

Keeping Your Adult Cat's Brain Healthy

As your cat ages, changes are occurring in their brain. Ultimately, these changes may lead to anxiety, reduced coping ability, confusion, altered sleep patterns and eating habits, house soiling, and altered social interactions with family members and other pets. Some cat owners think that these behaviors are normal in an older cat, but they aren't normal and you may be able to reduce the chances they will occur.

Changes occur long before you see the signs

Studies have shown that these changes start *years before* you may see changes in your cat's cognitive function – meaning her memory, learning, thinking and problem-solving abilities. Adult cats (between 6 and 7 years of age) that seem normal already have reduced cognitive function compared to younger cats, and this can worsen with age.

Start early to protect the brain

Because the changes in the brain occur long before you see the signs of a problem, early intervention may reduce the damage done by aging and help preserve brain function.

- Keep your cat healthy. Some medical conditions, such as diabetes, can affect cognition. Regular veterinary examination can detect problems earlier, so that treatment can be started before problems worsen and become more difficult and costly to treat.
- Maintain your cat's healthy weight. Excess weight can increase the risk of diseases and medical problems that may affect cognition, so keeping your cat at a healthy weight is important to overall health. Talk to your veterinarian about your cat's ideal weight as well as how you can achieve and maintain it.
- Provide stimulation for your cat in various ways
 - play
 - food puzzles, or even hiding small amounts of your cat's food around your home so they need to hunt for it
 - provide new items (paper bags, cardboard boxes) to investigate
 - play videos with moving images to capture their attention
 - position a bird feeder outside a window where your cat can comfortably sit and watch (but not threaten) the birds

Brain food: nutrients help protect your cat's brain function

Nutrition plays a key role in a holistic approach to protecting the brain by targeting some of the causes of age-related changes in the brain.

Omega-3 Fatty Acids:

Omega-3 fatty acids, such as those found in fish oil, play critical roles in the brain. Supplementing these fatty acids helps protect brain cells and their function. They also have anti-inflammatory properties that may reduce age-related damage.

Antioxidants: free radical fighters

There is normally a balance between the production of free radicals, which can harm the body's cells, and the production of protective antioxidants that neutralize these free radicals to reduce

damage. Aging increases free radical production and reduces antioxidant production, leading to a dangerous imbalance that threatens brain function.

Providing antioxidants, such as Vitamin C and Vitamin E, in the diet helps reestablish the balance and reduce the risk of damage.

B vitamins: essential for brain function

B vitamins are important for brain development and cognitive function. B vitamin deficiency can lead to accumulation of an amino acid (amino acids are the natural building blocks of protein) called homocysteine, which is a predictor of decreased cognitive function. Supplementing B vitamins can reduce the risk of homocysteine accumulation.

Arginine

Arginine is an amino acid that helps support blood flow in the brain, making sure that the brain cells have the oxygen and nourishment they need to function.

Combining nutrients for cognitive health

When it comes to nutrition, 1 + 1 might add up to more than 2. Because nutrients may interact with each other, appropriate combinations of nutrients may boost the benefits beyond what each nutrient may provide if supplemented by itself. By providing a combination of nutrients that targets different causes of age-related damage, we may be able to help protect the brain and slow the progression. Aged cats fed a diet supplemented with antioxidants, B vitamins, fish oil and arginine for one year showed significant improvements in cognitive function compared to cats fed a regular diet, showing that nutrition can positively impact cognitive function in older cats.

As your cat ages, keeping their brain healthy is just as important as keeping their body healthy. Through good nutrition and care, you give them the best chances of remaining social, curious, and active in their adult and senior years.

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