

## Special Needs Cats

The term *special needs* can indicate a variety of different health issues or physical limitations, usually requiring specific care and an understanding of the condition so quality of life can be supported for an animal. Cats adapt amazingly well to life when hearing or vision slowly fades, for example, but can have more difficulty when the loss is abrupt. In either case, special needs cats can require that modifications be made in the home, or medications be given. But, they're still cats and making sure they continue to have access to a cat-centric life that makes them happy is crucial for their well-being.

Cats are notoriously stoic! Discuss pain management with your vet ahead of time if your cat's diagnosis assumes pain will eventually be a factor. Do not wait until a Friday afternoon to reach out for help.

**Elderly Cats:** As cats age we might not notice subtle changes that happen over time. Some cats may have a decrease in appetite or start meowing or yowling at night making it difficult for anyone to sleep. But the one thing that never seems to change is a cat's love of warmth. Make use of this and move her bed close to a heat register or buy a heated cat bed. You cat's yowling at night may indicate that she is disoriented. Try bringing her into bed with you. Schedule a vet exam to rule out health issues that could be in addition to normal aging. In the meantime, invest in some good ear plugs so your sleep isn't interrupted.

Resources need to be easy for your senior cat to access. That might mean a litter box with one low side, food and water in more than one spot, and stairs or a ramp to help her up to your bed. If your cat still wants to play, incorporate playtime into each day. You might need to brush her more often since her body is producing less sebum now. Choose a soft brush since skin can thin and become more sensitive with age.

**Vision Loss:** Cats who go blind can usually adjust to the changes, but this is not the time to start rearranging furniture or redecorating. Maintain their favorite routes throughout the home. If there are any dangerous areas, such as the top of a staircase, block that off with a baby gate. Keep your cat's daily routine the same; this will give her a sense of comfort. And use your voice to let her know where you are or call her to you for neck and head rubs to reassure her. She might enjoy catnip or silvervine\* toys that she can find and play with by tracking the scent. If you have other animals, put a bell on their collars to give her a heads up on their location. Cats with vision loss need to remain inside.

\*Silvervine is from a species of kiwifruit and a higher percentage of cats respond to this than to catnip. The powdered form is recommended when first introducing it to your cat.

**Hearing Loss:** The brainstem auditory evoked response or BAER hearing test is one your vet can help you with. There are other tests but none as accurate at this. Deaf cats can fool people into thinking they can hear by using their extremely sensitive whiskers to sense and respond to air movement. They also feel and react to vibrations, sometimes making it difficult to easily confirm deafness since they can appear to act just as a hearing cat would.

Once you have confirmed that your cat is deaf, work to teach her hand signals, which you can create. This will be your own language to communicate with her. Keep your deaf cat busy with enrichment, such as food-dispensing toys and reward-based training so boredom is less likely to consume her and lead to unwanted behaviors.

Cats have very sensitive hearing, with a frequency range far greater than humans and dogs, so when they begin to lose this sense, they can feel quite vulnerable. Since they are prey as well as predators, they rely on their dynamic hearing for survival. If you notice that your cat gets startled more often when someone appears, give her time to adapt to using her other senses. Remember to take her changing hearing into consideration when moving around her. If waking a deaf cat is necessary, go slowly by touching or gently moving the bed she is on. Cats with hearing loss should be kept indoors; as with vision loss, a hearing-impaired cat is at risk outside.

**Movement Limitations:** There are numerous reasons why cats might have issues with movement: arthritis, amputated limbs, cerebellar hypoplasia, just to name a few. The incredible part is that these cats can and do live long, happy lives. Balance and gait can be affected by any of these diagnoses but will rarely stop cats from living normal lives. The one limiting factor for cats with arthritis is pain, so it's important to talk with your vet about pain management before your cat becomes uncomfortable.

Make life easy for your cat by examining your home environment for anything that might need to be modified for her. Can she access her resources easily? Can she get into her litter boxes or jump onto your bed comfortably? Would a ramp or stairs help her reach your bed with less effort? Could a different style of litter box accommodate her better? Is there room for improvement to help her navigate your home more comfortably? Give her the best life possible by making sure that no activity is a struggle for her.

**Resources for Enrichment:** All cats can get bored and special needs cats are no exception. Just because your cat can no longer jump or see, this is no reason to stop being creative with her enrichment. This is an excellent reason to get *even more creative* with her enrichment! Here are resources so you can do just that.

<https://www.companionanimalpsychology.com/search?q=enrichment+for+cats>

Suggestions provided in this handout are not intended to take the place of veterinary care and advice. Please continue to have your special needs cat seen regularly by your veterinarian.

**Need Help? Call our free Pet Behavior Help Line (503) 416-2983.**