

Code of Practice for the Welfare of Cats in the ACT

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1. Introduction

This Code of Practice for the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) has been prepared from a consideration of the welfare of cats by the ACT Animal Welfare Advisory Committee (AWAC). Its purpose is to provide general guidelines on the minimum standards of accommodation, management and care that are appropriate to the cat.

Animal welfare considerations are becoming increasingly important in the keeping of animals. This Code is based on established experience and current scientific knowledge. Practices that once were considered acceptable are now being reassessed and modified according to new knowledge and changing attitudes.

This Code of Practice is intended as a guide for people responsible for the welfare and husbandry of domestic cats. It recognises that the basic requirement for welfare of cats is ensuring a husbandry system appropriate to their physiological and behavioural needs.

The basic needs of cats are:

- readily accessible food and water to maintain health and vigour;
- freedom to move, stand, turn around, stretch, sit and lie down;
- to exercise as appropriate;
- mental stimulation;
- companionship with other members of the species or a compatible species, including humans;
- accommodation which provides protection from the weather and which neither harms nor causes distress;
- prevention of disease, injury and behavioural problems, and their prompt treatment should they occur.

A person in charge of a cat has a legal liability under the *Animal Welfare Act 1992* to ensure that it receives appropriate and adequate food, water, shelter and exercise.

This Code does not deal with common or statute law requirements such as those relating to the establishment and operation of a particular venture, environmental protection and occupational health and safety.

2. Responsible Ownership

2.1 Urban Cats

Since humans can alter or control a captive animal's environment, animal welfare includes the concept that people have duties and responsibilities towards animals in their care. Responsible cat ownership means looking after the emotional and physical needs of the cat, and taking into account its interaction with neighbours and its impact on wildlife. Cat owners should:

- recognise that their cat(s) may take wildlife at any time of the day or night and monitor their cats' behaviour accordingly; and

- maintain reasonable control of their cats at all times to both reduce the risk of harm to the cat and to avoid nuisance and danger to the community.

Cats are sentient, social creatures that, in the absence of other cats, need contact with people. Cats must receive sufficient time with people to maintain their psychological well-being. Such contact should include talking, stroking, grooming, and playing in addition to the time spent providing food and water.

For further details on the physical and emotional needs of cats see Section 4.

2.2 Desexing

Cats not intended for breeding must be desexed as early as veterinary advice allows, or within the timeframe stipulated within the *Domestic Animals Act 2000*, unless a permit to keep the cat sexually entire has been obtained under section 75 of that Act.

The veterinary surgeon will tattoo the cat's ear to indicate the animal has been desexed.

Desexing of both male and female cats is essential for minimising the number of unwanted cats that are abandoned, neglected or euthanased. Desexing male cats tends to discourage them from roaming, fighting and spraying urine. Female cats do not need to produce a litter for full physical and emotional development.

2.3 Owner absences

When absent from home for longer than 36 hours ensure the cat's needs are taken into consideration on a daily basis. Ensure alternate carer arrangements such as:

- Boarding the cat at either a commercial establishment or with a competent third party;
- Providing a live-in carer for the cat; or
- Having a person provide care for the cat at home on a daily basis.

When absent from home for a period less than 36 hours with no alternative carer arrangements in place, the cat must have access to water from two or more watering stations to ensure clean water is available. The cat must also have access to ample food and appropriate litter facilities.

2.4 Identification

The *Domestic Animals Act 2000* requires all cats in the ACT to be identified. For cats not resident in the cat curfew area, identification may be provided by:

- a collar and tag showing the phone number or the name and address of the keeper or carer of the cat, or
- a microchip implant by a veterinarian or authorised implanter.

If choosing to identify a cat with a collar and tag, elasticised or "breakaway" collars are recommended. Care is needed in adjusting the collar to ensure that it fits comfortably without being restrictive.

For cats resident in a declared cat curfew area, identification must be by means of an implanted microchip.

A microchip enables a cat to be checked for ownership by veterinarians or animal welfare shelters to enable a quick return to the owner. It is critical to advise the microchip registry of any change of phone number, address or new owner.

2.5 Cats Kept For Pest Control

Cats kept for rabbit or rodent control are the responsibility of the occupiers of the premises. Cats kept for such purposes should have their basic needs as in 1 above, nutritional needs and health care requirements met, and not be left to fend for themselves. Such cats should be desexed and identified.

2.6 Cats Kept for Breeding

The *Domestic Animals Act 2000* requires that an owner of a cat that is not going to be desexed within the timeframe stipulated in the Act, must apply to the Registrar of Domestic Animals for a permit to keep the cat sexually entire

3. Nutrition

Cats need a nutritionally complete and varied diet. The diet should be based on a good quality commercial tinned and/or dry cat food. Lower quality diets are more likely to contain nutritional deficits or excesses, and may contribute to problems such as urinary tract disease. Food appropriate for life stage (e.g. Kitten (to 12 months), adult/maintenance, and senior (> 6 years) and life style (e.g. "Light" for cats prone to being overweight) should be chosen. There are also diets designed to prevent the build up of tartar on teeth and fur balls in the stomach, as well as prescription diets to aid treatment of many medical conditions.

The diet can be supplemented with fresh meat, fish and bone. Bones must be raw to avoid splintering and to aid digestion, and be small enough for the cat to devour, for example chicken wings and necks. Raw bones encourage chewing and help prevent build up of tartar on teeth.

However, it should be noted that excess fish can lead to Vitamin B deficiency and excess liver can lead to Vitamin A toxicity. Raw meat has been associated with *Toxoplasma* and other parasitic and bacterial infections. Some prepared dog foods lack essential nutrients for cats and cats should not be allowed to eat these products in large quantities.

The type and amount of food given at each meal should vary according to age and condition of the cat. Kittens up to 4 months of age need a minimum of three meals a day which can then be gradually reduced. Pregnant and lactating queens at times may require two to three times as much food as other adult cats.

| Age | Amount |
|------------------------------|---------------------|
| Up to 8 weeks of age | 6 meals per day |
| Between 8 weeks and 12 weeks | 4 meals per day |
| Between 12 – 16 weeks | 3 meals per day |
| 4 months and 6 months of age | 2 meals per day |
| Over 6 months | 1 – 2 meals per day |

It is recommended that the type and flavour of food offered be varied for interest and to avoid boredom.

Milk is not essential as part of an adult cat's diet. Some cats are lactose intolerant and may develop diarrhoea if given cows' milk. Lactose free milks are available. Fresh water must be available at all times.

4. Environment and Housing

4.1 General

An environment that meets the cat's physical needs includes adequate protection from weather and temperature extremes.

As far as possible, cats should be kept indoors between dusk and dawn. Certain potentially fatal diseases such as feline AIDS, as well as debilitating illnesses (e.g. abscesses), are spread by fighting, which is more likely to take place at night. Many species of wildlife are also more susceptible to hunting at night time.

All cats should have access to facilities for jumping, running, climbing and playing. Isolation in an area without windows or without extended contact with humans is not acceptable.

Part of the garden may be specially fenced or netted to give a controlled space, with adequate shelter provided by a purpose built structure or by giving access to the house and/or garage.

Owners who do not have access to garden areas should provide their cat with access to sunlight for at least 30 minutes per day, and uncontaminated grass twice weekly. Grass can be grown in pots indoors.

A stable scratching post which is tall enough so the cat can stretch to their fullest extent, or a fibre mat, should be provided.

A toilet tray must be provided while cats are confined, and placed well away from the cat's bedding, food and water.

Cats may not live happily together, and owners must observe their cats' behaviour for evidence of stress associated with forced proximity to other cats. Signs of stress may include:

- hiding
- fighting
- excess grooming, and

- urination or defecation in inappropriate places

Cats exhibiting these signs should be allowed access to areas away from other cats. Often cats, especially those who are already adults, will exhibit these behaviours when they first meet each other, but will settle down into more amicable relationships over time. There is also a range of behavioural advice available to assist owners to socialise their cats with each other and other companion animals. Ultimately however, if the stress persists to the point where one or more cats are permanently unhappy, it may be necessary to consider re-homing.

4.2 Cats in Cat Curfew Zones

In declared cat curfew areas, cats must be permanently confined to their keeper's or carer's premises for the entire duration of the declared period, which may extend to 24 hours per day. Premises include land as well as buildings.

The recommended method of confinement for cats is within a keeper's or carer's residence with ready access to an appropriate structure that provides fresh air and sunlight. This may be attached to the house or garage and/or be a cat enclosure or cage constructed for the purpose.

Cat ownership should be reconsidered if the cat is to be housed solely in an outdoor enclosure. If a cat is to be permanently housed in an outside enclosure, particular care and extra time will be required to ensure that its needs, especially for human contact, are met.

4.3 Cats Housed in Enclosures (including breeding cats)

The minimum living space for one to three cats is 9 m² x 1.8 m high with an additional 2 m² for each additional cat. This applies whether cats are confined within the house, confined to an outside enclosure, or a combination of both.

Cats may be confined to smaller areas under veterinary, behavioural or medical advice, or for periods up to 24 hours under specific circumstances. If it becomes necessary to confine cats in smaller areas on a permanent or semi permanent basis, alternate arrangements (re-homing) should be considered for the cat's welfare.

Outdoor enclosures for cats, especially those that do not allow access to a carer's house, should be as large as possible and provide protection from sun, rain, wind and extremes of temperature. The minimum requirements are:

- solid wall/s on the weather side, and a solid roofed area providing effective shelter for the planned number of cats;
- solid floorings— this may be a combination of concrete, paving or timber and/or earth;
- shelves or other sites to allow jumping, and other furniture and toys;
- enclosed sleeping areas, sufficient for all cats; and
- openings and doorways designed to prevent escape.

Insulation may be required to prevent temperature extremes. Enclosures should be sited with an interesting outlook and sight of human activity.

5. Environmental Enrichment for Cats

Confinement, especially without human company for many hours, can result in boredom, loneliness and anxiety in cats. This may lead to unwanted behaviours such as marking, scratching or aggression toward people or other animals. However, it is important to note that the suffering may occur even when the unwanted behaviours do not. Enrichment of a cat's environment, and regular positive interaction with people, can help to prevent such problems.

Given the understanding of the activity patterns and interactions of cats with their environment, the following modifications or inclusions can effectively enhance the indoor home environment of a cat.

5.1 The Living Environment

As cats often prefer to rest on elevated objects, provide access to a variety of places for them to explore and rest. Use of three-dimensional space may involve elaborate or simple changes to the indoor environment. Options can include

- constructing catwalks;
- adding kitty igloos, tents or tepees;
- multi-layered scratching poles;
- trees;
- tunnels; and/or
- access to elevated resting spaces (such as the top of a wardrobe).

Regularly changing the environment by moving beds, toys and other accessories may provide for more stimulation. Some cats may prefer stability and be stressed by such changes. Cats may be better able to cope with confinement, loneliness, boredom or separation anxiety during the day if they have a view of the outside world. This could be achieved by constructing an outdoor enclosure and/or allowing the cat access to windows.

5.2 Feeding Enrichment.

Eating comprises a small percentage of a cat's daily activity. Cats in the wild spend a significant portion of the day hunting and searching for food. Instead of feeding a cat at a single, regular location, the cat's meal may be divided into three or more portions and hidden in various corners, shelves, nooks, and crannies on a rotating basis. In addition, particularly delectable treats may be hidden in different locations on a regular basis. The discovery of an extra "jackpot" will further motivate cats to search for their meals. Food and treats may be hidden in intermittent feeding balls and food puzzles (e.g. paper tubes with holes from which food may fall when rolled).

An owner should confirm that the food is being consumed and that the cat is maintaining correct body weight.

5.3 Tactile Stimulation

Cats love to scratch in order to clean and sharpen claws and to mark territory. Suitable material to allow them to express these behaviours should be readily available. These can include:

- scratching mats;
- cardboard scratching boxes;
- door hangers; and/or
- scratching posts. (Particularly posts covered with dense-pile carpet. A scratching post should be stable and tall enough to allow the cat to stretch maximally.)

Some cats find particular pleasure in scratching on a piece of tree limb covered with bark (e.g. firewood log), or old railway sleepers.

5.4 Mental Stimulation.

While many people provide a variety of toys for their cats, these are unlikely to maintain the interest of many cats unless only a few toys are provided at a time.

Toys should stimulate the cat's mind and all the senses: touch, sight, hearing, smell and taste. They should be both passive (with which the cat interacts alone) and active (with which you stimulate the cat to play). Fingers and finger toys are not recommended as this may encourage aggressive and undesirable behaviour in the cat.

Adding a variety of interactive activities can be one of the single most effective approaches toward enriching the social environment of an indoor cat. This is particularly important in single cat households.

Training may also be used as a means to reinforce natural (not trick) behaviours (i.e. behaviours which occur as part of their normal behavioural repertoire). Reinforcing, shaping, and even sequencing behaviours which are naturally expressed can complement learning and serve to further enrich the cats' social environment. Only positive reinforcement (rewards based reinforcement) training should be used. Punishment is ineffective and inhumane and should not be used.

6. Hygiene

Food bowls should be washed after every meal.

Water bowls should be washed daily.

Bedding should be changed weekly or more often if soiled.

Toilet trays should be large enough for the cat to turn around comfortably, have high sides and a minimum of 5cm of litter. Faeces and soiled litter should be removed daily. Litter should be changed every 3 days or every day if used by several cats. Toilet trays should be washed, and scalded with hot water everytime the litter is changed. Where cats have access to alternate toilet arrangements, tray hygiene may be maintained with less frequent cleaning. Additional trays may be required when housing multiple cats.

Pregnant women and those who are immuno-suppressed should take extra care when handling cat litter trays, for example by wearing gloves.

Enclosures should be cleaned and disinfected weekly. Cleaning and disinfecting agents should be chosen on the basis of their suitability, safety and effectiveness. Some common disinfectants, particularly those derived from or containing coal or wood tar products are toxic to cats. Phenol-based agents, pine oil, cresol, and chloroxylenols should not be used because they are particularly toxic to cats. Bleach or chlorine based disinfectants are commonly effective against cat pathogens

Manufacturer's instructions for the use of cleaning, disinfecting or flea control agents should be followed since too dilute a solution may be ineffective and too concentrated a solution may be toxic to animals. Disinfectants will need to be rinsed away with water.

7. Health Care

7.1 Prevention of Disease

A program of vaccination against Feline Enteritis, Rhinotracheitis and Calicivirus should be carried out. The need for other vaccinations should be discussed with a veterinarian.

An effective worm control program with an approved medication against gastrointestinal worms should be carried out. Cats under twelve weeks of age require more frequent worming against roundworms than adult cats. Attention should also be paid to the control of external parasites. The need for heartworm prevention and flea control should be discussed with a veterinarian.

A new cat should be free of contagious diseases and parasites. Examination by a veterinarian and/or a period of quarantine from other cats is recommended prior to introduction to a household.

A cat showing signs of a disease should be isolated immediately and veterinary advice should be sought.

7.2 Health Monitoring

Each cat should be observed at least once daily to monitor its health. The person observing the cat(s) should note whether each animal:

- is eating normally;
- is drinking normally;
- is breathing normally;
- is urinating and defecating properly;
- is expressing its usual behaviour;
- is able to move about freely; and
- has a normal coat.

Regular grooming of cats assists detection of some diseases and parasite problems. Semi-long-haired and long-haired cats should be groomed every day. Short-haired cats may need grooming only once a week.

7.3 Signs of Disease or Injury

Veterinary advice should be sought if a cat is showing signs of ill health, such as:

- runny nose, runny or inflamed eyes;
- repeated sneezing;
- repeated vomiting;
- severe or prolonged diarrhoea;
- lameness for more than a 24 hour period;
- significant weight loss or lack of appetite;
- wounds, irritations or inflammations;
- significant hair loss;
- repeated scratching and shaking of head; and/or
- bloody saliva or a rotten smell from the mouth.

Urgent veterinary advice should be sought if your cat is exhibiting any of the following signs of ill-health:

- rapid / laboured breathing;
- inability to stand or walk;
- bleeding or swelling of body parts;
- apparent pain;
- fits or staggering; and/or
- straining or inability to urinate or defecate.

8. Transport

8.1 Modes of Transport

Cats may be transported by motor vehicle, rail or air. The person(s) or company responsible for transporting them should ensure that they are transported at all times in a way that minimises stress, does not cause injury and prevents escape.

The mode of transport acceptable will be determined in part by the distance to be travelled, the familiarity of the cat to travel, and the health status of the cat.

In most circumstances cats being transported should be confined in a suitable container. These containers should be kept level and secured against movement at all times during transport. Suitable containers may be made of rigid plastics, metal mesh or wood. Cats can easily escape from cardboard containers. Containers should be constructed with a strong framework with

joints made so the animal cannot escape due to continual biting and scratching at the corners of the container. The container should have no protuberance that could injure the cat during transport.

The container should be large enough to permit each cat contained therein to stand, turnaround and lie down.

To provide ventilation, the whole of one face of the container should be open and covered with bars, metal mesh or smooth expanded metal securely attached to the container. Additional ventilation holes should be provided on all three of the remaining sides. The total ventilation area should provide a minimum of 16% of the total surface area of the four sides.¹

Where multiple cages are transported placement or stacking should not obstruct ventilation.

Access to the container should be by a sliding or hinged door adequately secured to prevent accidental opening and escape.

Containers should be easy to clean and disinfect.

The number of adult cats in one container should not exceed two, and then only if they are compatible. Kittens from the same household may be transported together and the number should be related to the size and strength of the individual animals as well as the size of the container.

At all times during transport, cats should be protected against extreme temperatures. They must not be left in a parked vehicle in warm weather or in a container that is exposed to direct sunlight.

For interstate transport, advice should be sought from the airline or railway. International transport should follow the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service (AQIS) and International Air Transport Association (IATA) standards and requirements.

8.2 Food and Water during Transport

Cats should be transported in the shortest time possible. Adequate and appropriate drinking water should be provided. If transported for longer than six hours, drinking water should be provided in a water vessel securely fixed to the side of the container.

If in transport for 24 hours or longer, provision must be made for food to be given to the cat at least every 24 hours. Cats/kittens under the age of 6 months and pregnant cats may need to be fed every 8 hours.

8.3 Labelling of Container

Except when the cat is travelling with its owner in a private motor vehicle, the transport container should have both a label on the top and at least one of the four sides with the name, address and phone contact number of both the sender and receiver and a label saying LIVE ANIMAL.

¹ Total ventilation area required under IATA Live Animals Regulations

8.4 Use of Tranquillisers during Transport

Tranquillisation of cats for transport is not recommended. Tranquillisers are prescription drugs that may have severe side effects, such as overheating or hypothermia due to disruption of temperature regulatory systems. Such drugs may only be prescribed by a veterinarian, with whom the carer should fully discuss their use.

9. Breeding

These comments relate to minimum welfare standards that are not necessarily the same as the standards required by a controlling body for registered purebred cat breeders. People interested in registered purebred cat breeding should contact a local controlling body.

Keeping cats for breeding should only be commenced after careful consideration of all the requirements. A permit to keep a sexually entire cat must be obtained from the ACT Government.

Persons planning to breed cats should carefully assess their own lifestyles. It takes time and energy and a significant financial outlay to produce, raise and find homes for every litter.

Cats selected and retained for breeding should have a balanced temperament, be physically healthy, and genetically sound.

The deliberate breeding of malformed animals is unacceptable. For example, breeds such as the Sphinx, Manx, Cymric, Munchkin and Scottish Fold may have genetic health problems associated with such breeding.

Kittens are best raised where they have extensive contact with their carer to ensure that they will be emotionally stable and acceptable as part of the family. House raised kittens should be trained to use a toilet tray, to accept grooming, to relate to other cats, and to respond positively to humans. Long haired and semi long haired kittens should be groomed daily from 5 weeks of age to accustom them to grooming.

Prior to going to their new homes, kittens should be health checked by a veterinarian at the time of the first vaccination. A vaccination program as recommended by the veterinarian should be followed. Kittens are not to be removed from their mother younger than eight weeks of age and then only if eating solid food.

Males can reach sexual maturity from around five months. Females can come into oestrus (in season/on heat) as early as four months of age. At first mating they should be a minimum of ten months of age, but preferably twelve months. Potential breeding animals should be checked by a veterinarian for sound health (including teeth) and physical maturity, and vaccinated against Feline Enteritis and respiratory diseases to boost immunity.

Sexually mature stock should be kept confined at all times to prevent contact with infectious diseases and parasites, and separate from cats of the opposite sex to prevent unplanned pregnancies. Any area of confinement should meet the requirements of sections 4 and 5.

For companionship, an entire male cat may be housed with a compatible neutered male or a spayed female cat. Entire male cats are unlikely to live amicably with other entire male cats in confined circumstances. Owners should observe behaviours exhibited by cats to ensure compatibility.

The average gestation period for a cat is nine weeks. After 60 days, owners should provide a suitable area for kitting. The area should be clean, safe, quiet and protected from weather. If the cat experiences difficulty, veterinary advice should be sought.

Queens should be used to breed no more than 3 litters over 2 years. Female sexually entire cats may come into oestrus within 2 weeks of the birth of a litter and thereafter every few weeks. Pregnancy and lactation is stressful to cats and breeding should be limited. Stress of breeding and lactation increases with age and, in general, these cats should be desexed by six years of age.

10. Placement of Kittens

Owners are responsible for finding suitable homes for all kittens produced by their cats, including kittens of any unintended breeding or kittens that may not have any commercial value.

Kittens should be weaned, vaccinated and wormed prior to re-homing. The *Code of Practice for the Sale of Animals*, gazetted under the *ACT Animal Welfare Act 1992*, requires that a kitten be a minimum of eight weeks of age before leaving its mother. This is to facilitate physical, immunological, behavioural, social and mental development.

New owners should be provided with information about diet; when to desex and vaccinate; worming; grooming; housing; identification and general health care. Appropriate information is provided within this code

11. Disposal of Unwanted Kittens/Cats

It is recognised that there will be times when a person(s) will no longer be able to keep and/or care for their pet cat(s).

Owners may make arrangements to pass their cat(s) on to a new owner as a companion animal either privately or through organisations such as the RSPCA. Pet shops, veterinarians and cat adoption centres might be able to assist with the re-homing of animals.

All relevant medical and behavioural history, including records of previous vaccinations, should be provided to the new owner or carer. Ownership details should be changed by the previous owner on relevant databases, such as microchip registries.

Persons concerned about apparently stray cats/kittens on their property should take them to the RSPCA or the local vet.

When a cat or a kitten cannot be re-homed, it may be necessary for it to be euthanased. Euthanasia must be performed by a veterinary surgeon.