



Know Your Responsibilities

There's a lot to consider when introducing a new cat to your family – including that they are a lifelong commitment. Here's some tips and things to think about.

1. Neutering

What is neutering?

There are many different words that can be used to describe 'neutering' including desexing, spaying, castration, fixing, sterilisation, altering. In the end, they all refer to the surgical altering of an animal to prevent breeding (having babies).

Strictly speaking, neutering refers to both speying and castration as it's the neutralising of their reproductive capacity via surgical removal of part of an animal's reproductive system. If it's a male cat, this means the testicles are removed. If it is a female cat, then the ovaries and usually the uterus are removed.

This is a significant surgical procedure and under New Zealand legislation, it must only be undertaken by a qualified, registered veterinarian, or a veterinary student under the supervision of a qualified, registered veterinarian.

Should I neuter my cat?

Yes! Neutering is a really important part of population control and has welfare benefits for the desexed cat too. There are lots of [benefits](#) to the cat to neutering cats.

At what age should my cat be desexed?

It's never too late to neuter your cat or kitten. Ideally, neutering will be before they reach sexual maturity and are able to have kittens themselves. This is normally around the age of four to six months old. It is possible to neuter as early as 8 weeks of age, as long as they have reach 1 kg in weight.

Early neutering (around 8 weeks of age) is commonly done by many rescue organisations both here and internationally. It is safe and very effective and guarantees adopted kittens cannot be used for breeding, accidentally or deliberately. This means they don't contribute to our overwhelming stray cat population.¹



¹ Photo by [Ilse Orsel](#) on [Unsplash](#)

When is breeding season for cats?

Cats are long-day breeders which means they start breeding when the day length starts to get longer (i.e. from the shortest day (June 21st)). A typical cat will start cycling in spring and stop again in autumn, which means 'kitten season' occurs over summer.

Kittens born at the end of the season (late autumn/early winter) will likely start cycling in the next spring and can come into season as early as four months of age. Kittens born early in the season (late spring, early summer) are more likely to be nine to ten months old before they first come into heat in the following spring. However, not every cat reads the rule book! Some cats, particularly purebreds kept inside under artificial lights over winter may cycle over the cooler months.

Do desexed cats still spray?

Spraying urine is a normal form of communication for cats - just not one that we tend to appreciate! Cats do spray urine to communicate their sexual status, and neutering significantly reduces this behaviour.

Unfortunately, spraying can also be stress-related, and this form of spraying is not affected by desexing. Anxiety-associated urine spraying is seen in both male and female cats, and the likelihood that it occurs will increase with the number of cats kept together in a household, or when cats feel threatened by other cats in the neighbourhood that may visit your property and threaten their sense of safety. A veterinary visit is needed for this type of spraying.²



Will neutering change my cat's nature?

Neutering a cat will not change their personality. A friendly cat will still be friendly; an anxious cat will still be anxious; a playful cat will still be playful. Neutering does reduce or eliminate sexual behaviours, so they are less likely to roam or show territorial behaviours, which is generally considered a good thing by most people who have cats as companions.

Should my female cat have a litter before being desexed?

No! Well-meaning people may tell suggest that a female cat should have a litter or experience a heat cycle/season before she is desexed because it is 'good for her.' However, the reality is not as simple as that sounds.

Female animals that have not been spayed will cycle frequently during the breeding season until they are mated, and are at more risk of trauma from cat fights, being hit by a vehicle due to the strong desire to roam and find a mate.

Pregnancy is also hard on the body both physically and metabolically, especially for those very young cats who are really just kittens themselves. They are at higher risk of developing cancers

² Photo by [Patrick Slade](#) on [Unsplash](#)

of the uterus, ovaries and mammary glands, as well as suffering from complications of pregnancy and birthing, so there is some significant risks with getting and being pregnant.

It also potentially means a lot of work for the queen's family! A litter of kittens (typically around 5) will need to go to good homes so they don't end up in shelters, or worse, being dumped and adding to the stray population.

That's assuming everything goes well with the birthing and raising of the kittens – remember also there could be the costs veterinary care if it doesn't all go according to plan.

Will desexing my cat make him/her gain weight?

Neutering removes the animals' major source of sex hormones which can slightly lower the metabolic rate meaning they need less food to maintain the same weight. As a result, a desexed animal may gain weight more easily if their diet isn't managed accordingly. It will save a wee bit of money, as a desexed cat needs relatively less food to maintain weight at a healthy level.

Other than preventing breeding, what are the advantages of desexing?

There are many advantages of desexing – some are well known, others not so much. Desexed animals generally live longer, healthier, happier lives due to various health benefits, some of which are listed here.

- **Eliminates “heat” cycles in females.**

Cats are seasonally poly-oestrus and reflex ovulators, which means they come on heat every few weeks during the breeding season and require mating to stop the cycle of heats.

A female cat “on heat” exhibits a range of noticeable behaviours, including loud vocalisations, increased affection, possibly increased anxiety and pacing, reduced appetite, undertaking marking behaviours like spraying and rubbing against & scratching furniture, unusually tail movements, and specific mating postures like lordosis, rolling & twisting their bodies.

- **Reduced roaming activity (in search of mates).**

Reduced roaming means they are also less likely to be hit by a car, fight with other cats, or come into contact with infectious diseases and parasites.

- **Reduced numbers of unwanted litters in females.**

- **Less chance of developing reproductive cancers such as mammary (breast) cancer.**

- **No chance of ovarian/uterine³ and testicular cancers.**

- **Reduces fighting and aggressive behaviours.**

This reduces risk of injury like abscesses and contracting infectious diseases like FIV which are spread by fighting.

³ Assuming a full ovariohysterectomy is done

- Reduces unwanted tom cats being attracted to your property by females in heat.
- Reduces urine and scent marking behaviour.

I want to get my animal neutered, but I can't afford it – what should I do?

Certainly, there is cost involved in desexing and this can be a barrier for some people. Fortunately, the cost of desexing is a one-off expense and there are many initiatives that offer lower cost (sometimes free) desexing for people who can't afford normal veterinary fees. Almost all veterinary clinic already offer significant desexing discounts as a public good service. Contact your local veterinary clinic for advice on where you can get help locally, or contact the SPCA.

What can I do to help prevent cat overpopulation?

- Have your cat desexed!
- Encourage friends, family, and neighbours to have their animals desexed.
- Support and even donate towards the desexing of rescued and stray cats in our communities.⁴



2. Microchipping/identification

A **microchip** is a small electronic device implanted under the skin that provides a permanent form of identification. Microchips are about the size of a grain of rice and are encased in biocompatible glass or polymer, so they don't cause any reaction and are safe to be implanted. They contain a unique identification number but do not emit anything. They are passive devices which are only activated when a scanner is passed over them. The scanner emits a low radio frequency signal that 'reads' the unique number on the microchip.

This unique number contained in the microchip is only useful if it is registered on a searchable database that is linked to your contact information. This should be done at the time it is implanted or anytime there is a change of guardian. It is important to note that microchips do not have any tracking ability. It is only when the microchip number is physically scanned and this number searched on the register that you can be reunited with your cat, so it's really important these details are kept up to date.

Microchipping your cat is a simple, yet highly effective way to ensure their safety and well-being with many benefits.

⁴ Photo by [Fidel Fernando](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Permanent identification

A microchip provides a permanent form of identification that cannot be lost, removed, or altered, unlike collars or tags. Even if your cat gets lost and their collar falls off or is removed, the chip remains as a reliable way to identify them. All veterinary clinics and rescue organisations will have scanners that can read the microchip, along with the council animal control officers.

Microchips do need to be registered on a database with up-to-date contact information to be effective however, just implanting the microchip doesn't link that number to you without registration as well.

In New Zealand, the best database for cats is the New Zealand Companion Animal Register.⁵

Increased chance of reunification - peace of mind for pet owners

Studies show that microchipped cats are significantly more likely to be returned to their owners if they become lost or are found by animal shelters. Microchips help during natural disasters or emergencies, if they're separated during evacuation or other stressful situations.

This was shown after the Christchurch earthquake when 94% of microchipped cats were reunited with their owners and only 24% of cats without microchips were successfully returned. In the event of natural disasters, fires, or other emergencies, a microchip ensures that your cat can be easily identified and reunited with you.

Microchipping offers owners peace of mind - there's a high likelihood of reunification after separation if a microchip has been placed (and contact details kept up to date!).

Safe and non-invasive

1. **It's a quick and minimally invasive procedure:** microchipping is a relatively simple, and quick procedure, a bit like having an injection for a vaccination. It involves a small chip the size of a grain of rice being inserted under the skin, typically between the shoulder blades. Most cats tolerate the procedure well and no sedation is required.
2. **Microchips use RFID Technology:** The microchip contains a unique identification number programmed into it using Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) technology. When a special scanner (which is commonly available at veterinary clinics, rescue organisations and animal control centers) is passed over the microchip, it emits a radio signal that powers the chip, allowing the scanner to read the chip's unique ID number. The microchip is inert at all other times.
3. **No Power Source:** The microchip does not have a battery or internal power source. It is powered by the very localised electromagnetic field created by the scanner. This means the chip remains functional for the animal's entire life, with no need for maintenance or recharging

⁵ <https://www.animalregister.co.nz/>

4. **No Known Health Risks:** The microchips are made from biocompatible materials (such as glass or bio-glass) and are designed to be safe and non-toxic to animals. There are no known long-term health risks from having a microchip implanted.

No collars or tags

Collars can easily come off, especially if a cat is outdoors or in a scuffle with another animal. Microchips don't have this risk since they are embedded under the skin. Collars are particularly a risk for cats that climb trees, as if they can't come under easily, they could get caught up in a branch. They can also get a leg stuck through the collar which can cause horrific injuries to the skin the armpit if not removed very quickly. Of course, collars that can be easily removed often are, and are lost.



A non-visible, yet effective form of ID for cats who hate collars

Some cats dislike wearing collars or might chew on them. A microchip provides a solution for cats that don't tolerate traditional identification methods.⁶

Global recognition

Microchips are internationally recognised and can be read by scanners in many countries. This is especially helpful if your cat is lost while traveling or if you're relocating to a new country, as your cat's identity will still be traceable.

Affordable and one-time cost

The cost of microchipping is relatively low (usually <\$80) and it's a one-time fee that lasts for your cat's lifetime. There are no recurring costs (aside from occasional updates to contact information if necessary).

Easy to update information

If you move, change phone numbers, or adopt a new veterinarian, you can update the contact details registered to your cat's microchip. Just login to <https://www.animalregister.co.nz/> (you should have got an email or login set up when your cat was first registered on the database.) This ensures that the microchip always links to the correct information.

Supports ethical pet breeding and adoption

Microchipping can help track and verify the lineage of a pet, ensuring that ethical practices are followed in breeding and helping prevent illegal or unethical practices.

Many shelters and rescue organizations microchip pets before adoption, ensuring the pet can be tracked back to their original owner if they become lost.

⁶ Photo by [Bhaskar Chowdhury](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Minimal invasion to your cat's daily life

Once implanted, cats can't feel microchips, and the chip doesn't require any maintenance aside from keeping the contact information up to date. It doesn't interfere with cats' normal activities or health.

However, the microchip can't be used to track their whereabouts or health either - it's not a GPS or medical device.

Fewer risks of medical issues

Collars and tags can sometimes cause irritation or allergies in cats, especially if they're wearing them constantly. Cats have been known to get caught up by collars that don't release, and can sustain serious injuries in their armpits if the collar gets stuck there while they're trying to escape them. A microchip avoids these issues as it's embedded under the skin, is non-reactive, and doesn't touch the surface of the skin.

Encourages responsible cat guardianship

Microchipping your cat is an easy and responsible step in ensuring that you're doing everything possible to keep them safe and identifiable. Many local councils now require microchipping of cats as part of their bylaws.⁷

Helps with lost cat recovery programs

Many shelters, rescues, and animal control agencies actively scan for microchips when they find a lost animal. This means that even if your cat is out of your sight, there's a system in place to find and return them to you. Sometimes cats wander far from home or end up in situations where they can't make it back. Microchipping reduces the likelihood of "forever lost" cats because of its permanent ID feature.

3. Regular Health Checks

Regular health checks are a crucial part of being a responsible cat owner in New Zealand (or anywhere) because they help ensure that your cat remains healthy, happy, and protected from preventable illnesses. Here are some key reasons why these check-ups are so important:

Early detection of health issues

1. **Prevent Serious Illness:** Many health problems, like dental disease, kidney disease, diabetes, or arthritis, can develop slowly and may not show obvious signs until they're quite advanced. Regular health checks help veterinarians identify early warning signs of these issues before they become serious, giving you the chance to intervene sooner.

⁷ Companion Animals NZ: <https://www.companionanimals.nz/articles/local-cat-bylaws-what-is-required-and-where-for-our-feline-companions>

2. **Parasite Control:** Regular check-ups allow veterinarians to check for internal and external parasites (e.g., fleas, ticks, worms), which can affect your cat's health. Some parasites, if left untreated, can cause severe illness or even death.
3. **Vaccinations:** In New Zealand, some infectious diseases, like feline panleukopenia and cat flu (Feline herpesvirus (FHV-1) and feline calicivirus (FCV)), are very common and can be fatal. Regular check-ups ensure your cat is up to date with vaccinations, which help protect them from these dangerous diseases.

Monitoring weight and diet

1. **Prevent Obesity:** Overweight cats are more susceptible to various health issues, including diabetes, heart disease, and joint problems. Regular health checks allow your veterinarian to monitor your cat's weight and offer advice on nutrition and portion control.
2. **Tailored Diet Recommendations:** Cats have specific dietary needs depending on their age, breed, activity level, and any health conditions they may have. Regular health checks enable your veterinarian to offer tailored advice on what type of food is best for your cat's health.

Dental health

1. **Prevent Dental Disease:** Dental health is often overlooked in cats, but it's essential for their overall welfare. Regular check-ups help identify early signs of dental disease, such as plaque, tartar, or gingivitis, which can lead to more serious issues like tooth loss or infections.
2. **Improved Quality of Life:** By catching dental issues early, you can help prevent discomfort or pain for your cat, ensuring they can continue eating and enjoying their food without difficulty.

Ensuring proper grooming and skin health

1. **Fur and Skin Conditions:** Cats can develop a range of skin and fur issues, such as allergies, hot spots, or fungal infections, which can be hard to spot if you're not familiar with what to look for. A health check provides an opportunity for your veterinarian to examine your cat's coat and skin closely for signs of issues like fleas, infections, or unusual lumps.
2. **Nail Care:** Overgrown nails or ingrown claws can cause pain and even injury. A health check allows the veterinarian to assess your cat's claws and trim them if necessary.

Senior cat care

1. **Aging Cat Needs:** As cats age, their health needs change, and they may be at higher risk for conditions such as arthritis, dental disease, heart disease, or kidney failure. Regular health checks become even more important for senior cats to ensure they continue to live comfortably and are not suffering from age-related issues.
2. **Quality of Life:** Regular visits allow your veterinarian to monitor changes related to aging and adjust treatments or medications to improve your senior cat's quality of life.

1. **Addressing Behavioural Issues:** Sometimes, changes in behaviour, such as increased aggression, lethargy, or litter box issues, can indicate underlying health problems. Regular health checks give you a chance to discuss any behaviour changes with your veterinarian, who can rule out medical causes and offer behavioural advice.
2. **Stress and Anxiety:** Cats can experience stress, and regular health checks allow you to discuss ways to reduce stress in your cat's environment. Veterinarians can also recommend products or techniques to help manage anxiety in cats, such as pheromone diffusers or calming strategies.

Legal and welfare considerations in New Zealand

1. **Welfare Standards:** In New Zealand, responsibilities of people in charge of animals is set out in the Animal Welfare Act 1999. The Act's secondary legislation - the Code of Welfare | Companion Cats – provide more details about cat care, and sets minimum standards to which cat guardian must adhere. Regular health checks demonstrate that you're meeting the legal obligations of providing proper care for your cat.

Peace of mind

1. **Confidence in Your Cat's Health:** Regular check-ups give you peace of mind knowing that you are actively keeping your cat in the best possible health. It also allows you to ask any questions about your cat's behaviour or well-being, giving you confidence that you're taking the right steps as a responsible owner.
2. **Microchipping and Identification:** Regular veterinarian visits can ensure your cat's microchip is up-to-date and functioning correctly, which is important for identification if your cat gets lost.

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4. Pet insurance

Getting pet insurance for your cat can offer a variety of benefits, both in terms of peace of mind and financial security. Here's a list of key advantages:

Financial protection against unexpected veterinary costs

1. Getting cat insurance helps cover unexpected veterinary bills, such as those for accidents, illnesses, or emergencies. This can alleviate the financial burden during stressful times.
2. Treatments like surgeries, diagnostic tests (e.g., X-rays, MRIs), or specialist care can be expensive. Insurance can help make these more affordable.



⁸ Photo by 蔡世宏 on [Unsplash](#)

3. Without the worry of costs, you're more likely to seek prompt medical treatment when you notice signs of illness, leading to faster recovery and better health outcomes for your cat.
4. Knowing that you have financial support in case of an emergency or unexpected illness helps reduce stress and anxiety, allowing you to focus on your cat's well-being rather than worrying about the cost of treatment.
5. Insurance spreads the cost of treatment over time, making it easier to budget for veterinary care.
6. After surgery or injury, cats may need physical therapy or rehabilitation. Pet insurance can often help cover the cost of these treatments, aiding in a faster and more complete recovery.

Access to better medical care

1. With insurance, you're more likely to be able to afford advanced or specialised treatments (e.g., surgery, cancer treatment, or referral to a specialist), which can improve your cat's chances of recovery.
2. With insurance, you might be more willing to pursue options that could be costly but beneficial to your cat's health.

Coverage for chronic or long-term conditions

If your cat develops a chronic condition like diabetes, arthritis, or kidney disease, pet insurance can help with the long-term cost of medications, vet visits, and treatments required to manage those conditions.

No need to choose between care and finances

Without insurance, you may face the difficult decision of whether to proceed with treatment based on cost. Pet insurance can provide a safety net, ensuring you don't have to choose between giving your cat the care they need and your financial well-being.

Support for cat breeds with special health risks

Some cat breeds are predisposed to specific health conditions (e.g., Maine Coon cats and hypertrophic cardiomyopathy). Pet insurance can help cover the costs of treatment for these hereditary or breed-related diseases.

Convenience of online claims and services

Many pet insurance companies offer online claim submission, making the process quick and efficient. This means less hassle and more time focusing on your cat's recovery or well-being.

Flexible plans

Pet insurance policies are often customizable, allowing you to choose coverage that suits your needs, whether that's comprehensive coverage for all vet visits or a more limited plan for accidents and emergencies.

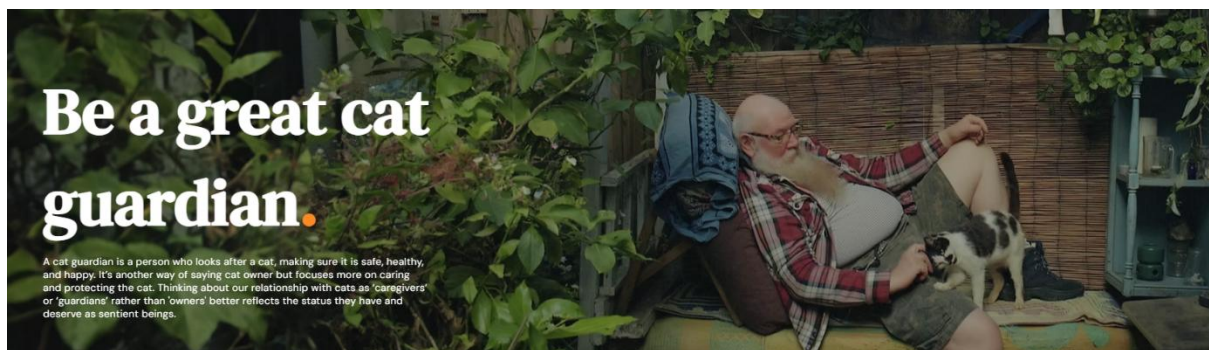
Reduced financial worry in case of cat's illness or death

In the unfortunate event that your cat develops a life-threatening condition or passes away, having insurance can help mitigate the financial impact of end-of-life care or treatment.

5. Keeping cat safe and happy at home

In New Zealand, free-roaming cats face a variety of risks that can negatively impact their health, safety, and the environment. As well, there are risks to the environment and local wildlife. From traffic accidents and disease to the predation of native species, the consequences of free-roaming cats are significant. Keeping cats safe and happy at home, either indoors, via a catio, or cat-proof fencing, is an excellent idea, both to keep the cat safe from threats, and to limit their access to the local environment as predators.

You can find more information at Keeping Cats & Wildlife Safe and at the National Cat Management Groups website.⁹



⁹ <https://www.nzncmg.com/cat-guardians>