



Questions and answers from Vet Q&A on 16th June 2026

Q Where does the data come from showing that actual fights between household cats is rare?

A *It is probably largely anecdotal but there is a paper which confirms our experience. When there is conflict between cats, we see a lot of chasing and hissing but it is rare for cats to actually injure each other. This is the paper:*

Elzerman, A.L. et al. (2020) "Conflict and affiliative behavior frequency between cats in multi-cat households: a survey-based study." *Journal of Feline Medicine and Surgery* 22(8): 705-717

Q How do you go about introducing a new cat to an existing one?

A *It depends on the cats involved and their previous social experience. It's easiest when the existing cat is still young and you're introducing another kitten – then it may be possible to do an introduction these fairly quickly. If you're dealing with older cat, those that have previous social experience may cope better with the introduction of a new cat than those without. When a household cat has lost a cat with whom they were bonded, clients often misguidedly acquire another cat as a new friend for the surviving cat and this often doesn't work well.*

The advice is to set up a room for the new cat, such as a spare bedroom, where they can be provided with all the resources they require, such as litter tray, food and water, scratch post, cat tree and resting places. The door to this room is kept shut and the cat given time to get used to their new environment and visits from their new owner. The client can then obtain a bag of cheap cloths and rub one cloth on the facial pheromone areas of each cat and put it in the room with the other cat. If they don't hiss or show other signs of being uncomfortable about this, cloth swapping can be repeated each day. If this continues to go well, the scents of the two cats can be mixed by wiping cloths on both their faces and exposing each to the combined scent. If it is not going well, it is best to stop any scent swapping for a few days and then cautiously restart. When both seems comfortable with each other's scent, the new cat can be allowed to explore the rest of the house for a short period while the existing cat is shut in another room. Sometimes it is also helpful to shut the new cat elsewhere and allow the existing cat to explore the new cat's room briefly. The next step is to either open the door to the new cat's room a crack or install a mesh barrier in the doorway to allow them limited exposure to each other. If they respond well to seeing, hearing and smelling each other through the barrier, the new cat can be let out to mooch about at a time when the existing cat isn't very interested in them eg when they're calmly resting.

Behaviourists are often brought in when introductions have already gone wrong so have to advise that likely to take a long time and may not be successful. It is useful for vets in practice to advise clients to introduce cats gradually (including new kittens) because it is much more difficult to do an introduction when it has already gone wrong previously.

It is difficult because probably a lot of household cats don't get on but owners are not really aware of this because they just tend to avoid each other or occasionally have a bit of conflict which doesn't cause difficulties for their owners. People may not realise that their cats are not



comfortable with each other when they spend time in the same room in separate locations, either staring at each other or looking away from each other to avoid conflict.

Q Do you ever use food to try to create a positive association with each other's presence when introducing cats, especially given that they are solitary feeders?

A *EB does not involve food in introductions as it could increase tension. She may lure a more active cat away into another room and engage them with an activity feeder or food-based game in another room but doesn't have food present when both cats are together.*

Q How do you try to persuade clients of the benefit of changing the position of their cat food bowls and litter trays when they have fixed ideas of where they want them to be to fit in with the décor of their home?

A *Just talk to them about how important it is for the cat to have these resources located in such a way that they feel safe when they are using them, as cats feel vulnerable when eating and toileting. Clients are more willing to make changes to suboptimal litter tray provision if their cats are spraying or urinating in the house outside their tray. It is more difficult if their cats are shut down and don't do anything that's problematic for their owners when they are uncomfortable about the location of their resources.*

Q How do you persuade clients whose cats have stress-related medical conditions eg FIC that their relationship with the other cats in the household is likely to be a factor behind their medical condition?

A *EB has a behaviour RVN in the practice she works in – clients whose cats have had cystitis symptoms more than once are offered the opportunity to have an in-depth conversation about their cats to see if sources of tension or conflict can be identified and modified. It is always worth mentioning at the outside in vet consults that symptoms of FIC and grumbling GI and skin signs etc. may have an emotional component and sow the seed that the relationship between the household cats may be involved. Then if a problem recurs or doesn't resolve, clients are more likely to be receptive to the idea of making changes.*

Q Do you use psychoactive medications to help cat who are experiencing stress in multi-cat households.

A *There are several that can be used and different clinicians may use different ones – we generally use what has worked well for us in the past. EB sometimes uses gabapentin or pregabalin at the beginning of introductions if a cat is really struggling. For longer-term problems, especially if a relationship has broken down, she uses an SSRI alongside environmental changes and behaviour modification. In cats SSRI's sometimes seem to work more quickly and have fewer side-effects than in dogs but it can be difficult to get cats to take*



them. Pregabalin and gabapentin can be used to bridge the few weeks before the effect of an SSRI begins. We discussed that some clinicians have started using venlafaxine in cats and it seems to be easier to administer. BOVA will formulate fluoxetine into a chicken-flavoured liquid but cats often still don't like it. There is a risk of urinary retention in patients treated with SSRI's but EB has not found this to be a problem in most cases and has only had to discontinue treatment in one female cat. Generally in cases of FIC, even if they have previously blocked, the benefit of being less stressed outweighs the risk of urinary retention but owners should be warned about the risk and the cats monitored well.

Q How do you reply to people who say that there are lots of cats in cat cafés and they all get on.

A By explaining that, in some cases, they may have chosen particularly sociable cats to inhabit the cafes, who are not typical of the normal cat population. But that in many cases the cats probably aren't actually very comfortable in the presence of the other cats. The fact that they are sitting in different locations around the café either staring at each other or obviously looking away from each other shows that they are not relaxed in each other's presence. Only those who are sleeping curled up together or are allogrooming or allorubbing are relaxed with each other. The others are only tolerating being in that environment and could be quite stressed.

Q If you have 2 litter mates who have all their resources provided appropriately but have conflict between them and this is getting worse, what is the next step?

A Consider whether there is an external factor influencing their relationship. It could be a cat outside that is affecting them – either because one of the two comes in feeling tense because of having encountered a cat outside or another cat is trying to invade their territory or another cat is hanging around in the garden and they are both becoming wound up about it and redirecting aggression onto each other. This can also happen with frustration if there is a bird outside that they can't get to and they redirect this frustration into aggressive behaviour towards each other.

Also consider whether there have been changes in the house which may have influenced how the cats feel eg new people in the house, a new baby in the family resulting in them being excluded from a room where they used to spend time.

Also need to rule out medical conditions if one is not tolerating things they used to. Check for arthritis or skin conditions which could be reducing their tolerance. If nothing medial is found, the next stage is to go back to the house to check the environment to ensure that appropriate resources are definitely being provided and that appropriate opportunities for hunting simulation play are being provided especially at dusk and dawn when cats are most active. This play needs to involve the hunting sequence of stalking, catching and eating to avoid frustration. If everything is correctly provided and they still don't get on, a period of separation is required while the owners decide if they want to try to reintroduce them.

Q How do you work with two cats whose relationship has broken down when they live in an open plan home and are likely to find confinement to one room difficult?

A EB tries to do this in the least stressful way for both cats. Often one cat is better at being confined in a room than the other and may actually be relieved to be separated from the other



but it may be necessary to swap them if it doesn't initially work well. Clients often realise that their cats are actually much happier and less stressed when separated and then are more open to considering rehoming one of the cats.

Modern minimalist open plan home with white walls are often not good for cats who do better when there is more clutter, so they have hiding places and lots of elevated resting places.

Q What do you most want to see vets do to improve welfare in multi-cat households.

A *To talk about it more and be more pro-active in questioning owners. For example, when seeing a cat with a medical condition other than FIC (when they usually do already), it would be good for vets to ask whether there are other cats at home or whether there have been any changes in the household cats – to open the conversation about potential conflict causing stress etc. And in appointments for kitten vaccination, they could ask how the introduction of the kitten is going, and how the other cats are coping – to be able to suggest some ways of mitigating stresses by providing play outlets for the kitten to avoid them trying to play with reluctant older cats etc.*

Q When talking about GI and skin problems which can occur as a result of stress, do you mean diarrhoea and over-grooming?

A *Yes diarrhoea is one symptom of stress-related GI problems but there can be others. Some cats vomit when they're stressed, and occasionally dogs may also too. Over-grooming is usually actually due to pruritis or pain of some sort, rather than being a direct result of stress. However, cats sometimes overgroom their ventral abdomen due to bladder discomfort when they have FIC which is due to stress. It's important to rule-out pruritis or pain before assuming that over-grooming is due to stress.*

There may be more medical conditions linked to stress in cats than we realise. Even cats who are the only ones in the household can experience cat-related stress if they are in a neighbourhood with a high density of cats, and some of these come into their garden, or sit watching the house from a fence – this can make the resident cat fearful of going outside the toilet etc. As behaviourists, we often suggest cat-proofing the perimeter of gardens to keep the resident cats in a safe area (and prevent other cats coming in) – using overhanging extensions such as by Protectapet. Not many clients actually do so but it can be effective.

Clients often want to put up catios as a way of improving the environment for their cats but they may not achieve this objective. They often don't add a lot of space and don't really compensate for having free access outside. Unless there is a lot of shelter in them, cats probably feel quite vulnerable, so it is important to install high vantage points for them to rest and shrubs and visual barriers to prevent neighbourhood cats coming close and staring at the occupants of the catio. If clients mention that they are going to install a catio, it is worth questioning them about the type they are thinking of in order to point out these factors.

Q Are there any things which prevent other cats coming into the garden as well as the resident cat getting out.

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A You can get rollers to put on the top of fences which do this. The fence overhangs also usually achieve this too. If another cat does manage to get over it, they may be stuck inside the garden which is obviously not helpful, but this very rarely happens.

Also discussed the new types of cat flaps which detect that cats are carrying a prey animal and prevent them getting through the flap. They are a problem for cats who are anxious about neighbouring cats as they can be shut out when dashing to their cat flap to escape the