

4-H CAT PROJECT HEALTH SUPPLEMENT



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4-H Veterinary Science project members investigate the normal health of several animal species. It's important that you become familiar with the normal health of your project animals so that you can recognize when one of your animals isn't well.

This cat project health supplement should acquaint you with the common cat health characteristics.

Think about your feline. You are important to your cat or kitten because it's your job to keep them well and to know when they need veterinary care.

Recognition of the following normal characteristics will help you and your veterinarian work as a team to keep your pet cat in good health.

You should keep a record of any abnormalities which do occur. This record will be important as a case history when your veterinarian begins to formulate a diagnosis. You can create your own chart or use Wisconsin 4-H Publication No. 4H369A.

Your cat's **attitude** is a characteristic with which only you are familiar. An abrupt or gradual change in your animal's behavior may be an indicator of sickness. Does your cat prefer to be alone or do they wind around your legs begging for attention? Does your cat enjoy lying on a sunny window sill or prefer a cool bathroom floor? Does your kitten really like playing with the puppy or does their hair stand on end and their tail swish threateningly from side to side? Take note of behavioral changes and try to identify the causes.

Your cat's normal **stance** should be well-balanced on four straight legs. Abnormal posture may indicate skeletal or muscular problems.

Normal feline **motion** should be free and effortless. A healthy cat moves with grace and strength. You may have observed your cat carefully stepping among items on a dresser top, or perhaps you've seen your kitten frightfully pounce on her mouse toy. Watch for lameness or lack of energy.

Keep track of your cat's **weight**. You should be able to feel your pet's ribs easily under a freely moveable coat of skin, fat and muscle. If you can't easily feel the ribs, your cat is too fat. Be concerned with a sudden or gradual weight loss also. This may be a sign of disease, parasitism, or improper feeding.

Your normal feline's **fur condition** is smooth and glossy. Your cat does a lot of grooming but you need to help them with this chore. Groom your cat regularly. Watch for patches of hair loss. These may be signs of ringworm, a fungal disease which requires veterinary treatment.

Skin and mucous membrane (color and condition) are important indicators. Normally a cat's skin is soft, loose, and pliable. Tight skin may be a sign of water loss or dehydration. Mucous membranes line all body openings such as the eye, ear, nose, mouth, rectum, and vagina. These membranes should be pink and moist in a healthy cat. Dry, dark brown, gritty material in the ear canal is a sign of mites. Your cat's gums should be pink. Unhealthy gums may be pale, yellow, or red.

An obvious characteristic to notice about your project animal is **bodily discharge**. Normal feces should be well-formed and firm. Abnormal excretions might be runny or filled with blood and mucus. Diarrhea is a sign of many disorders. Pink urine or frequent urination is important to notice. Many cats suffer from cystitis, a bladder infection.

What about your cat's **voice**? Felines are very vocal. Your cat will probably tell you if she isn't feeling well or if she's hungry. And happily, she may also purr, if she's content. Don't ignore your cat's meows. Your ability to listen is an important tool as is your power of observation. Most healthy animals have good appetites. However, this is not always the case with a finicky cat. Know your cat's diet and eating habits. Be careful if you change food. Be sure your cat's dishes are clean. Always provide plenty of water. Take note of the amount of water your cat normally consumes. An unusual increase or decrease may mean trouble. Report this to your veterinarian.

What is a cat's normal **heart beat, pulse rate,** and **temperature?** You can check these vital characteristics occasionally on your pet with the help of someone to gently restrain your cat.

You can feel the **heart beat** by placing your fingertips against your cat's chest just behind the point of elbow. The normal heart beats about 110-130 times per minute in the resting cat.

To take your cat's **pulse**, place your finger at the middle of the inside surface of rear leg near the point where the leg meets the body. This is where the femoral artery passes near the skin allowing you to feel the pulse. The heart rate and pulse rate should be the same. Count the heart beats or pulse for 15 seconds. Then multiply by four to calculate the rate per minute.

To take your cat's **temperature** shake the thermometer down to its lowest point. Lubricate it with vaseline. Insert it two inches into your cat's rectum and leave it there for two minutes. Hold your cat and thermometer firmly. Read the thermometer immediately after removing. The temperature should range from 100° to 102° F.

Practice recognizing and recording many of these common health characteristics on your cat every day. When you need to contact your veterinarian, be prepared with a complete report of all the signs you have noticed.

If you'd like further information on animal health, join the 4-H Veterinary Science project. You may use your cat as a Veterinary Science project animal!

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