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Living with a Deaf Cat

When we think of cats who are different—cats with disabilities—we generally first think of cats with obvious, visible differences. For instance, we may get a mental image of a cat

with three legs, or missing an eye, or perhaps a cat who is paralyzed. We may simply overlook the invisible disabilities a cat may be living with. Deafness is one of these hidden issues.

Deaf cats are just like hearing cats in all other ways. When we discover that a cat is deaf, or if we are considering adopting a deaf cat, it is important to sort through the misinformation to learn how to best live with a deaf feline companion.

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How do cats become deaf?

Cats can lose their hearing as they age, just as many humans do. Generally, this is a gradual process, so it may be difficult to notice. The eardrums become less flexible, and sounds are not transmitted as effectively. Typically, these cats will show subtle behavior changes like not coming when we call them or not noticing when we arrive home from work.

Some cats are born partially or completely deaf because of a genetic defect; this is called "congenital deafness." In most cases of congenital deafness, the deafness is pigment related, and most of these cats have an all-white or mostly white haircoat. These cats are *not* albino, which is a complete lack of all pigment. They do have color in the irises of their eyes, and they may have color in their skin or in part of their haircoat. It is a myth that every white cat is deaf, or that white cats with blue eyes, green eyes, or one of each are always deaf.

How will I know if my cat is deaf?

Generally, it is harder to tell if a cat is deaf than it is to tell that a dog is deaf, particularly if there is a hearing cat in the household. A deaf cat will tend to look to the hearing cat for visual clues about what is going on. The deaf cat will play with its hearing companion, chasing through the house just like a normal cat.



It may be easier to notice deafness when only one cat is present in the home. The cat may sleep very soundly. You may also notice that she startles more easily. Or she may not notice when you enter the room. To determine if your cat is deaf, clap your hands or rattle your keys when she's facing away from you. No reaction? Then it's a good bet your cat is deaf.

Are there any special health worries associated with deafness in cats?

No. Deafness in cats is generally *not* linked to any special health concerns.

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How do I teach my deaf cat the routine in the household?

Deaf cats are quite visually attuned to their surroundings, so take advantage by using your body language to communicate.

- For instance, when she looks at you, crouch down toward the floor and extending your hand to "call" her to you. Reinforce her instinct to approach you by using a small tasty treat. Standing tall and waving your arms above your head as you approach can communicate your displeasure if she jumps onto the kitchen counter or a table.
- In addition, you can teach a deaf cat to not jump up on a table or counter by using a squirt bottle filled with water set to the "stream" setting. A squirt of water is not painful, gets the cat's attention if she happens to be looking away from you, and actually separates the behavior correction from your person so that your cat does not become afraid of you.
- By creating a scheduled routine and sticking to it, you can quickly teach a deaf cat important facts, such as when meals happen and the feeding location.

How do I communicate with my deaf cat?

As mentioned earlier, deaf cats are highly visual and tend to be very alert and aware of their surroundings when awake.

- Visually, we can use a number of strategies to get their attention. Flashing the overhead lights when we enter the room will prompt them to look around and see us. A simple laser pointer can get their attention if they are facing away from us. Focus the laser pointer on the floor just ahead of your cat, and then "lure" him to turn around and notice you.
- Touch and vibration are also important to deaf cats. A firm stomp on the floor uses vibration to communicate your presence and cause him to look around for the source. You can then call him to you or head toward the food dish. Stroking, brushing, and combing may be quite comforting. Purring is a tactile experience—it causes a vibration—so when you cuddle your deaf cat, see if she responds to your "purr."
- And, of course, play is a great way to communicate with your deaf cat. Toys and feathers attached to strings or short poles make for great hunting and chasing games. Some cats will even learn to "fetch." (Also see the handout "Teaching and Training a Deaf Cat.")

What else should I be aware of to help my deaf cat?

The most important thing to remember with a deaf cat is that the cat is deaf. This may seem obvious, but we bear a special responsibility for deaf cats. They cannot hear traffic or a honking automobile horn, so they need and deserve to live a protected indoor lifestyle. Outdoor enclosures provide great environmental enrichment, and many cats can learn to walk on a harness and leash. Start indoors, and progress slowly with leash walks.

Deaf cats may feel a vibration in the floor as we approach them, but they may not, so it is important not to sneak up and startle them. Often, firmly tapping a foot nearby is enough to wake them or get their attention. It is also important to teach children appropriate respect for deaf cats.

With a bit of thought, consideration, and training (for both cat and human), deaf cats can lead normal, long, rich, and happy lives.

This client information sheet is based on material written by: Robin Downing, DVM, CVPP, CCRP, DAAPM.

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