

THE GREAT OUTDOORS IS NO PLACE FOR CATS

Outdoor cats, even otherwise well cared-for cats, face an extraordinary array of dangers. According to The Humane Society of the United States, free-roaming cats typically live less than five years, whereas cats kept exclusively indoors often live to 17 or more years of age.

GENERAL HAZARDS TO FREE-ROAMING CATS

Cars: Cars kill millions of cats each year in the U. S. and maim countless others, either from being hit or from crawling inside the hood of a car to get warm in the winter. Automobile accidents also occur as drivers attempt to avoid hitting a cat in the road.

Poisoning: Cats can find chemicals that are poisonous to them on treated lawns, in rat or mice bait, and on driveways and roads from antifreeze leaked or drained from cars. Antifreeze tastes sweet to a cat, but as little as one teaspoon can be fatal.

Animal Attacks: Outdoor cats can be injured or killed by free-roaming dogs, wildlife, and other cats. Cats can suffer torn ears, scratched eyes, abscesses and other injuries requiring expensive veterinary treatment. Fatal diseases can be transmitted by bites and scratches from infected animals.

Human Abuse: Animal care and control agencies often learn of situations in which cats have been burned, stabbed, or hurt by other means. Free-roaming cats are also susceptible to theft.

Traps: Cats can get caught in traps set for other animals and may become injured or suffer before being released.

Overpopulation: Unaltered outdoor cats are the main source of cat overpopulation, causing millions of unwanted cats to be euthanized at animal shelters each year. Humane societies and animal control agencies struggle daily to rescue, treat, feed, and house stray and unwanted cats. Dealing with this preventable tragedy



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costs taxpayers millions of dollars each year.

FELINE DISEASES

Free-roaming cats are at risk from many diseases, some of which are acquired from prey animals. Some diseases affecting cats can be transmitted to humans. Vaccines are available for some of these diseases, but no vaccine provides 100 percent protection.

Feline Leukemia Virus (FeLV) compromises a cat's immune system and is the leading cause of death due to infectious disease in cats. There is no cure. The virus is shed in feces, milk, and tears, but spread between cats primarily via saliva by grooming, licking, biting, and shared food dishes and litter pans. Kittens can be infected by their mother before birth or during nursing after birth. Clinical signs range from chronic diseases to cancer. Once infected with FeLV, the cat may develop immunity and become resistant to future infections; become a "latent carrier" of the disease; or become persistently infected and die within three years. Death can be sudden or lingering and painful. A vaccine exists and must be given annually, but is not 100 percent effective. There is at least one reported transmittal of FeLV to a mountain lion.



Photo: Alan Hopkins

Feline Panleukopenia Virus (FPV), also known as feline distemper, is extremely contagious either by direct cat to cat contact, or indirect means, i.e., transmitted on clothing, by people, or inanimate objects. Fleas can also spread the virus. FPV attacks and destroys white blood cells in cats, effectively disarming the cat's immune system, making it vulnerable to other diseases. FPV also attacks the gastrointestinal system

and nervous system. Vomiting, diarrhea, and dehydration are common symptoms. Without intensive medical treatment, death will result. A vaccine is available and must be given annually. FPV has been diagnosed in bobcats and in the endangered Florida panther.

Feline Infectious Peritonitis (FIP) is a progressively debilitating, difficult to diagnose, and fatal viral disease. FIP is transmitted via feces, urine, or nasal/oral secretions by direct contact with infected cats as well as use of common food, water dishes and litter pans. FIP causes the cat's immune system to attack its own cells, damaging blood vessels throughout the body. It can infect liver, eye, brain, kidneys, lungs, lymph nodes, heart, and the blood vessels in the body's cavities, causing fluid accumulation in the abdomen or chest cavity. There is no cure or completely effective vaccine for this fatal virus. FIP has been diagnosed in jaguar, mountain lion, and lynx.

Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV) destroys a cat's immune system, and is always fatal. It is most commonly transmitted by cat-to-cat bite wounds and found most often in unneutered free-roaming males. Transmission from mother to kitten can occur during pregnancy and through infected milk if the kitten nurses after birth. FIV leads to chronic infections



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of the mouth, upper respiratory tract, intestinal tract, eyes, and skin. The virus can affect organs such as the kidneys and liver, as well as bone marrow. Cats with FIV may develop cancer. There is no cure. Cats typically die from complications caused by the virus. A vaccine is now available but is not 100% effective, and all current methods of testing for FIV will show a "positive" for cats

vaccinated with the vaccine. FIV has been found in bobcats and the endangered Florida panther.

Upper Respiratory Infections (URI) are highly contagious and common illnesses in felines, especially young kittens. Symptoms include sneezing, nasal discharge, and lack of appetite. Transmission is via aerosol contact between cats. These viruses are extremely stable in the environment, so transmission via inanimate objects is common. Other clinical signs include fever, mouth ulcers, eye infections, blindness, lameness and diarrhea. Medications will alleviate some of the symptoms but do not eliminate the virus. About 80% of cats

that recover from these viruses remain carriers of the disease for months to years. Vaccines are available and must be given annually.

DISEASES AND PARASITES OF CATS TRANSMISSIBLE TO PEOPLE

Rabies is caused by a virus which can infect warm-blooded mammals, including cats, people, wildlife, and farm animals. Outdoor cats are at risk of contact with rabid wild animals such as raccoons, skunks, foxes, and bats. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, cats are the domestic animal most commonly found to be rabid. Cats are closely associated with people and rabid cats often become aggressive. These two factors increase the risk of human exposure. Bites are the most common means of transmission. A 3-year rabies vaccine is available for cats. However, the cat must get a booster the following year for the vaccine to be protective for 3 years.

Rabies is lethal if not detected and treated immediately. Rabies attacks the central nervous system, resulting in paralysis and death. Flu-like symptoms progress to hyperactivity, disorientation, hallucinations, and convulsions. In the last stages of the disease, the victim lapses into a coma and dies of respiratory arrest. Since 1960, there have been only two documented human deaths in the U.S. from rabies contracted from cats. However, the post-exposure treatment of people bitten or scratched by cats infected or suspected to be infected is enormously costly, inconvenient, and can be painful.



Photo: Alan Hopkins

Plague is caused by the bacterium, *Yersinia pestis*, and is transmitted primarily by wild rodent fleas mainly in the states of NM, AZ, CO, and CA. Cats can become infected from flea bites or from eating infected small mammals. The most frequent route of transmission to humans is via the bite of an infected flea. Alternatively, people can contract the illness by direct contact with the secretions of an infected animal or person, such as scratches, bites, or from inhalation of infective droplets released by coughing or sneezing. In recent years, almost all human cases of the most lethal form of the disease, pneumonic plague, have been



Photo: Clipart.com

linked to domestic cats. Plague causes fever, diarrhea, nausea, slurred speech, mental confusion, staggering gait, coughing, enlarged lymph nodes, coma, and death if not treated immediately. A vaccine is no longer commercially available in the U.S.

Cat-Scratch Disease (CSD) is caused by a bacterium, *Bartonella henselae*, and is transmitted from cat to cat by fleas. Over 90 percent of human cases are associated with either a scratch or a bite received from a cat. CSD occurs in people of all ages, but most frequently affects children under the age of 10. People who contract this disease sometimes require treatment including antibiotics, analgesics, bed rest, and heat applied to painful lymph nodes. This disease can cause encephalitis in young children and people with compromised immune systems can become seriously ill and may require prolonged treatment. Up to 80 percent of the cats in some studies were infected with this disease. Cats typically show no symptoms of the disease, and kittens are more commonly infected than adults.

Toxoplasmosis is caused by a tiny protozoan parasite, *Toxoplasma gondii*, which resides in the intestinal tract of cats and in the tissues of many animals and rodents. If contracted by a pregnant woman in her first trimester, it can cause abortion of the fetus or blindness, retardation, or seizures in the newborn. *T. gondii* can also cause infected ewes to abort their lambs or produce stillborns. It is estimated that 30% of cats and up to 50% of humans have been exposed to *T. gondii*.

Cats and people can acquire *T. gondii* from undercooked meat, unpasteurized milk, contaminated water sources, soil or sandboxes contaminated with cat feces, flies, rodents, earthworms, and the litter boxes of infected cats. Toxoplasmosis can cause serious illness in children and even death in individuals with compromised immune systems. A suspected outbreak of toxoplasmosis occurred in British Columbia in 1995. One hundred and ten people were believed to have acquired acute infections from the feces of infected domestic feral cats which entered the drinking water supply. Cats are the only animals in which the organism can complete its complex life cycle and be excreted in the feces. Signs of infection in cats vary from being unapparent to weight loss, fever, diarrhea, pneumonia, encephalitis, and eye disease. Toxoplasmosis may be fatal in young kittens.

Roundworms can reside in the intestinal tract of cats, other domestic animals, and wildlife. Cats can contract this parasite from eating infected wildlife, and mother cats can pass the larvae to their kittens before birth or through milk. The kittens can develop life-threatening disease as a result. Signs of infection in pets include vomiting, loss of appetite, or severe weight loss. Cats infected with these worms contaminate their surroundings by passing eggs or larvae in their feces. People get roundworms through direct contact with infected feces, by chance ingestion of contaminated soil, sand, or plant life. Children are more vulnerable than adults. Roundworms enter the body when ingested as eggs that soon hatch into larvae. The larvae migrate through the liver, lungs, and other organs and tissues where they can cause damage and induce allergic responses. Infection may leave children with permanent visual or neurological damage. Roundworms can remain infective in the soil for a prolonged period. Drugs are available to kill this parasite in cats and people.

Hookworms are a type of roundworm that lives in a cat's digestive tract and can infect human skin, causing lesions. People acquire hookworm larvae through contact with wet sand or soil. For example, sunbathers, children, electricians, plumbers and other workers who crawl beneath raised buildings are more susceptible than the general public. The larvae can remain alive and travel in the skin for up to several months. One type of hookworm can penetrate into deeper tissues and cause more serious damage to intestines and other organs. Drugs are available for cats and people. For more information, go to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention web site at: www.cdc.gov/healthypets/.



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Conclusion: While letting cats outdoors may seem the natural thing to do, the hazards that cats face when they leave home are clearly numerous. The best way to keep cats healthy, and protect wildlife and human health, is to keep cats indoors.

For more information, contact:

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