

Inappropriate Vocalisation In Cats.

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As urban environments become more consolidated inappropriate vocalisations of both dogs and cats have become one of the major problems with which owners and local authorities have had to contend. Increasingly more legislation is being introduced, more complaints are being filed and more fines are imposed.

Vocalisation is a normal behaviour and a major form of communication. If the dog or cat engages in this behaviour, at inappropriate times or for excessive periods, this can present a problem, not only for the owner but also for the community and the authorities. Education of the pet owner and general public is important to be able to effectively deal with these problems.

Like many behaviour problems, inappropriate vocalisation can just be annoying either to the owner or the neighbours or both. However, excessive vocalisation can also be an indication of pain or discomfort, either physical or psychological or both and pose a serious welfare issue.

Vocalisation can be modified, but not necessarily eliminated completely, if the causes are known. It is important that owners and the community are aware of this and do not have unrealistic expectations. There are many options for treatment of inappropriate vocalisation that should be considered prior to rehoming or euthanasia.

Factors that affect vocalisation include inherited aspects such as breed, previous experience and learnt behaviour and the current environment. A behavioural assessment ascertains which factors are contributing to cause the problem and then a specific treatment program for each case is determined. Medical causes need to be eliminated.

Preferably potential owners would consider their lifestyle and the breed of cat prior to obtaining a cat. For example many oriental breeds are more likely to vocalise excessively and may not be the most appropriate pet for an apartment.

Many animals are left alone all day and provided with neither appropriate mental stimulation nor physical exercise. This can lead to inappropriate vocalisations and other unacceptable behaviours.

Options for treatment should include behaviour modification, but in some cases drug therapy may also need to be considered.

Indoor cats can be provided with many forms of entertainment or occupational therapy. Many cats enjoy having access to plants, either to roll in, to eat or chew or to lie in. To prevent cats eating potentially toxic indoor pot plants a safe indoor garden can be grown in a large litter tray. Two such grass garden areas allows them to be rotated so that one does not get over used. Many plants, such as catnip and cat mint, grown in association with grass, can be used successfully.

There are many suitable toys now available for cats. Appropriate toys for cats left alone all day include ones that do not require owner manipulation. Cat tracks, cat dancers, Bizzy Kitty's can all be purchased from retail outlets. However, many inexpensive toys such as cardboard boxes, paper bags, pipe cleaners, ping pong balls also provide hours of entertainment for cats. Pieces of paper attached to elastic or cat wire toys that can be hung

from door knobs and cupboard doors are useful as these will move whether the owner is present or not.

Regular active interactions with their owners is also important. Cats, like their owners often need to be taught how to play. Interactive games such as hide and seek are fun for both the cat and the owner. Training cats can provide mental stimulation as well as physical exercise. Cats can be taught to perform tricks. They can be taught how to come, sit, give me five, jump and roll over on command.

Cats like a routine. If the owner can feed and interact with the cat at a set time each day it is often helpful to stop attention seeking vocalisation.

Cats that vocalise because of anxiety related problems or compulsive disorders may also need treatment with psychotropic medications. Tricyclic antidepressants and anxiolytics, such as amitriptyline and clomipramine, have proved useful in several cases where behaviour modification alone has proved ineffective. Prior to medication liver and kidney function tests are performed on all the cats. If the cat is older than eight years of age then a full profile, full blood count and biochemistry as well as urinalysis is conducted.

In all cases of inappropriate vocalisation it requires the continued commitment of the owner to reach a successful and prolonged outcome.

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