

# Cat vet questions

Melissa Catt BVSc  
Paddington Cat Hospital

Melissa graduated from the University of Sydney in 1990. She worked in a private small animal practice in Adelaide for two years and then in England for a further two years. Melissa continued in private practice on her return to Sydney before starting Paddington Cat Hospital with her husband, Randolph Baral in 1997. Melissa is interested in all aspects of feline medicine and has a particular liking for soft tissue surgery. Of course, Melissa was nominatively destined for feline medicine.

183 Glenmore Road  
Paddington NSW 2021



I'm a busy Mum with two boys, two dogs and a Persian x two-year old cat called Mouse. Mouse has dirty ears that I've been trying to clean myself but the problem is that Mouse hates his ears to be cleaned. He seems to scratch the ear area, sometimes a lot and other days it seems to not bother him. Can you advise the best way to clean his ears without getting scratched? Is this something my vet should look at?

Most cats don't require their ears to be cleaned regularly; as they have upright ears with little hair on the inside, they don't tend to get ear problems to nearly the same extent as dogs do. Some cats are not so good at cleaning themselves, and if they spend time outside, can get a build up of dirty wax in the ears. This is usually fairly benign, and shouldn't require any intervention on your part.

If Mouse has only started to have dirty ears fairly recently, and certainly if he is itchy or irritated, he should definitely be checked by a vet as there is possibly a medical problem. Cats can get ear mites, although we don't see this very often in adult cats, and mites can be treated in a number of ways. Diagnosis is fairly easy for this condition usually, as the vet can look down the ears and either see the mites directly, or make a smear onto a microscope slide and see them then. However there are other, potentially quite complicated problems that cats can have with their ears, for example polyps, infections or even cancers (though these are rare in younger cats). Diagnosing and treating these sooner rather than later is really important.

My eight month old kitten has been having sneezing fits. I'm wondering if this is just due to the cooler weather. She regularly has play-time in her outside enclosure and I notice that she's not so prone to sneezing if she's been inside for a while. There's no sign of runny nose or other discharge. Could this be something environmental or is it something like a cold? I'm curious if cats can have allergies to pollen. It doesn't seem serious but I'm still worried about what could be causing this.

Sneezing in cats can be due to a number of things. Probably the most common reason for sneezing is 'cat flu', which is a respiratory viral infection (and by the way, is not at all related to influenza, and is not contagious to humans). This is one of the diseases cats get vaccinated for, although it is important to realise that vaccination does not prevent infection with the virus, but it helps the body's response, so the cat has more resistance to the disease. Cat flu is a whole spectrum- some cats will have one bout and never again, others may have occasional sneezes or brownish discharge from their eyes, and still other kitties may end up with more serious long-term effects with persistent damage to the lining of the nasal cavities. We call these chronic snufflers, and luckily we don't see many, but it is worth keeping in mind.

Certainly cats can have allergies causing sneezing ('allergic rhinitis'), although we don't see this so often. You would expect to see more sneezing when your kitten spends more time outside with more exposure to outdoor allergens, but it would depend on what she is allergic to!

Occasionally, we can see sneezing with other processes, for example if there is a foreign body at the back of the nose area (like an insect leg!). If she is only sneezing occasionally and it is not productive, so long as she seems otherwise well you probably don't need to do anything specific. If she starts producing mucus, shows other signs (for example weepy eyes), or seems at all unwell, it would be a good idea to have her checked over.

Bless her!

Dr Katherine Briscoe  
Gladesville Veterinary Hospital

Dr Katherine Briscoe graduated from the University of Sydney in 2004 with first class honours and the University Medal. She grew up in Sydney and has always had a keen interest in animals. She is currently working at Gladesville Veterinary Hospital.

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# Dog & small animal vet questions

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Can you explain what parvovirus is? I've heard about it and know that dogs should be vaccinated against it but would like to know more about it. Is it very common in Sydney?

Hmm...you've really opened a can of worms here! There is an awful lot of information out there about parvovirus and the amount of detail that describes the virus extends to the actual size and make up of the virus particle, but I will try and keep this relatively simple. Canine parvovirus is the virus that affects dogs. There are a number of different types of parvovirus, all members of a particular family of viruses that infect different types of animals. There are two different types of parvovirus that infect dogs. Canine parvovirus 1 (CPV-1) is a relatively harmless virus that infects dogs. It sometimes cause gastroenteritis (diarrhea and vomiting) and may cause a disease of the heart muscle when it infects very young dogs, but frequently this infection goes unnoticed and the virus does not cause significant disease. Canine parvovirus 2 (CPV-2) is the virus responsible for the classic disease that people call parvovirus. The disease it causes can be very serious and life threatening.

CPV-2 is a virus that persists for very long periods in the environment. It is excreted in the faeces of infected dogs and can survive in the soil for months. Dogs are infected when they ingest the virus particles from the soil. The virus then invades and destroys rapidly dividing cells, such as those that line the intestine and the dividing cells in the bone marrow. It makes sense, then, that CPV-2 causes an enteritis (diarrhea). It takes between 5-12 days from the time the dog is infected to the time that it shows clinical signs of disease. The classic clinical signs of parvoviral infection include diarrhea, vomiting, intestinal bleeding, depression, and anorexia (the animal being off their food). When parvoviral particles infect the bone marrow, they can cause a neutropenia (low number of neutrophils, a particular type of white cell, in the blood) and this can predispose the infected dog to secondary bacterial and viral infections. In severe cases of infection with parvovirus, the dog can develop a fever and septic shock. If puppies are infected when they are in the uterus (i.e. the bitch ingests the parvovirus and the virus spreads to the puppies) or when they are less than 8 weeks of age, then parvovirus can cause a myocarditis (inflammation of the heart muscle).

As you can see, parvovirus infection can have devastating effects on a dog, particularly on puppies. Prevention of infection is therefore the key to ensuring your dog remains happy and healthy. It should always be remembered that because parvovirus particles persist for very long periods of time in the environment, prevention of exposure to the virus is difficult. Additionally, dogs may be infected with CPV-2 and not show clinical signs, but still shed the virus in their faeces, so preventing exposure to areas where infected dogs have been does not mean that your dog will not be exposed to the virus. Vaccination of dogs is the best method we have of trying to prevent dogs from becoming infected with CPV-2, but does not provide 100% protection. It should be remembered that some protection against parvovirus is passed from the mother to the pups, and this may interfere with the action of the vaccination. The protection provided by the mother can last up to 16 weeks, therefore it is important that the final puppy vaccination is given between 16-20 weeks of age, so the mother's antibody does not interfere with the vaccination. A course of three vaccinations should be given from 5-8 weeks of age, and vaccines should be given 4 weeks apart. An annual vaccination is required to maintain immunity to parvovirus.

I hope this has provided you with a little more information on what parvovirus is and what effect it has on dogs. With regard to your question on how common parvovirus infection is in Sydney, the answer depends on which area of Sydney you come from, but it is fairly safe to say that it is common, and all dogs should be vaccinated against parvovirus.

We have guinea pigs and at one time seemed to have so many it was ridiculous. The kids brought two home and they just kept breeding until we found the male and rehomed him. So we currently have six females and four have lost vast amounts of hair. They're in an outside aviary and get morning sun. Their diet is mostly uncooked veggie scrapes from our weekly shopping. Could the hair loss be through lack of vitamins in their diet?

Isn't the breeding capacity of guinea pigs amazing?! I had a similar experience with my own guinea pigs breeding out of control when I was young, and it sounds as though you found the male guinea pig just in time! There are a number of possible causes of the hair loss you describe in your guinea pigs. These can be divided into infectious and non-infectious causes of hair loss (also known as alopecia).



Photo by Animax

# Bird vet questions

**Dr Alex Rosenwax – BVSC MACVSc (Avian Health)  
Bird & Exotics Veterinarian, Green Square.**

Alex graduated from the University of Sydney in 1991. He achieved Membership of the Avian Health Chapter of the Australian College of Veterinary Scientists in 1996. In November 1996 he opened the first and only Sydney all bird and exotic pet practice. The Clinic moved to 1 Hunter St Waterloo in 2003 and sees approximately 80% birds, and 20% fish, reptiles and other exotic pets. Alex is the current president of the Australian Veterinary Association Avian Group.

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I have a hand-raised Lorikeet and am looking to get a mate for it but am unsure of the sex of my current bird. I was told by a local pet store that if I brought the bird in then they could determine the sex by feeling the hip bones. Another local pet shop employee said that this wasn't correct and that only DNA testing can determine the correct sex of the bird. I've heard there can be aggression between same sex birds and want to avoid this and of course I want the second bird to be a mate to my first. Can you also please explain what would be required to take a DNA test?

Lorikeets do not show any obvious signs of their sex. This can be a problem if you have two lorikeets that are the same sex and this is especially a problem if they are both female. When they are in season many female birds may become quite territorial and may attack another female. It is better to get lorikeets of the opposite sex or at least two males.

Unlike lorikeets, many other species of birds do show the sex when adults. For example, budgies have different coloured ceres (around the nostrils it is blue for boys and brown for girls) and male ringnecks have a ring when they are adults. Some birds such as eclectus are, even as juveniles, completely different colours – red for girls and green for boys. Some breeders feel they can determine the sex of a bird by the size of the bird, the hip bone separation and the bird's behaviour. Unfortunately, in lorikeets this is hard to do accurately.

There are two main ways to determine the sex of lorikeets; DNA sexing and surgical sexing. Surgical sexing was used in the past and involved anaesthetising a 6-12 week or older bird, cutting a hole in the abdomen and placing a rigid tube with a magnified camera to check the sex organs. Nowadays most pet birds are sexed using DNA sexing. DNA sexing has the advantage of being painless, safe, accurate and can be performed on any bird from as young as 1 day old. It involves taking a drop of blood and sending it to a laboratory. This sample is ideally taken by your veterinarian using a needle and syringe to collect a few drops of blood from a vein. At home, blood samples can be taken by cutting the nails till they release a drop of blood. This is not ideal as it can be painful, may lead to large amount of blood loss and can lead to sample contamination.

Some DNA sexing companies offer feather sexing, however this is not considered as accurate as blood sexing. This is because it is not uncommon for the feathers to become contaminated with another bird's DNA, leading to inaccurate results. DNA sexing results usually take 1-2 weeks. Your avian veterinarian often will recommend microchipping your bird at the same time in order to correctly identify the bird that has been sexed. This is especially important if the bird ever needs to be moved to another owner or sold.

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Non-infectious causes of hair loss are common and include barbering, endocrine (hormonal) alopecia, and vitamin deficiencies. Barbering is a situation that occurs in group-housed guinea pigs when the dominant guinea pig barbers (pulls the hair out) the subordinate guinea pigs. A guinea pig can also barber itself when housed alone. Close examination of the area of hair loss reveals hair shafts that have been broken off, and the skin underneath the area is not inflamed or itchy (pruritic). Barbering may be caused by inadequate roughage in the diet or protein deficiency. Addition of Lucerne hay to the diet may help if barbering is caused by a deficiency of roughage. Separation of incompatible animals may be necessary if one guinea pig is barbering the others.

Endocrine alopecia (hair loss caused by hormonal imbalances) is quite common in female guinea pigs and occurs when they are pregnant. Presumably, as you have rehoused your male guinea pig, there are no pregnant females in your hutch, so this is an unlikely cause of the hair loss in your guinea pigs.

Nutritional causes of hair loss in guinea pigs, such as vitamin deficiencies, are not common, except Vitamin C deficiency. Clinical signs associated with vitamin C deficiency include a dull coat, dry skin, animals being off their food and a propensity to develop bacterial infections. Vitamin C deficiency is another unlikely cause of hair loss in your case. Fatty acid deficiency and riboflavin deficiency can also cause hair loss, but this is uncommon and should not be the problem in your case.

Guinea pigs can also lose their hair when they are weaned from the mother, so if the four affected guinea pigs have just been weaned, this may be the cause of their hair loss.

In addition to the non-infectious causes of hair loss, there are some infectious (and potentially contagious) diseases that cause hair loss in guinea pigs. Such causes include ringworm (dermatophytosis), which typically causes hair loss and can cause the guinea pig to be itchy. The skin underlying the area of hair loss is often crusty. The lesions often first appear on the face, forehead and ears, and spread over the back and down the limbs. Parasites such as mites and lice can also cause hair loss and may be contagious.

In short, there are many causes of hair loss in guinea pigs. It is less likely that it is a nutritional deficiency causing the hair loss, but I would certainly recommend having your guinea pig examined by a Veterinarian to ensure that the hair loss is not being caused by an infectious disease that may spread to the other guinea pigs in the hutch.

I've recently moved into a spacious apartment and can't have a small dog or cat because of body corporate rules. I had budgies as a kid but I want a more interactive bird and a friend has suggested that I get a tame Alexandrine or similar small parrot. If I get a bird from a breeder or pet store, how can I be sure if it's healthy and free of disease? Are there clues to look for in checking the health of the bird? I don't want to spend a lot of money on a pet that isn't in the best of health and I'm not sure what questions I should ask a breeder or pet store. Also can you recommend what size of cage would be suitable – are there any guidelines you can suggest?

It is extremely important that your bird is healthy when you purchase it as most birds live a long time. Alexandrines live 24-40 years, even budgies and cockatiels live 12-25 years while cockatoos can live for 40-80 years. The problem with birds is that they mask the signs of disease until they are very sick. This is because in the wild if they showed signs of disease predators would kill them. So they may look healthy in a pet store even when they are ill and still die in a week to six months of moving into your house.

When buying a bird, check the facilities the bird has been kept in. Are the other birds in the same cage healthy looking, bright and alert? Check the shop or bird room is clean and the birds have clean cages, and fresh food and water. Your new bird should look bright and alert. The feathers should not have too many dark lines across and the bird's droppings should be firm. If the bird is meant to be hand-raised and tame, it should step straight up onto your hand and not cower at the back of the enclosure. You should ask the shop the history of where the bird came from and what, if any, medications the bird has had. You should also ask about their policy if the bird is found, after an avian veterinary check, to be ill or unsuitable. Read up on the requirements of the species of bird you are buying and see if the pet shop is knowledgeable about these.

I recommend you to visit your local avian veterinarian for a checkover within the first two weeks of the purchase of the bird. The checkover has to be after the bird has left the shop or breeder and not returned to this place. At the checkover at your avian vet your bird will be examined, its droppings tested and other tests as appropriate for your bird performed. This may include some blood tests.


For cage size the answer is most cages are too small for any bird to live in full-time. Most cages should simply be a home for protection while you are away from them, and for sleeping and eating. I recommend, as an absolute minimum, that the cage size be at least twice the wing span of your bird. The cage should be made of powder baked material and not zinc or painted.

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**Kristine Edwards** is a physiotherapist and acupuncturist with a Masters degree in Animal Physiotherapy, and works with both animals and people.

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