veterinary Medical Association endorse that kittens should be spayed or neutered by 5 months of age and can potentially experience their first heat (yes, they can be pregnant when they are still kittens).

"Research has shown that if a cat is spayed before the age of 5 months, it virtually eliminates the risk of unwanted litters," says Esther Mechler, long-standing feline welfare advocate and

founder of Marian's Dream, the organization behind the Feline Fix by Five initiative. "The number of kittens born every year during 'kitten season,' let alone the rest of the year, is staggering, and earlier surgery can really help to reduce the numbers of unwanted and homeless kittens.

"Further, doing this surgery at a younger age also lessens the risks of mammary cancer as the cat ages," Esther adds. "It also curbs behavioral issues such as peeing outside of the litter box, a primary reason cats lose their homes and land in shelters."



## → FEED THE RIGHT DIET

The nutrition that kittens get while they're growing will affect their health for the rest of their lives. So, feeding a premium kitten diet is an investment in their future.

"It's best to feed both canned and dry food since they only have 'baby' teeth when young and can't chew very well," explains Dr. Drew Weigner, owner of The Cat Doctor, an all-feline practice in Atlanta, Georgia, and a longstanding board member of the Winn Feline Foundation, an organization whose primary focus is the health and well-being of all cats.






"Vitamins and supplements are not needed when using a high-quality

diet; neither is milk, nor tidbits from the table!" Dr. Weigner says.

Get your kitten used to measured food amounts even if you free-feed to avoid obesity from the beginning. And check with your veterinarian about the right time to switch to adult formula.

"Typically, most cats are fully grown around 6 months of age, but certain large breeds can continue growing up to one year," Dr. Weigner explains. "Feeding kitten food after that will definitely contribute to obesity. The best way to tell is to ask your veterinarian when your cat will become an adult. It's often when all their adult teeth are in."

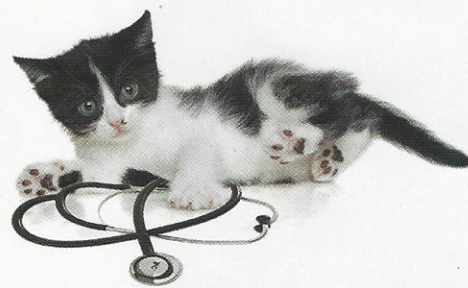
## Adapt for your cat's real age

	Life Stage	Cat's Age	Human Equivalent
	Kitten	0 to 6 months	0 to 10 years
	Junior	7 months to 2 years	12 to 24 years
	Prime	3 to 6 years	28 to 40 years
	Mature	7 to 10 years	44 to 56 years
	Senior	11 to 14 years	60 to 72 years
	Geriatric	15 years plus	76 to 100+ years

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## → DON'T SKIP KITTEN'S VET VISITS

No matter where you got your kitten from, do not skip the first checkup, and ensure she gets all of her shots. Testing for feline leukemia and FIV is routine. Unfortunately, many kittens, especially strays or those of unknown parentage, have these diseases, which are often fatal but can take years to manifest. Best to check! Deworming is also very important. Stool tests are often negative in kittens even when they have intestinal parasites, which have a very significant effect on their growth rate, so preemptive deworming is imperative. And do it more than once.



## → GET A WELLNESS PROFILE

Annual physical exams often reveal underlying issues such as dental disease, heart murmurs and obesity as cats age. When you book an annual visit, advise the receptionist that you want lab tests called Wellness Profiles done. These tests detect the early stages of diseases such as diabetes and kidney disease. And when caught early, simple treatments such as a dietary change can be very effective.

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### → DON'T OVERTREAT

Yummy tidbits are very important, and it's a way of spending quality time and dispensing love. But be sure not to overtreat no matter the life stage. Count the treat calories as part of your cat's daily caloric intake to avoid too much weight gain.

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### → CHECK THOSE TEETH

Don't skip regular exams of kitty's teeth. Dental care is not only important in preserving teeth, but the chronic inflammation and infection associated with dental disease also increases the likelihood of kidney disease and heart disease. Check to see if your veterinarian offers discounts during February, which is Pet Dental Month.



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### → ALWAYS MAKE TIME FOR FUN & GAMES

Toys and puzzle games provide both mental and physical stimulation, essential for a cat to remain fit and in good health at all life stages. It's particularly important if your cat is home alone for long periods and doesn't have much human company while you are at work.



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### → ADJUST FOR SENIOR YEARS

As cats age, they generally have a more sedentary lifestyle and sleep a lot more. So, it's time to have another discussion about diet with your veterinarian. It's not only a matter of changing the food to serve a formula specifically for your cat's changing needs, but you need to have a discussion about amounts, too. Cats, just like humans and dogs, lose muscle mass as they age, and it's important to keep them moving and active.

Older cats are also not as agile and can have problems grooming themselves properly and will benefit with some basic grooming help. Keep the hair trimmed between their toes and also around the anus so litter doesn't get stuck to these areas. Use special bull-nosed scissors so as not to cut into the skin in these delicate areas. Or ask your veterinarian for help.

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### → SEE THE VET MORE OFTEN

Ideally, senior and especially geriatric cats should visit the veterinarian's office every six months for a physical exam.

"At this age, one human year equals about four cat years, so even biannual exams for your cat is equivalent to humans seeing their doctors every other year," Dr. Weigner explains. "Cats are masters at hiding illness and will act perfectly normal until they crash and burn without notice. It's so common to see these critically ill geriatric cats that their owners swear were normal the

week before, and they're not wrong! Wellness Profiles are essential to finding significant illness before this happens and may save your cat's life," he cautions.

Since many cats go without routine dental care, it's common for these cats to have infected, broken or missing teeth. Once again, they often won't show symptoms, and the chronic infection damages internal organs. Correcting this requires anesthesia, which can be performed safely with the proper preparation and lab tests.

**TO SUM UP:** Watch kitty's diet throughout her life, don't miss vet visits, check those teeth, don't overtreat and always play with kitty at every stage of her life to keep her active. Every one of these health tips is pertinent to keeping your kitty not only furry and fabulous but also mentally alert and physically fit throughout her life. 🐾

### Stash your cash



If you don't have pet insurance for your cat, consider starting her own fund and putting away a fixed amount monthly throughout her life. This way, you will have the funds should you ever need them as she ages.



Ziggy and Tory "work" as feline muses for **Sandy Robins**, an

award-winning multi-media pet lifestyle expert, author and pet industry personality. They like to disrupt the workflow by playing fetch with wand toys and directing food operations in the kitchen. Learn more about Sandy at [sandyrobinsonline.com](http://sandyrobinsonline.com).