

Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine at Tufts University



**CATNIP**



The Newsletter for Caring Cat Owners

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## **UPDATE ON ALLERGIES**

For more than a decade, Patricia Smith and her two cats, Sunshine and Stormy, were a firmly-bonded trio. Then, quite unexpectedly, Patricia met Gary, who would eventually become her husband. As love blossomed, so did Gary's allergies.

As it turned out, Gary was highly allergic to many things, from perfumes and household cleaning products to cats. Especially cats. The couple went to great lengths to remedy the problem. They sacrificed by living separately for more than three years. Patty also gave up wearing perfume and scented lotions. They replaced cleaning products with environmentally-friendly, unscented ones.

Gary even tried allergy pills and incurred the time and expense of painful allergy shots. All to no avail. Just the mere sight of Patricia's cats sent him into a severe episode of wheezing and sneezing. Ultimately, Patty made the heart-wrenching decision to find a new home for Stormy and Sunshine.

One day, this distressing scenario may never have to occur again.

## **NEW THERAPY SHOWS PROMISE**

For the past four years, researchers at the University of California at Los Angeles and the University of New Mexico have been working on an experimental therapy that may, in essence, stop the molecular process that triggers a person's allergic reaction to cats. This new research is showing promise in animal studies and could be a potential treatment against the misery-causing cat allergies in humans in the not-too-distant future. In addition, it may also benefit patients with severe allergies to peanuts.

Andrew Saxon, lead researcher and director of UCLA's Clinical Immunology and Allergy Center explains, "We made a cat-human fusion protein that binds to the inhibitory receptor of a human allergic cell. At the same time, it binds to the allergic antibody that people have to cats on those cells and turns those cells off. One of the receptor molecules works like a gas pedal by triggering the allergic reaction. The other receptor molecule works like a brake. In essence, the gas pedal and brake are pushed at the same time, thereby turning off the allergic response to cats."

Keith Hnilica, DVM, an associate professor of dermatology in the department of small animal clinical sciences at the University of Tennessee, adds, "In order to get the allergic reaction, you must have a lock-and-key kind of fit with these molecules - the antibodies and the antigens. Once you have that lock-and-key fit, it opens the door, and all sorts of chemicals are released that cause the symptoms. Basically, it's almost like putting a big glob of glue on the key so that it can no longer unlock that door and let out the chemical."

According to Dr. Hnilica, the cat allergen is one of the top five most potent allergy-inducing compounds. Others include allergies to cockroaches and dust mites. The feline allergen is very prevalent in the environment, Dr. Hnilica notes, because people with cats carry it wherever they go - they take it to school, to work, and on the subway. It's relatively easy to avoid exposure to say, bees or wool, but it's nearly impossible to avoid cat allergens.

*"Even people who don't own cats can be exposed to the cat allergen through other people who do own cats," he says. (continued)*

Until this treatment is approved for use by the general public, what's an allergic person to do? Gene Nesbitt, DVM, a veterinary dermatologist and clinical professor at Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine at Tufts University, offers these helpful tips to ease symptoms:

- Conduct grooming outdoors
- Bathe your cat weekly, weather permitting
- Use a vacuum that has a Hepa filter on your carpet regularly
- Use a room air cleaner

### ***CURE MAY BE YEARS AWAY***

Before you throw out those tissue boxes, realize that a cure for cat allergies may still be years away. Many of the treatments currently on the market work partially, but nothing seems to work completely. To date, there is no silver bullet or magic cure. "This is a new technique that has only been used in lab animals," stresses Dr. Nesbitt. "It is still a long time in coming into clinical use."

Dr. Hnilica concurs, adding, "We're still trying to find answers to solve that problem and help control allergy symptoms in people. This experimental treatment does a lot to show what can be done to alter the mechanisms of the allergic reaction at the molecular level. Will it ever become a functional product? Maybe, but I think it's probably going to be a long way down the road."

### ***POISONOUS HOLIDAY PLANTS***

- Amaryllis (bulb)
- Balsam
- Cedar
- Christmas cactus
- Christmas rose
- Elderberry
- English ivy
- Holly
- Juniper
- Mistletoe
- Narcissus (bulb)
- Poinsettia

### ***PET LOSS HOTLINE***

Veterinary student Anna Ludi knows that in order to be a successful veterinarian, she needs to know more than the medical side of this profession. That's why she elected to work at the pet loss hotline at Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine at Tufts University.

"This gives me the opportunity to sharpen my counseling skills and learn how to deal with people who are grieving about an injured or dying pet," says Ludi, of Sherburne, Massachusetts. *(continued)*

Ludi and other student volunteers devote time to speak with parents and their children. They also offer educational packets and suggest a list of age appropriate books on coping with death. These books given children the tools they need to handle their grief.

Among the titles of books that help families deal with their sadness over losing a pet include *Cat Heaven* by Cynthia Rylant (Scholastic Press), *Barn Kitty* by June Kirkpatrick (Azro Press), *For Every Cat An Angel* by Christine Davis (Lighthearted Press), *The Loss of a Pet* by William Sife, PhD (Howell Book House), and *When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide for Understanding Death* by Laurie Krasny Brown (Little and Brown).

“We’re here to help the parents as well as their kids during this sad time,” says Ludi.

To learn more about the Tufts pet loss hotline, you can visit the Web site:

**[www.tufts.edu/vet/petloss](http://www.tufts.edu/vet/petloss)** or call **508 839-7966**.

### ***MUST LOVE CATS***

Sara Ryan’s first several dates with Brett Harder were resounding successes, complete with sumptuous dinners, sincere conversation and spontaneous laughter. Ryan’s radar told her Harder possessed long-term relationship potential and that he could, just possibly, be “the one.” What she did not count on, however, was the immediate and unabated dislike her beloved and much-doted-upon 10- year-old cat, Bailey, displayed toward Harder.

Sparks flew when Bailey first met Harder, who wasn’t a cat person, but liked animals and was willing, at first, to be patient and give Bailey his space. The cat’s first acts of disapproval included sulking and glaring whenever the couple relaxed on the couch. Bailey’s strategy soon escalated to include run-by ankle nips and regular litter box lapses whenever Harder came over.

Unfortunately, Harder did not have unlimited patience either toward Bailey’s behavior or Sara’s anxiety over her cat, leaving Sara to wonder whether love would ever be in the cards for her as long as Bailey lived.

### ***NEW RULES FOR DATING***

Welcome to the new world of dating - when a cat, dog or other pet plays a big part in your life. The rules of dating have dramatically changed in this information age. Some singles do background checks, provide highly detailed personal ads, and participate in online chat rooms to weed out the bad and hopefully, find the right partner.

The good news for cat lovers who seek friendships or serious relationships with other cat people is that their mutual interest places them in a more easily-defined dating category. There is also no shortage of resources available to help find that special someone who loves your feline friend as much as you or find someone willing to do whatever it takes to keep love and a happy household alive. (*continued*)

Cat people can seek companions sharing their interest in felines at local shelters, breed rescues, adoption clinics, cat shows, and any events or linked to such organizations, where like minds tend to congregate. Wear or use personal items, such as T-shirts, key chains or breed bumper stickers, all of which can act as ice-breakers or conversation starters.

### **FELINE BEHAVIOR**

Some have employed creative methods to find a cat-loving person. Chicago-area veterinarian, Scott Griffiths, DVM, recalls how one woman in his waiting area, distraught at her cat's obvious suffering, found her soul mate in a man who was also present with his cat and managed to say just the right things to make her feel better.

*"They claim neither was looking for romance at the time, but that chance meeting ended up in a wedding to which I was cordially invited,"* Dr. Griffiths says.

However, many people just don't have that kind of time or interest when it comes to actively seeking someone with similar interests. Enter pet-centered online dating services, where people from just about anywhere can connect with others who espouse the same lifestyles, hobbies, quirks and preferences.

To direct your online search toward cat lovers only, many pet-centered dating sites boast the ability to join together animal lovers for happily ever after; some mainstream sites offer areas specifically for pet lovers. One site, [www.animalpeople.com](http://www.animalpeople.com), which has been featured in USA Today, The New York Times and People Magazine Online, claims "Pets Bring People Closer" and provides users with an easy-to-navigate site. Another Web site known as [www.animalattraction.com](http://www.animalattraction.com), claims it is "The Place for Pet Lovers." Finally, a third pet-friendly Web site called [www.lovemelovemypets.com](http://www.lovemelovemypets.com), offers a quick-search option that garners pages of results. Most dating sites offer initial free membership and personal ad posting.

Such sites allow cat people to be straightforward about the important role their animals play in their lives and provide members the platform to talk about what site visitors and other members love to share: stories and information about their pets.

### **BUILDING A HAPPY FAMILY**

Finding a match may not prove as difficult as actually making that match work, especially when a jealous cat is involved. However, there are ways in which an initially rocky relationship with a new love's cat can be smoothed, eliminating the cat owner's need to ultimately face a choice between a human mate and a faithful feline companion. Even savvy cat lovers "intruding" upon a cat's hallowed home and horning in on time usually reserved for the cat, can experience difficulty winning over a wary pet's heart.

Nicholas Dodman, BVMS, veterinarian and director of the Animal Behavior Department of Clinical Sciences at Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine at Tufts University, has shepherded many couples - new and established - through the perils of jealous kitty behavior. He is a domestic animal research and animal psychology expert, and author of *The Cat Who Cried for Help* and *If Only They Could Speak: Stories about Pets and Their People*.

*(continued)*

Dr. Dodman recounts one woman who lived alone with her cat. A new boyfriend soon turned serious, moving in and laying claim to territory that had previously belonged to the woman's cat.

### **CATS MAY ACT OUT AND MISBEHAVE**

*"The cat, anxious about this guy's visit, immediately started experiencing psychological problems,"* says Dr. Dodman by exhibiting unfriendly behavior, withdrawal and a refusal to use its litter box. *"The only strategy was to make this guy more popular in the cat's eyes, which meant him taking a step back, becoming a provider, and allowing the cat to come to him."*

The boyfriend was instructed by Dr. Dodman not to make friends with the cat and act nice, but display a nonchalant attitude toward the animal, not forcing the issue. He followed Dr. Dodman's advice (*"the way to a cat's heart is through its stomach"*), fed the cat delicious, particularly aromatic food at a consistent time daily. He successfully changed the perception of the cat, which accepted the boyfriend's overtures and stopped its inappropriate elimination behavior.

Dr. Dodman practices what he advises. During a particularly busy time in Dr. Dodman's career, his own family cat withdrew from him and regarded him with indifference. In order to make himself popular with the cat once again, he took over the morning feeding.

*"My wife said it would never work, but it did,"* says Dr. Dodman. *"It worked only too well. I ultimately had to establish limits on how early I was willing to rise to feed the cat."* For those who find themselves facing a date's skeptical cat, Dr. Dodman recommends to offer gifts (any treat the cat likes), encourage the cat to play with a favorite toy, or engage in its favorite game. In addition, he advises to never stare directly into the eyes of a cat or make any kind of direct approach. Finally, he says, be sincere in your efforts to woo the cat.

### **YOU CANNOT EASILY FOOL A CAT**

*"Cats will see through your veneer,"* says Dr. Dodman. *"Acting nice is one thing, but cats will know if you actually have no time for them."*

Clea Simon, author of *The Feline Mystique: On the Mysterious Connection Between Women and Cats* and *Mew is for Murder*, says that it is common for cats to not immediately cozy up to a new love interest. "Look at it from the cat's point of view," says Simon, of Cambridge, Massachusetts. "Suddenly, someone else is taking up your time and attention, and all the comfy routines are changed. But I'd say 99.9 percent of the time, this goes away with a little patience."

Conversely, if a new date didn't like her animal, Simon, whose own cat was her best barometer in determining whether someone was worthwhile, would wonder why.

*"Except in cases of severe childhood trauma or allergies, I don't think there are any good excuses for people to actively dislike animals,"* she says. (continued)

Another problem is that many people act overeager to get in a cat's good graces.

*"Cats like to take their time and don't like people who come on strong," says Simon. "A startled cat will withdraw, and it will take a lot of time to lure it out again, and a really scared cat may even hiss or scratch. Let kitty sniff your hand and approach you, and always speak softly."*

To help facilitate a budding relationship, take control of the situation and give your date a head start by teaching him or her how to approach, feed and play with your cat. Also, to minimize jealousy, give both your cat and a new love separate, special attention. Let your companion know that sometimes your cat reacts to changes in routine and bad behaviors aren't necessarily personal.

*"Problem behavior, whether it's a hiss or inappropriate elimination, is a reaction to the new noises and smells, and the disruption of routine," says Simon. "Give them both time and help them understand each other."*

### **MISCHIEVOUS MANX**

I have lived alone for many years, but have never really been lonely. For several years after my husband died, I did not have a cat in my life. However, prior to that time, I can't remember not having a cat to keep me company.

From time to time, I mentioned to my daughters that having a cat again might be nice. Each time I spoke, however, I would also worry about the dangers posed by the busy highway that runs in front of my home in Austinville, Virginia. I would want to keep my cat safe.

In the 1960s, I owned a beautiful Manx. Ever since then, I've been partial to that breed's intelligence, loyalty, and loving nature. Each time I would mention the possibility of getting a cat, my daughters would search the Internet with the intention of surprising me with a pedigreed kitten shipped directly to my home.

I discovered their plan and thanked them for their act of kindness. Instead, I told them, I would call a former Manx breeder who lives in my county to see if she had any kittens left. I dialed the phone and she said, "We have just one little kitten left, but you won't like her. She's wild and hasn't been handled much." I appreciated her candor, and asked the woman if she would bring the kitten inside and try to tame her a bit before I arrived the next day. On the way to her home, I was excited about the prospect of meeting a kitten which no one else seemed to want. I expected a small, furry bundle who would hiss and smack at me. But when I first eyed Baby, it was instant love. I knew immediately that she was *"my little girl"* - all 1.5 pounds of her.

That was three years ago. Since Baby's arrival, my formerly tranquil home has been filled with all the activity that I can handle - and then some. Though Baby loves her home, she still longs to be outside at times. So, I take her out each day to romp and play and sometimes, eat grass while I supervise. *(continued)*

Inside my home, Baby loves to jump on the mantle, climb the curtains, and stretch out in my bathtub. She jumps up on my lap, touches my face when she needs my attention, and stands on her back feet and stretches her front paws, softly meowing to signal that I should follow her. Responding to her signal, we could be heading to the screened porch to check out a bird or to the kitchen for a mid-day snack.

My daughters have nicknamed Baby, Little Stripey, because of her bold, black-and-gray stripes, and “that wild and crazy cat.” All I know is that I’m blessed with a loving, smart cat, who retrieves things, including cotton-tipped swabs. If I’m behind a closed door, she will poke her paw under the door to draw my attention.

Yes, Baby is absolutely spoiled and in total charge of my household. She is my little girl who loves me a lot - on her terms, of course. Her attitude shows me that she is aware of how special she is - a special and unequalled gift in my life.

### ***MANY, MANY TOES***

As a veterinarian who specializes in cats, I frequently come across felines in need of good homes. Fortunately, my hospital is located in a fairly residential part of Manhattan in New York City, and the adoptees draw lots of interest. In the past three years, more than 100 kittens and cats in our window display have landed good homes.

For years, I resisted with great difficulty taking home one of these adorable felines for fear of upsetting Crispy, my high-maintenance diva cat. Recently, though, I succumbed to the charms of Mittens, a 14-week-old calico. What won me over wasn’t her cute face, winning personality or sweet meow. I confess - it was her freaky feet!

### ***MANY TOES IS GENETIC BASED***

Mitten is a polydactyl cat. Polydactyl comes from the Greek words, poly (many) and daktulos (fingers). In the case of cats, it refers to many toes. Polydactylism is a naturally-occurring genetic variation that occurs in many animals as well as in humans. Although the trait had been observed earlier, the first official scientific recording of polydactylism was noted in 1868.

The lore behind polydactyl cats is intriguing. It is believed that English Puritans may have taken polydactyl cats on their ships to Boston during the mid-1600s, although it is also possible that the mutation developed in cats already residing in the Boston area. The offspring of these cats are believed to have then traveled on trading ships from Boston to Yarmouth, Massachusetts and Halifax, Nova Scotia, which might explain why these areas have a higher than normal incidence of polydactyl cats.

In Norway, polydactyl cats are known as “*ship’s cats*” because the extra toes supposedly give them better balance on ships during stormy weather. In fact, polydactyl cats were considered to be lucky by sailors, including those heading from Europe to America. These sea-farers also viewed extra-toed cats as better mice hunters. It has been said that there are less polydactyl cats in Europe because many of these cats were destroyed due to witchcraft superstitions. *(continued)*

Polydactyl cats are occasionally referred to as “*mitten cats*,” (explaining my cat’s corny name), “*thumb cats*,” and “*Hemingway cats*.” The latter name refers to the late writer Ernest Hemingway, who made his home on the small island of Key West, Florida. Hemingway shared this island retreat with almost 50 cats, including a six-toed polydactyl named Snowball (or possibly Princess) given to him by a ship captain and drinking buddy named Stanley Dexter. For nearly the next 100 years, unrestrained breeding between this cat’s descendents and the local cats (Alas, they weren’t as keen on spaying and neutering as we are today) led to a high percentage (almost 50 percent) of polydactylism in the local population.

Hemingway isn’t the only famous person linked to polydactyl cats. President Theodore Roosevelt had a polydactyl cat named Slippers, who reigned as one of the first feline residents of the White House. Historically, the original unregistered Maine Coon cats had a high incidence of polydactylism - around 40 percent. It has been written that the extra toes evolved as a “snowshoe foot” to help Maine Coons walk in the snow. Local folk tales claimed that these cats used their big mitts to catch live fish right out of the streams, taking them home to feed their owners.

These stories may sound charming, however, there is no evidence that polydactylism confers any natural selective advantage to affected cats. Breed standards required a normal foot configuration, and did not allow polydactylism in Maine Coons. As a result, this trait was deliberately bred out of this breed. In the Netherlands and Belgium, there is currently a move to restore the polydactyl form of Maine Coons.

Although polydactylism is alluring, breeding cats deliberately for polydactylism is controversial. Some cat enthusiasts fear that unscrupulous breeders would try to produce cats with excessive and disabling numbers of toes on each paw.

Fortunately, polydactyl genetics doesn’t work this way. You can only fit so many toes on a cat’s foot. Even so, a good compromise would be to write breed standards to define the maximum number of toes allowed, to discourage such attempts.

### ***MOST CATS HAVE 18 TOTAL TOES***

Normally, a cat has 18 digits. The front paw has five toes - four toes and one dewclaw (the small toe on the medial side of the foot). Most polydactyl cats have one or two extra toes on each foot, with the extra toes appearing on the thumb side of the foot. Each normal rear paw has four toes.

The polydactylism gene can give rise to either extra toes or extra dewclaws. Each toe has its own “terminal pad” (the fingertip pad) and often an extension of the palmar pad (the larger pad on the front foot) or plantar pad (the larger pad on the rear foot). Cats can have different numbers of toes on each of its front feet. Most cases of polydactylism affect the front feet only. The hind feet are less often affected. It is quite rare to find a cat with polydactyl rear paws and normal front paws. When polydactylism does occur on the hind paws, it tends to cause extra toes rather than a dewclaw. My mutant Mittens, however, has a dewclaw on each of her rear feet. (*continued*)

Variations exist regarding the number of extra toes and how wellformed they are. The most common form of polydactylism results in cats with well-formed extra toes. Others display an enlargement of the inside digit to a degree that it looks (*continued*)

like a “thumb.” This is conventional “*thumb cat*” polydactyl. And then there’s my freaky little Mittens, who has the other form.

While most expressions of polydactylism are harmless, a gene can cause a wide range of defects, ranging from extra toes (no big deal) to missing or abnormal bones (a potentially disabling deformity). Examples include a “*twisty*” mutation - a genetic defect that causes hypoplasia (underdevelopment) or agenesis (absence) of the radius, a major bone of the forearm. One striking result of this gene is the “*triphalangeal pollex*” - a thumb with an extra joint (a “three-boned” thumb), making it look more like an extra finger than the usual little dewclaw.

Cats with these three-boned thumbs, like my Mittens, carry the gene that could put their offspring at risk of producing kittens with underdevelopment or absence of forearm deformities. Of course, we don’t need to worry about Mittens. I spayed her myself when she was six months old. Genetically, polydactylism is a simple autosomal (not related to gender) dominant trait. Cats with extra toes have the dominant gene, Pd. A cat needs only one copy of this gene from either parent to have the trait.

### ***EITHER PARENT CAN PASS ON GENE***

If one parent has this gene, between 40 to 50 percent of the kittens will inherit this gene. However, the kittens do not always inherit extra toes in the same configuration as their extra-toed parent.

Because many polydactyl cats carry the gene for normal toes, the trait is never “fixed.” In other words, even breeding two polydactyls doesn’t guarantee all the kittens will be polydactyl. In-breeding would increase the percentage of polydactyl offspring, but there will always be a few normal-toed kittens in the litter, because of that recessive gene. Polydactylism doesn’t affect cats adversely. It yields no advantages or disadvantages. It is simply an enchanting quirk, an anomaly - rather than a deformity.

While people often worry about cats catching the extra toes on furnishings, this is rarely a problem. The toenails associated with the extra toes tend to be normal nails, although occasionally, the extra toe is incompletely formed, and the nail bed is deformed, leading to claw problems like ingrown or overgrown claws. Like all feline toenails, the extra ones require regular trimming. In case you were wondering, the most toes ever found on a cat is 32 - eight on each paw - as reported in October 1974.

I’ve shared pictures of my Mittens with Catnip readers. Now it’s your turn. If any of our readers has a polydactyl cat, we’d love to see photos. Please include the toe count along with your photo. If your kitty has more than 27 toes, then please allow us to forward the photo to the Guinness Book of World Records, because the current verified record holder is Tiger, a 27-toed cat residing in Alberta, Canada. Tiger has seven toes on each front foot, seven on her left hind foot, but only six on her right hind. Mittens, with her 22 toes, has a long way to go.

## **KIDS PET LOSS**

In the Gray household, Elvis Costello the cat ruled for nearly 19 years.

*“Elvis has seen the arrival of our two daughters, plus every pet that has come into this house,” says DeeAnn Gray, of Costa Mesa, California. “Elvis truly was king of our house.”*

The night before Elvis died - late November last year - he spent individual time with DeeAnn, her husband, John, and daughters Paris, age 14, and Milan, age 12. The next day, this indoor cat somehow slipped out the front door unnoticed and his dead body was discovered by DeeAnn hours later.

*“I called my husband at work and we both cried,” says DeeAnn. “When our daughters came home from school, they saw our faces. We told them Elvis had died and we had him in a shoe box and asked if they wanted to see him. They said, yes, and tenderly pet him. We then spend that night reminiscing about how cute and silly he was.”*

## **LIKE LOSING AN OLDER SIBLING**

For Paris and Milan, Elvis was like an older sibling.

*“We grew up together,” says Paris, a high school sophomore. “He would sit on my lap when I was reading in my room and fall asleep and snore very loudly. It was hilarious.” As for Milan, Elvis tolerated being placed in a baby stroller and wheeled around the home during Milan’s younger days.*

*“We had lost some pets because they got old or sick, but Elvis was here before I was born,” says Milan, a sixth grader. “We all knew he would die at some point and we were a little ready, but it was still sad.”*

Children losing pets to disease, injury or other circumstance can take its toll - on the entire family. *“Over the past 20 years, we have re-defined our notion of family,” says Ann Weber, PhD, professor of psychology at the University of North Carolina at Asheville. “Pets are more and more part of the family. They are often acquired as a companion for the child. There are a lot of development roles for a child and when the family pet dies, the child not only lost a friend, he or she may feel they lost a sibling of sorts, too, because everyone in the household answers to mom and dad.”*

At the Western Veterinary Conference held earlier this year in Las Vegas, family therapist Carolyn Butler, of Fort Collins, Colorado, led a workshop on children and pet loss. She works closely with veterinarians and families dealing with the death of a beloved family dog or cat or other pet. She regularly advises veterinary staff on the best way to explain to children at age-appropriate levels what happens during pet euthanasia. She urges parents to not hide their sadness.

*“If parents don’t show their sadness or grief, it sends the wrong message to children that grief is wrong,” says Butler. “It is appropriate for parents to tell their children, I’m sad today, or, I just don’t have as much energy today, because I miss our cat. But I still love you and you want to talk about [our cat], that’s fine with me.” (continued)*

The healthiest way to honor their memories is to recognize that you need to grieve before you can truly heal. Realize that sudden tear bursts or unshakable blue moods and other emotion-ridden actions and attitudes are normal. As more regard cats as valued members of their families, their deaths take on a greater heart-tugging toll.

Based on the work by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, M.D., a Swiss psychiatrist in the late 1960s, most pet owners and their family members go through this five-step grieving process:

- Denial/shock
- Anger
- Bargaining
- Depression
- Acceptance

Keep in mind that it may take your children days, weeks or even months to go through this grief process. Also, recognize that not everyone goes through these steps in a linear fashion, says Dr. Weber.

During the grief process, avoid using euphemisms and go with honesty, recommends Dr. Weber. Use the word, “*died*,” rather than “*put to sleep*” when describing a pet’s death to children, particularly those under age 12.

A child may need an operation, for example, in the future and hearing the doctor tell him that he will “*put him to sleep*” to do the procedure may unduly frighten the child if you used that same phrase to describe the death of a family cat.

In addition, Dr. Weber advises to avoid saying, “*God loved Fluffy so much that He had to bring him to heaven.*” The reason? Your child may wonder why God doesn’t love him enough to bring him to heaven, too.”

### **TIPS FOR DIFFERENT AGE GROUPS**

Keeping in mind that a child’s level of maturity may be less or more, therapists offer this general guideline to help parents discuss the dying and death of family pets by these age breakdowns:

- Under age two: Babies and toddlers may sense the pet’s death, based on feeling the stress and emotions expressed by other members of the family.
- Between two and five: Children may be sad because they miss the family cat as a play pal. They may also not recognize that death is permanent and due to the heightened stress in the family, may regress to thumb sucking, tantrums and other childish behaviors.
- Between age five and nine: Children start to recognize that death is permanent, but may fantasize that death can be defied. During this age, some children may harbor resentment for having to feed or care for the family cat and may secretly wish (*continued*) at times that the cat would die. When the cat slips out of the house and gets hit by a car and dies, for instance, these children may be filled with guilt and it is important for parents to let them know that accidents happen and that they did not cause the family cat to die.

(continued)

- Ages 10 and older: Children understand that cats and other living things eventually die, but some may have difficulty accepting that death is permanent. They may express anger or guilt or become curious about death.

Dr. Weber encourages parents and children to reach out to friends and other family members who can listen and who recognize just how sad they are about the death of their pets. She also sees the value in pet loss hotlines or pet loss therapy groups.

*“Grieving for a pet is distinct from other forms of mourning,”* says Dr. Weber.

### **HONOR PET WITH A CEREMONY**

*“There are no traditional ceremonies or social rituals for honoring a funny cat, a sweet bird, or a loyal dog,”* she adds. *“But a pet’s presence punctuates daily life. After the loss, the household is stunned by absence. Morning treats and night time rituals of cuddling on the couch with a purring cat are gone. The routine is shattered; the home feels empty.”*

Alice Moon-Fanelli, PhD, a certified applied animal behaviorist who counsels pet owners at the Animal Behavior Clinic at Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine at Tufts University, says despite the loss they will face, people of all ages who share their lives with pets are fortunate.

*“I feel sorry for people who have never had that kind of bond with an animal,”* says Dr. Moon-Fanelli. *“Each companion animal brings a special connection. They are part of your life in different experiences and different ages. They simply cannot be replaced. You will never go through the same experiences with the same pet at that same age again.”*

Although there are more pet loss hotlines and therapy groups surfacing, Colorado State University’s School of Veterinary Medicine created what is believed to be the nation’s first pet hospice program in early 2004 at its Argus Institute. Director Gail Bishop and her team of veterinary student volunteers help families care for their terminally-ill pets.

*“I’ve been in the human hospice field for 20 years, and this seemed like a natural extension of services,”* says Bishop. *“Often, the death of a family pet tends to be a child’s first experience with death and loss. This is an opportunity to teach healthy coping mechanisms. We all deal with losses in our lives, but not often, are we given the opportunity to create a healthy foundation to deal with our grief.”*

### **STUDENTS COMFORT FAMILIES**

Student volunteers travel within a 30-mile radius of the institute to meet with families of dying pets. They explain what is happening physically to the pet and provide necessary care, such as pain medications, for the pets. *(continued)*

For our veterinary students, this gives them an opportunity to work with end-of-life experiences,” says Bishop. *“They have the opportunity to learn to develop excellent communication skills in a very vulnerable time with families.”*

*(continued)*

To learn more about the Argus Institute's pet hospice program, please visit their Web site: [www.argusinstitute.colostate.edu](http://www.argusinstitute.colostate.edu) or call 970-297-4578.

As for the Gray family, they shared tears when Elvis, their black-and-white cat died. The daughters also reached out to pet-loving friends to express their grief.

*"When Elvis died, I called my very best friend, McKenzie, who now lives in San Diego," says Milan Gray. "She helped me a lot with the pain and helped cheer me up. It was nice having someone my own age to talk to about this. Elvis was a really good cat."*

### **GRIEF COPING TIPS**

Our experts offer 10 coping tips to help you and your children recover from the death of a beloved pet:

- Give yourself permission to grieve. Denying these natural emotions can elevate stress and physical fatigue.
- Seek out friends and family members who share your compassion for animals. Focus more on their good intentions and not necessarily their words.
- Dismiss and ignore comments from those who may trivialize your loss. They may never have had a pet or recognized the closeness of your friendship with your cat.
- Recognize that your departed cat is one-of-a-kind who can never be replaced. When you are ready to adopt a new cat, embrace that new pet for his uniqueness and avoiding comparing him to your previous cat.
- Treat yourself well. Eat healthy meals and get ample sleep.
- Fight through sad or blue moods by exercising. Physical activity raises endorphins and other feel-good hormones in your body. Take longer walks or bike rides, for example, in scenic areas.
- Avoid declarations such as, "I will never get another cat." These statements hinder your healing process. (continued)
- Ritualize your cat's death through a ceremony or memorial service. The greatest way to honor the memory of a pet is to learn how to become a better person for having them in your life.
- Spend time recalling happy, silly, fond memories you shared with your cat.
- Consider writing a letter or poem to and from your departed pet. Getting words down on paper can sometimes help the grieving process.

## **DOCTOR HAIRBALL**

### **Cat Battles Hair Balls and Digestion Problems**

*I have a very smart nine-year-old "tuxedo" cat named Freeway. I acquired her when she was only five weeks old. Freeway grooms herself all the time, and has a very hard time with hair balls. Most of the time, she appears to be in discomfort, and she vomits a lot, maybe five out of every seven days.*

*She is at the veterinarian's office frequently for the discomfort and vomiting. One doctor diagnosed her with pancreatitis, although no blood work was done. After seven years of this, I took her to another veterinarian, who ordered more blood work and X-rays. The blood tests came back normal, but the X-rays revealed hairballs packed into her stomach. I've always suspected that her vomiting was hairball related. I've tried Laxatone<sup>®</sup>, but that just made her vomit even more. I tried special hairball control diets, but they, too, cause her to vomit. Now I give her a half-teaspoon of Vaseline<sup>®</sup>, because she's been constipated, but it doesn't help.*

*Freeway has never been much of a water drinker. However, lately, I see her at the water bowl a lot, which makes me happy (because it helps with her constipation), but concerned. Is there anything I can do to help with her hairball problem?*

*Becki P. Orr, Vineland, New Jersey*

*Dear Becki:*

*I must start my reply with a compliment: you have been very patient to tolerate nearly daily vomiting for the last seven years! The good news is that unless something has recently changed, the vomiting is likely not due to cancer, since by now, more serious signs of illness would have developed. However, this is not to say that daily vomiting is okay.*

*You have mentioned two things in your letter that are somewhat alarming. First, you stated that a hairball is visible in the stomach on a radiograph. Hairballs that do not pass should be surgically removed. If the hairball is repeatedly found on radiographs, surgery must be considered. A hairball stuck in the stomach may be vomited back into the esophagus and cause great harm.*

*Next, your cat has started to drink a lot of water. This could indicate a new problem, such as diabetes or kidney disease, and should be immediately looked into. A trip to your veterinarian is recommended.*

*Getting back to your original question, what can be done about hairballs? Hairballs are a major problem for longhaired cats. Cats normally swallow hair and it usually passes without incident. However, cats that groom excessively (such as those afflicted with skin allergies) and longhaired cats may develop hairball problems.*

*Hairballs represent a matted accumulation of hair in the stomach that frequently is expelled through vomiting. To reduce vomiting secondary to hairballs, either reduce the amount of hair ingested or help the body to pass ingested hair.*

*Frequent brushing is helpful. A trip to the pet grooming salon, with the consideration of a whole body clip, may be prudent. You may aid the passage of hair through the gastrointestinal tract with a petroleum-based lubricant, such as Kat-A-Lax<sup>®</sup>, Laxaire<sup>®</sup>, or Laxatone<sup>®</sup> (continued)*

*(there are many available). Vaseline® may be administered safely, however, many cats find the taste unpleasant. I hope you find my advice helpful. Let us know if surgical removal of a large hairball cures your cat. Best of luck to you and your pet.*

*Michael Stone DVM, ACVIM*

*Assistant Clinical Professor Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine at Tufts University*

## **DOCTOR GLAND PROBLEM**

### **What's the Best Option for Gland Problem?**

*I have a mixed breed female cat named Collar, who was diagnosed with hypothyroidism several months ago. Since then, we have been giving her a medical salve prescribed by our veterinarian that we rub into her ear. She has indicated a strong objection to this treatment, so it was replaced by a liquid medication given in an eye dropper into the throat. Unfortunately, she hates that too!*

*The veterinarian mentioned that there is an operation that removes the thyroid gland and thus prevents this condition, but that the procedure is dangerous (if the cat has a thyroid gland also in her throat.) Is this operation the only - and best - way to solve the problem? Radiation was also mentioned, but the price tag is out of the question unless it's a matter of life or death.*

*Basically, what we need to know is if my cat will require medication treatment for her entire life. Should the operation be considered? Can a cat live a full life without a thyroid gland or is she in for deteriorating health? Please enlighten us as to the possible outcome for Collar. Thank you very much.*

*Mary R. Sullivan, via e-mail*

*Dear Mary:*

*Your cat has hyperthyroidism (excessive production of thyroid hormone), not hypothyroidism (thyroid hormone deficiency). The words sound similar, but their meanings are quite different. Hyperthyroidism is the most common glandular disorder in cats, and typically affects older cats older than 10 years.*

*There are several options for treatment. The most common options are medication, surgery, or radioactive iodine. Surgery and radioactive iodine are likely to cure the condition. Medication doesn't cure the condition, however, it effectively controls it.*

*Radioactive iodine treatment is curative, non-invasive, and very effective, and is, in my opinion, the best treatment. As you mentioned, it is quite costly, usually between \$1,200 and \$1,600. Medical therapy - administering a drug called methimazole, either orally or transdermally - is effective. However, the medication must be given twice daily for the remainder of the cat's life. Thyroid hormone levels must be monitored every few months to ensure that the medication requirements haven't changed. Side effects have been well documented, but are relatively uncommon.*

*Surgical removal of the thyroid gland is another option. Surgery is usually curative, although complications are possible. In rare instances, cats can have "ectopic" thyroid tissue- a functioning piece of thyroid tissue that is not in the usual location. This often goes (continued)*

*unnoticed by the surgeon, and after surgery, the cat may still have elevated thyroid hormone levels as a result. I suspect this is the "thyroid gland also in her throat" that you refer to in your letter.*

*Another potential complication is damage to the parathyroid glands - small glands located near the thyroid. These glands control the level of calcium in the bloodstream, and damage to these glands during surgery can cause potentially life-threatening blood-calcium disturbances. To avoid this, it is recommended that the surgery be performed by an experienced surgeon, at a facility where the cat can be monitored around the clock, and where blood levels of calcium can be determined immediately on in-house blood chemistry machines. (continued)*

*Cats with uncontrolled hyperthyroidism are a potential anesthetic risk, and it may be necessary to control the thyroid hormone level with medication first, before performing thyroid surgery. After surgery, the thyroid hormone level may return to normal, or it may be low. It is very rare, however, for a cat with low thyroid hormone levels to show clinical signs or suffer any effects of hypothyroidism, and thyroid hormone supplementation is rarely necessary.*

*You may find that the cost of anesthesia, surgery, and postoperative hospitalization and monitoring is not very different from the cost of radioactive iodine treatment. Ask your veterinarian for a detailed estimate.*

*If radioactive iodine therapy isn't significantly more costly, I strongly recommend this treatment, as it requires a simple injection and a brief hospitalization period. Treatment is curative, even if there is ectopic thyroid tissue, because the radioactive iodine concentrates in all thyroid tissue, regardless of whether it's in the usual location or not.*

*Arnold Plotnick, DVM  
Medical Editor*

## **DISASTER PLAN**

Andrew. Frances. Jeanne. Katrina. Rita. A hurricane by any name, still spells disaster. Seeing images of lost, frightened cats and other companion animals separated from their loving owners in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina jars us. More importantly, I hope it propels action to protect our pets against future natural disasters.

We can't predict when or where Mother Nature will unleash her ire, but we can take steps to reduce her punch. In recent issues of Catnip, we addressed how to protect pets against natural disasters and of the need for microchip identifications for all cats, even strictly indoor ones.

The aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in the Gulf Coast magnifies that message even more. Pets are indeed part of our families - part of our lives. Cats pose a unique challenge. Unlike dogs, they don't always come when called or feel brave enough to approach a rescuer coaxing them with a treat. Cats tend to hide or flee when disaster strikes and become lost, disoriented, and hungry.

I am grateful to report that faculty, staff, and students from Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine at Tufts University responded swiftly in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. They quickly packaged and shipped supplies to the Massachusetts Veterinary Medical Assistance Team stationed at the veterinary school in Louisiana. (continued)

The pharmacy department ensured essential life-saving drugs were included. Others pitched in to coordinate supplies, medicine, and veterinary support to the estimated 2,500 people and their pets transported from the hurricane center to Camp Edwards on Otis Air Force Base in Bourne, Massachusetts.

These were immediate actions, but everyone here understands - and is very willing - to continue their help in the months to come.

Nationally, organizations like The Humane Society of the United States, the American Veterinary Medical Association, and ASPCA have teams rescuing and finding temporary or permanent homes for thousands of pets separated from their owners.

I urge you to take time this week and prepare a disaster kit and evacuation plan for your pets. This includes pet carriers, a two-week supply of food and drinking water, extra collar and leash, pet first-aid kit, photos of your pets, and copies of medical records. To learn more, the AVMA has a helpful booklet called "Saving the Whole Family" that you can download from their Web site: [www.avma.org](http://www.avma.org). The HSUS's disaster booklet can be accessed by visiting their Web site: [www.hsus.org](http://www.hsus.org). We love our pets. Let's show them how much by protecting them the best way that we can.

Arden Moore, Editor

### ***PETS AND DATING FUN FACTS***

- A Google search of the keywords, "tips for dating people with cats," took exactly 0.18 seconds to display more than 1,500,000 matches.
- The keywords, "dating and cats," turned up more than 850,000 matches in 0.14 seconds.
- According to the Web site, [www.datemypet.com](http://www.datemypet.com), 73 percent of site members are women; 27 percent are men.
- The Web site's top five states for membership are California, New York, Washington, Florida, and Texas.