

CATFANCY magazine

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Disabled Felines Share Inspiration and Their Appreciation

By Don Vaughan

Stevie has been blind since birth, but you'd never know it to watch her. The 17-year-old domestic shorthair does almost everything a sighted cat can do, including frolicking outdoors, stalking insects and racing around the house.

"I've seen her sit in the middle of the living room floor and 'watch' a spider walk across the ceiling," says Stevie's owner, Grafton Houston, DVM, owner of The Pet Hospital of Tierrasanta in San Diego, California. "She's not handicapped in the slightest. In fact, I attribute her general well-being to her lack of vision."

Stevie is living proof that being differently-abled doesn't have to mean a life unlived. In fact, most differently-abled cats can enjoy a long, happy existence with just a little help from their owners, say veterinarians.

"The worst thing you can do to a differently-abled cat is treat it as less than whole," observes Robert Munger, DVM, DACVO, president of the Animal Ophthalmology Clinic Ltd. at the Veterinary Referral Center of North Texas in Dallas. "You have to figure out what it can do on its own, but don't limit what it's allowed to do, within reason. Don't treat it as an invalid."

Differently-abled cats have an astounding ability to adapt to their situation and the world around them, adds Sharon Crowell-Davis, DVM, PhD., DACVB, professor of veterinary behavior at the University of Georgia College of Veterinary Medicine. Owners can facilitate the process with lots of love and understanding, especially when the disability occurs suddenly.

"Don't withdraw from your cat as it adapts to its disability," Dr. Crowell-Davis advises. "As the cat learns to cope with the change in its ability to interact with its environment, you need to increase your involvement with and attentiveness to it. A newly blind cat, for example, shouldn't just be left by itself in a corner. It's alone either because it hasn't figured out how to maneuver yet, or it might be clinically depressed, in which case the owner needs to consult a veterinarian."

This article will examine the three most common forms of feline disability – blindness, deafness and physical injury – and what owners need to know so that they and their pets can adjust quickly and well.

BLINDNESS

Vision loss presents less frequently in cats than in dogs, but it's not uncommon. Causes include congenital defects, traumatic injury, glaucoma, cataracts, chronic uveitis and degenerative retinal disease. Hypertension is the number one cause of blindness in older cats, Dr. Munger warns, so

senior cats should be examined by a veterinarian at least twice a year.

Sudden blindness can result from traumatic injury, but it's more common for disease to take away a cat's vision by degrees. Unfortunately, cats are quite good at adapting to such changes and often hide their diminishing vision from their owners until their eyesight is all but gone. According to Dr. Munger, common indicators of progressive feline vision loss include increased vocalization, greater caution when moving around a room, bumping into furniture and misjudgements when jumping on to or off of favorite perches.

"Cat owners should regularly monitor their pets' vision by checking their pupillary light response," says Dr. Munger. "When you shine a light in a cat's eye, the pupil should constrict. If that light reflex is abnormal, then the animal may have a problem and should be evaluated by a veterinarian. If caught early enough, the problem may be something we can treat."

Cats adapt to blindness by relying on memory and their other senses, but this adjustment can take time and owners must be supportive and patient. "Realize that just like people, the cat that goes blind is going to find itself having to cope with issues that it's not used to, such as navigating around the house," notes Dr. Crowell-Davis. "Some of the things we can do to help are common sense, such as not rearranging the furniture every day."

It's also a good idea to walk through your house at cat level and see what needs to be done to cat-proof your home. Sharp table edges, decorative metal work or low, protruding objects can all pose a hazard to a blind cat and should be cushioned or removed for the animal's safety. Baby supply stores carry a variety of products, such as table pads, that can be used to protect differently-abled cats.

Keep in mind that a cat that suddenly can't see will understandably be timid at first as it learns to adapt to its situation. "Cats that are extremely fearful may benefit from a few weeks of anti-anxiety medication," says Dr. Crowell-Davis. "An owner can also encourage her pet to walk around by leaving a trail of favorite treats for the cat to follow. Over passing days, place the treats farther and farther apart. Once the cat learns that it can walk around safely, it will steadily build up its self-confidence."

DEAFNESS

As with blindness, many cases of deafness are the result of a congenital defect. For example, many blue-eyed, white cats are born deaf, notes J. Veronika Kiklevich, DVM, clinical teaching professor at Washington State University School of Veterinary Medicine and head of community practice at the WSU Veterinary Teaching Hospital. Other common causes include traumatic injury and severe, untreated ear infections.

One of the biggest obstacles when living with a deaf cat is communication. We tend to take for granted our use of sound in letting our pets know our intent, whether it's calling them to come play or running the electric can opener to let them know it's dinner time. But that's not possible

when a cat can't hear. The alternative? Developing your own special sign language.

“If it's time to feed the cat, you might want to provide some kind of visual signal, such as holding up a can of cat food so the cat can see it,” Dr. Crowell-Davis suggests. Of course, your cat must be looking at you when you do this. Because cats are very sensitive to vibrations, an effective way to get a deaf cat's attention is to tap your foot on the floor. It's also smart to do this before touching a deaf cat from behind so that you don't startle it.

No matter how much it may beg, a deaf cat should never be allowed to roam outdoors, warns Dr. Kiklevich. Though it may be able to see just fine, a deaf cat cannot hear approaching cars or barking dogs. In lieu of outdoor play, provide your deaf cat with plenty of visual enrichment via interactive toys or a window perch.

While the outdoor dangers to a deaf cat may be obvious, indoor hazards can be less so, as Robert Neal of Dearborn, Michigan, found out after adopting Marley, a 4-year-old Sealpoint Siamese that was born deaf. “We've learned that we need to be especially careful not to step on Marley's tail or paws,” Neal explains. “She likes to be right next to us and since she's deaf she doesn't have the ability to sense when we're taking a step back or to the side. Consequently, she gets nipped by our feet two or three times a week.”

PHYSICAL INJURY

Cats are agile, active creatures by nature, so the loss of a limb due to trauma or cancer can pose a serious challenge. But most cats are quite adept at meeting that challenge and getting on with their lives.

Joanne Hergert of Kooskie, Idaho, knows this first hand. She adopted Scrunchy as a kitten because the orange domestic shorthair had lost the use of his left front leg due to physical abuse. Though initially reluctant to have the limb removed, Hergert was astounded at how quickly Scrunchy adapted to getting around on just three legs.

“He's not really inhibited by his disability at all,” she says. “In fact, I think he was relieved because he didn't have to drag the leg around anymore.”

While the long-term prognosis for a physically disabled cat is usually quite good, the first few days or weeks following the loss of a limb can be traumatic. Some cats become depressed, as indicated by decreased appetite, increased vocalization, decreased play or simply “giving up.” However, most cases of feline depression can be successfully treated with medication.

“Thankfully, most cats aren't going to need that,” Dr. Crowell-Davis adds. “In most cases, recovery is a mechanical issue. For example, a cat that loses a hind limb won't be able to jump as high as it used to. The owner can help by making access to favorite spots easier, perhaps by providing a ramp.”

You can also make life easier for your three-legged cat by carpeting hard surfaces and monitoring your pet's weight. Notes Dr. Kiklevich: "Fat is an extra burden a three-legged cat doesn't need."

"Be prepared for a very different animal when he or she first comes home," advises Robert Conrad of Canastota, New York, whose 10-year-old domestic shorthair, Leo, lost a hind limb to cancer. "The first two days or so will be rough for your cat as well as you because just standing up is a challenge, much less moving around. But after a couple of days, you will be amazed at how quickly it copes and before you know it, your cat will be back to normal."

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WHEN TO SAY GOODBYE SIDEBAR

Most differently-abled cats are able to live full, rich lives. But as much as we hate to consider it, there are times when euthanasia is the more compassionate choice.

"Euthanasia should be considered when a cat is in intractable pain, or when its condition is related to a disease such as a tumor that is progressive and significantly detracts from its quality of life," says Dr. Robert Munger.

Euthanasia may also be necessary when a cat's temperament makes adjustment to disability very difficult, Dr. Munger adds. A cat that has always been fractious, for example, may become bewildered and panicky by its disability and lash out, making it a hazard to itself and others.

– Don Vaughan

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