

Special Needs: The Inspiring Lives of Disabled Cats

Cats with disabilities can live long, happy lives, and surprise their owners with their resilience.

Don Vaughan

Stevie, a 17-year old domestic shorthair, has been blind since birth, but you'd never know it to watch her. She does almost everything a sighted cat can do, such as frolicking outdoors, stalking insects and racing around the house. I've seen her sit in the middle of the living room floor and watch a spider walk across the ceiling, said Stevie's owner, Grafton Houston, DVM, owner of The Pet Hospital of Tierrasanta in San Diego. She's not handicapped in the slightest. In fact, I attribute her general well-being to her lack of vision.

Stevie is living proof that being impaired doesn't have to mean a life un-lived. In fact, veterinarians say that with a little help from their owners, most disabled cats can enjoy a long, happy existence.

The worst thing you can do to a disabled cat is treat it as less than whole, said Robert Munger, DVM, president of the Animal Ophthalmology Clinic at the Veterinary Referral Center of North Texas in Dallas. You have to figure out what it can do on its own, but don't limit what its allowed to do, within reason. Don't treat it as an invalid.

Physically impaired cats have an astounding ability to adapt to their situation and the world around them, said Sharon Crowell-Davis, DVM, professor of veterinary behavior at the University of Georgia College of Veterinary Medicine. Owners can facilitate the process with lots of love and understanding, especially when the disability occurs suddenly.

Don't withdraw from your cat as it adapts to its disability, Crowell-Davis said. As the cat learns to cope with the change in its ability to interact with its environment, you need to increase your involvement with and attentiveness to it. A newly blind cat, for example, shouldn't just be left by itself in a corner. Its alone either because it hasn't figured out how to maneuver yet, or it might be clinically depressed, in which case the owner needs to consult a veterinarian.

Leading the Blind Vision loss is not uncommon in cats. Causes include congenital defects, traumatic injury, glaucoma, cataracts, chronic uveitis and degenerative retinal disease. Hypertension is the No. 1 cause of blindness in older cats, Munger said; so senior cats should be examined by a veterinarian at least twice a year.