

How COVID-19 Pandemic Lockdowns have affected Cat Behaviour at Home

COVID-19 lockdowns have caused owners to spend a lot more time at home with their beloved pets. However, each cat copes differently to the change in environment during lockdowns depending on their breed and temperament. Some cats may be unbothered by their owners' change in lifestyle, whereas others may love spending more time with their owners or become stressed. Novel stimuli have been noted to be the cause of change in cat behaviour for years. Therefore, this article aims to understand in what specific ways could the pandemic change domestic cat behaviour at home.

A study by Jezierski *et al.* (2020) interviewed cat owners to understand how the pandemic might have affected behaviour of cats. Most owners couldn't find changes to their cats' behaviour. Some reported their cats have exhibited more attention seeking behaviour, although this would depend on how attached the cat was prior to the pandemic. The paper also suggests that breed can be a factor for behavioural changes during the pandemic. For example, British short hairs are likely to have reduced contact with people, low probability for aggression as well as least active compared to other cats.

The PDSA Paw Report 2020 from the UK has noted 23% of the studied feline population presented new behaviours such as begging for food and waking up owners. Results also revealed 15% of cats spending more time outdoors, perhaps to take time away from their owners. Several articles have reported changes to cat's behaviours noticed by owners given the extra time spent at home. Some owners found their cats to be less affectionate and avoid interacting with their human counterparts. Cats could also express stress through unwelcomed behaviours such as urinating outside of their litter trays. Displacement behaviours such as mounting, pacing, vocalising and scratching were also observed.

The mentioned unusual behaviours are mainly caused by interruption to their normal living routine. Owners were likely to seek more attention from their pets as social interactions with others were limited during lockdowns. Articles also reported owners using their pets to create social media content, including dressing their pets up and making them learn crazy new tricks, which could upset their pets. Cats can find it difficult to adapt to the increased disruptions at home including noises and all the unwanted interactions elicited by owners. Interestingly, another concern raised in an article was related to separation anxiety since pets might find trouble adapting to another new routine when their owners resume their pre-pandemic work routine again.

Owners should be aware of actions that can be taken to improve the welfare of their pets. It is crucial to set a specific time for playing and eating everyday so their cat can have a routine to adhere to as well as receiving an appropriate amount of socialisation. Creating spaces for refuge can be very helpful for cats to escape from stressful situations such as a child at home desperately trying to play with the cat when it doesn't want to. Elevated surfaces are preferred for cats as they would be able to survey the area from a higher vantage point. Lastly, owners should be patient with their pets when they display unwanted behaviours as it is likely to be caused by stressful stimuli that wouldn't usually be present before lockdowns.

Existing scientific studies were limited to the middle of 2020 and no further studies have been conducted. Since many countries have undergone several rounds of lockdown, it is also important to understand how the constant change in lifestyle could affect the mental wellbeing of domestic cats. Therefore, it would be worthwhile to conduct further studies and interviews to gauge a better understanding of the mental wellbeing of cats during this ongoing pandemic to help educate the public on how they can provide a comfortable environment for their pets.

Sources

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