INCREASING WATER INTAKE

Encouraging your cat to drink: a guide for caregivers

There are many medical conditions, including kidney and bladder problems, for which it would be beneficial to increase the amount of water that cats drink. This guide provides hints and tips to help caregivers find methods that work best for each individual cat.

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Introduction: cats' individual preferences and needs

The domestic cat's ancestors were desert dwellers and derived most of the water they needed for survival from a diet of live prey. As a result, the pet cats we know today tend to drink less water than dogs (though this may vary depending on their diet) and have retained the ability to produce highly concentrated urine. This is a useful adaptation for living in the desert but can cause problems for modern cats, and there are a variety of situations and medical conditions where drinking more water would be helpful (see box). For example, if cats have an illness that means they produce more urine, they can become dehydrated and unwell if they do not drink enough water. Additionally, cats with bladder or urinary problems can benefit from a higher water intake.

Encouraging cats to drink more fluids can be challenging as each cat will have individual preferences and needs. In households with more than one pet the challenge may be even greater, as each pet's preferences and requirements need to be considered. For example, cats may not want to drink from a bowl used by another cat or a dog, even if they get on well. Fortunately, there are lots of practical hints and tips, which are summarised in this guide, although it is important always to introduce changes gradually, as cats do not like sudden changes to their food and water resources, and may take some time to get used to them.

How do I know if my cat is drinking enough?

As caregivers, we tend not to witness our cats drinking, particularly if they are fed a wet (canned/pouch) diet. This is not a concern if there has been no overall change in drinking habits, and the cat is well, with no obvious health concerns. Many cats, in fact, prefer to drink in private or outdoors, so it might just be that they are drinking when we are not looking!

The information in this guide is relevant for all cats, but particularly those with medical conditions where drinking more will be helpful. It is important to be aware that there is also such a thing as drinking too much water (see box on page 3).

Which cats might benefit from an increased water intake?

Medical conditions and other situations where cats could benefit from drinking more water include:

- **Kidney disease** Affected cats are vulnerable to becoming dehydrated, which can result in constipation, loss of appetite and even worsening of their kidney condition
- **Cystitis (bladder inflammation)** Production of dilute urine can help prevent relapses of this and some other bladder conditions
- **Urinary stones (uroliths)** Increasing a cat's water intake can be a vital part of disease management, and help to prevent further stones forming in the bladder and other parts of the urinary system
- **Diabetes mellitus ('sugar diabetes')** Diabetic cats, and particularly those on certain medications, need to avoid becoming dehydrated, so drinking enough is a must
- **Cats receiving medications such as non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs)** Maintaining hydration by drinking enough can be important to help avoid complications. For more information, see International Cat Care's Cat Carer Guide to 'Treating chronic (long-lasting) pain with NSAIDs' (available at **icatcare.org/advice/cat-carer-guides**)

Keep an eye on drinking levels

Too little
If you are concerned that your cat may be dehydrated, it is always best to contact your veterinary team, who will be able to administer fluids safely, if needed. Forcing cats to take water (or food) with a syringe is never recommended as it is highly stressful for cats and can actually cause illness if water enters the cat's lungs.

Too much
Although drinking water is essential for survival, excessive drinking of water (polydipsia) can be a sign of an underlying problem such as diabetes mellitus, kidney disease or hyperthyroidism (overactive thyroid gland). There may be other accompanying signs, such as weight loss, increased hunger or changes in behaviour. If you are worried that a cat in your care is drinking more water than is normal for them, speak to your veterinary team.

How to offer water

Types of water bowl

Every cat is different, but most cats generally prefer to drink from:

- Glass or ceramic bowls (Figure 1);
- Wide and shallow bowls;
- A bowl that is filled to the brim.

Cats tend to prefer bowls with these attributes because it prevents their whiskers from touching the sides and getting wet, and also avoids them having to put their head deep into a bowl, which may make them feel vulnerable. Try experimenting with different types of water bowls and containers, including different materials, to see which ones the cat prefers. Note, however, that metal bowls are noisy, cold and reflective, which may deter some cats. Plastic bowls have other disadvantages in that they can be easily scratched and retain bacteria.

Figure 1: This cat is drinking from a wide and shallow ceramic bowl in the garden. This bowl might have naturally filled with rainwater, which some cats actively prefer.
Source: Sam Taylor

Cats with osteoarthritis (also called degenerative joint disease) or reduced mobility may prefer a bowl that is raised off the ground (Figure 2) or even a tall plant pot or a non-breakable tumbler to drink from, as it may be painful for them to crouch down to drink.

See International Cat Care's Cat Carer Guide to 'Changes to the home environment for cats with muscle/joint pain or mobility problems' (available at **icatcare.org/advice/cat-carer-guides**) for a description of how other simple modifications in the home can improve a cat's comfort and quality of life.

Figure 2: Many cats with osteoarthritis or mobility problems prefer a water or food bowl that is raised off the ground.
Source: Sarah Collins

Regardless of the type of water bowl, all water should be provided fresh daily, and the container cleaned on a regular basis (daily, if possible, with soap or dishwashing detergent and hot water, and then rinsed well). Mould and bacteria can easily build up in food and water bowls, which may not only affect how the water tastes, but also presents a health risk. Some cats like to drink from bowls that collect rainwater outside (see Figure 1) and, likewise, these should be regularly emptied and cleaned.

Number and location of water bowls

When it comes to encouraging cats to drink, the location of water bowls around the home is as equally important as the type of water bowls. If a cat does not have to go very far to find a water source, they are more likely to take the opportunity to drink. Figure 3 illustrates how a cat friendly approach is applied to the location of a cat's resources throughout the home. In terms of water bowls/sources specifically, cats should have:

- At least one water bowl per cat in the home, plus an additional bowl;
- At least one water bowl on every floor of the home, positioned in quiet locations (away from doors, noisy appliances, thoroughfares, etc) and away from litter trays;
- Easy accessibility to their water bowls, preferably from all sides (eg, bowls should be positioned away from the wall to prevent the cat from having their back to the room when drinking, which may make them feel vulnerable; Figure 4);
- Separate bowls for the cat(s) in households that also have dogs (though some may prefer the dog's water!);

Figure 3: The number and location of water bowls in the home are important considerations. Source: International Cat Care

Figure 4: A cat's sense of comfort and security when drinking is enhanced by positioning the water source appropriately. (a) This cat likes to drink from a tall glass. Note that open space around the glass on three sides means the cat does not have to turn their back on their surroundings while drinking. Source: Sam Taylor. *(b) This water fountain is positioned away from the wall to allow the cat to view their surroundings while drinking.* Source: Adobe Stock

Why avoid double feeders? When given the choice, cats prefer fresh, clean water sources away from their eating area. Double feeders with separate divisions for food and water mean the water is in very close proximity to the food, and can easily become contaminated. They are best avoided.

- A bowl of water in the same room as the food bowl, but not positioned directly next to it (avoid 'double feeders');
- Water sources positioned in high locations where the cat feels safe, such as on a shelf, bench or countertop, ensuring that they are secure and cannot be knocked off (Figure 5). Cats with mobility issues will require special consideration, and likely some assistance with accessing these resources (eg, ramps or steps).
- Water sources outside (for cats with outdoor access), close to the entry and exit points of the home.

Figure 5: This cat enjoys drinking from a glass positioned up on a bathroom countertop. Source: Sheilah Robertson

Alternative water sources

Many cats like to drink running or moving water. Alternatives to simply providing water in a bowl include a:

- **Pet water fountain** Whether made of plastic (Figure 6), ceramic or metal, it is always advisable to introduce a water fountain gradually, to ensure acceptance by the cat (see box on page 6). Water fountains must be regularly disassembled and cleaned thoroughly, plus the filter changed, as recommended by the manufacturer;
- **Dripping tap** While often not as practical as a dedicated pet water fountain, a dripping tap is usually located at a height (Figure 7), which cats often prefer;
- **Bowl of water with a floating play object** A small light hollow ball (eg, table tennis ball) floating in a wide bowl full of water may encourage play, thus creating some movement of the water, which may stimulate drinking.

Figure 6: This cat is drinking from a pet water fountain. Source: Sam Taylor

Figure 7: This cat prefers to drink dripping water from the tap. Source: Sam Taylor

Some cats may also prefer to drink out of a clean bath or shower tray containing a small amount of water, or an outdoor container (eg, plant pot) that collects fresh rainwater. With any of these options, it is important to be careful to avoid toxins (poisons), such as pesticide or fertiliser residue inside a plant pot, or detergent/household cleaners. This extends to glasses and cups of coffee/tea or other liquids for human consumption that could potentially be toxic to cats.

Introducing water fountains

Some cats may need a little extra encouragement when faced with novel objects or experiences, such as a new water source. A stepwise approach to introducing a water fountain is recommended:

- Start by placing the fountain in the desired location – without any water or the motor turned on – allowing the cat to investigate;
- Once the cat is comfortable with the fountain, add water;
- As a final step, turn on the motor.

Some models of water fountain may be noisier than others, and this is something to consider if your cat is sensitive to noise. Placing the water fountain on a silicone or rubber mat can help deaden the sound by reducing the vibration. Ensure the water fountain is kept topped up with fresh water, as some become noisy when running low.

Wet food diets

Another key source of water is the cat's food. Wet cat food contains 70–80% water, so feeding a wet diet can be a helpful way to increase a cat's water intake. Such diets, which include pâté-style foods or meaty chunks in gravy or jelly, are typically packaged in a can or pouch.

It is important to speak to your veterinarian before changing your cat's diet, and to introduce any changes very gradually, particularly if your cat is used to eating dry food. New food can be offered mixed with the old diet, or try offering the foods next to each other, slowly altering the proportions (reducing the old, increasing the new). Bear in mind that each cat may have their own preference as regards the style of wet food (eg, jelly, pâté, gravy-type). Wet cat food can contain fewer calories than dry food, so ensure your cat is eating enough by following the manufacturer's instructions and monitoring your cat's weight and body condition score.

An additional approach might be to add small amounts of warm (not hot) water to your cat's wet food, slowly increasing the volume over time. This can also be tried with dry food; although, if left to soak, the texture change may not be enjoyed – so, as always, follow your cat's preferences. Note that this strategy should only be adopted if tolerated by the cat and recommended by your veterinary team.

Drinking water preferences

Some cats may prefer a particular type of water. Many cats, for example, avoid water with high levels of fluoride. Different types of water to try include:

- **Tap water** – if safe for human consumption. For households with a water softener installed, it is worth bearing in mind that some cats prefer unsoftened water;
- **Rainwater** – collected from the garden in a clean container;
- **Still spring water** – non-carbonated;
- **Filtered water** – especially in areas with hard water that is prone to limescale build-up;

• **Room temperature water** – some cats prefer water that is at room temperature over cold water;
• **'Puddle' water** – many cats may prefer drinking from puddles, if given the choice, and this can be mimicked with a bowl or dish placed outside to collect rainwater (Figure 8).

Regardless of the type of water, it should always be fresh. Mouldy or stale water, or water that has been contaminated (eg, through close proximity to a food bowl, litter tray or cleaning products), must be avoided.

Flavours and textures

If plain water is not enough to encourage a cat to drink, there are flavoured options to try, including:
• Water in which a piece of chicken or fish has been poached (with no stock or added salt);
• Liquid from a can of fish in spring water (Figure 9);
• Prawns, meat or fish liquidised in water (producing a soup-like texture);
• Tuna in spring water that is frozen into ice cubes and added to water bowls;

Figure 8: This cat is choosing to drink rainwater that has collected in a plant pot over the water provided in the drinking bowl. Source: Laura Watson

Figure 9: Some cats will enjoy fish in spring water, supplemented with extra water. Source: Sam Taylor

Encouraging your cat to drink at home

Sometimes it might be helpful to encourage your cat to drink more fluids. For example, cats with kidney disease who are vulnerable to becoming dehydrated or cats with feline idiopathic cystitis where producing dilute urine helps prevent relapses.

Types of bowls

Experiment until you find a bowl your cat likes. Remember to clean it daily.

- Cats generally prefer glass and ceramic dishes
- Wide and shallow to prevent whiskers touching the sides
- Use different heights so seniors don't have to crouch down to drink

Liquids to avoid

- Anything containing onions (eg, gravy), as they are poisonous
- Milk
- Salty liquids, like brine or stock

Number and location

- Have several locations, indoors and outdoors, in quiet areas, so that your cat does not need to go far to find water
- One on each level of the home
- One per cat, plus an extra one
- Have water and food in the same room but not right next to each other
- Keep the bowl away from the litter tray
- Position bowls away from walls for easy access from all sides

Water sources and types

- Tap water (if safe for drinking), dripping or in a bowl
- A small amount in the shower tray or bath
- Water fountains. Make sure to regularly clean and change the filter
- Still mineral water
- Keep water fresh and clean, not mouldy or stale
- Collected rain water in dishes or bowls in the garden
- Meat or fish liquidised in water
- Liquid from a can of tuna in spring water
- Wet food diet (as recommended by your vet)
- Water left over from poached chicken or fish

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• Warm water added to liquid treats;
• Commercially available cat 'soups' (to which extra water can be added).

For some cats, offering cat milk can help to boost hydration, but it can also upset a cat's stomach and reduce the amount of nutritious food they eat. It is important, therefore, to discuss this, and the other options presented above, with your veterinary team. Not all options are suitable for all cats (eg, those with certain medical conditions). It is also important that your cat eats enough of their principal diet, and is not choosing a fishy soup over their nutritionally complete and balanced food.

Liquids to avoid
• Salty liquids such as brine, stock or gravy
• Cow's/sheep's/goat's milk (can cause diarrhoea)
• Any liquid containing onions or onion powder (a common ingredient in stocks or gravies)

Are the changes making a difference?

Despite following the advice in this guide, which is summarised in the infographic on page 7, you may still be unsure if your cat is drinking enough, partly because they may be using the new water sources in private. If this is the case, have a chat with your veterinary team – your veterinarian might be able to detect an improvement in hydration when they examine your cat, or they may check the urine to see if it is now more dilute.

If you are still concerned that a cat in your care is not drinking enough water, contact your veterinary team to make sure there is no medical reason that may be affecting their drinking behaviour. It may be recommended that you speak to an accredited clinical animal behaviourist, as underlying stress-related issues (eg, problem dynamics in a multi-cat household) can also affect a cat's drinking behaviour and preferences.

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