Fellowship of Animal Behaviour Clinicians

COVID-19 – ADVICE FOR CAT OWNERS

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You may have recently seen or heard news reports advising that during the current crisis all cats should be kept indoors. This is actually a misquote or misunderstanding of advice from the British Veterinary Association (BVA).
The BVA have clarified their statement as follows:
"**We are not advising that all cats are kept indoors. Only cats from infected households or where their owners are self-isolating, and only if the cat is happy to be kept indoors. Some cats cannot stay indoors due to stress-related medical reasons"** (BVA, 080420)

Can my cat become infected by Covid-19?

A cat in Belgium recently started to show symptoms of COVID-19 about a week after its owner had been confirmed as having the disease. Samples of the cat's vomit and faeces were sent for testing and both were found to contain high levels of the virus. However, this is not as yet confirmatory evidence that the cat was infected. The cat's symptoms could have been due to another cause, and it is possible that the samples may have become contaminated during collection. It is also possible that the cat may have simply ingested the virus when self-grooming after close contact with its owner. Therefore, after a period of quarantine a blood test will be required to confirm if the cat had been infected.

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Research in China has also shown that cats might possibly become infected with the disease. Scientists inoculated five domestic cats with the COVID-19 virus by placing the virus directly into their noses. These cats were later found to have viral RNA and infectious virus particles in their upper respiratory tracts and had produced antibodies in their blood against the virus; indicating that they had contracted the disease. Three of these infected cats were then placed in cages next to other uninfected cats. One of these exposed cats was also later found to have produced viral antibodies, suggesting that the disease had been transmitted between the cats via respiratory droplets. However, laboratory experiments do not always replicate what happens in real life, and this study has not yet been peer reviewed, so we need to read these results with caution.

Can I catch Covid-19 from my cat?

Although recent developments and research suggest that cats can become infected with COVID-19, and that infection may possibly be passed from humans to cats and cat to cat, **THERE IS NO EVIDENCE TO DATE OF DIRECT TRANSMISSION OF THE VIRUS FROM CATS TO HUMANS.**

However, a cat might act as a 'fomite'. In other words, there is a very slight chance that you could pick up the virus if you pet or stroke a cat that has recently been in close contact with a person infected with COVID-19.

How best to limit this possible route of infection:

- If you know or suspect that your cat goes into other people's houses or is likely to be petted by other people when away from your home, wash your hands thoroughly after petting your cat and avoid touching your face. Also do not kiss your cat or encourage your cat to rub around your face.
- Do not fuss or pet cats that are not your own.

- Do not encourage or allow other cats into your home. If you do not already have an exclusive cat flap i.e. one that only allows your cat to use it, now would be a good time to fit one. If your cat is microchipped the best type to fit is one that is operated by your cat's microchip. If you feed a stray or feral cat, do so as far away from your house as possible.
- **DO NOT** use disinfectant, hand sanitizer or anti-bacterial wipes on your cat. These could be potentially harmful to your cat.

If you have been diagnosed or have symptoms of Covid-19. Or if you are at 'high risk' or you are a carer for someone that is:

- Try to isolate yourself as much as you can from your cat. Avoid petting your cat and if possible, delegate the tasks of feeding and caring for your cat to other household members.
- To prevent your cat from passively spreading the virus away from or into your home, confine your cat indoors or only allow access into an enclosed run or cat proofed garden and do not allow other cats into your home
- If your cat becomes visibly stressed from being confined and especially if he or she has a medical condition that could be exacerbated by stress, continue to allow your cat to go outside. Advise your neighbours not to pet your cat or allow your cat into their homes. But also inform them that as long as they don't touch your cat, the cat cannot pass the virus to them.
- If your cat develops any of the following symptoms: vomiting, diarrhoea, coughing or difficulty breathing, telephone your vet. **Do not** take your cat to the veterinary surgery unless you are advised to do by the practice. In which case, inform the practice that you may have the virus and arrange for a friend or neighbour who is not a member of your household, and who is not also self-isolating to take the cat to the surgery for you. Arrangements should be made that, whilst also keeping your cat safe, this person does not need to come into your house or have contact with you or other members of your household to collect the cat.

Why is it important to continue to allow your cat outside if you are not unwell, self-isolating or at risk?

Research increasingly shows that stress can be an underlying cause or contributory factor to a number of feline medical issues including lower urinary tract disease, chronic infectious conditions, dermatological and gastrointestinal conditions. At this time most pet cats will already have to cope with some disruption from having everyone at home all the time. Keeping cats shut in, if they are usually allowed outside, can be an additional and an even more major stressor, which could possibly cause the development or worsening of stress-related medical conditions.

Stress caused by confinement can also result in the development or increase in feline behaviour problems. For example:

- ***House soiling.*** If your cat is prevented from going outside to go to the toilet, he will need to have extra litter trays provided indoors. If these are not suitable for him, he may then choose to go to the toilet elsewhere in the house.

- ***Fighting between cats that live together***. Cats that live in the same household, even if they get on well, will need some space to get away from each other. The extra space provided from being allowed outside can be very important for cats living with other cats. If this is taken away tensions between them can increase resulting in conflict and fighting.
- ***Biting and scratching.*** Chasing bugs and butterflies and just playing outside provides an enormous amount of the necessary enrichment that a cat requires to be mentally healthy. If the cat is no longer allowed outside, other means of entertainment will need to be provided. But if these are not sufficient there is an increased chance that the cat might instead start to 'play' by attacking human hands and feet.

Therefore, unless your household is infected, self-isolating or at risk, it is far better for both you and your cat to allow outdoor access as normal.

If it is necessary for you to keep your cat indoors advice on how to limit stress and potential behaviour problems can be found on our "Tips if you need to keep your cat indoors" handout.

Keep safe and keep your cats safe and happy.

References and further reading:

https://www.bva.co.uk/news-and-blog/news-article/bva-statement-on-cats-and-covid-19/

Shi, J. *et al* Preprint at bioRxiv
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https://www.livescience.com/cat-infected-covid-19-from-owner.html

Sparkes, A., Bond, R., Buffington, A., Caney, S., German, A., Griffin, B. and Rodan, I., 2016. Impact of stress and distress on physiology and clinical disease in cats. *ISFM Guide to Feline Stress and Health: Managing Negative Emotions to Improve Feline Health and Welfare*.