Management decisions in a cohort of UK pet kittens, and changes made up to 18 months of age

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Certain decisions by owners in the management of their cats, including outdoor access, living with other cats and vaccinations can impact on health, such as lower urinary tract disorders, road traffic accidents and infectious diseases. However, little information exists on when these decisions are made and the extent to which they change during a cat’s early life. The aim of this study was to investigate changes made to these variables prior to age 18 months.

The Bristol Cats Study is a long-term longitudinal study involving data collection by owner-completed questionnaires. Pertinent data were used from the first four questionnaires (ages 2–4 months, six months, 12 months and 18 months). Only cats with all four questionnaires returned were included in this study (n=1422).

For most cats (80.7%) there was no change in whether they had outdoor access between six and 18 months; 25.4% were indoors only or had restricted lead/run access outdoors and 55.2% had indoor and outdoor access. Some were ‘indoor only’ cats or had lead/run access at six months, but allowed outdoors by 12 months (11.5%) or 18 months (3.0%). A further 4.5% were allowed outdoors at some point but subsequently had outdoor access restricted.

The presence/absence of other cats in the household tended to be consistent from age 2–4 months to 18 months, (76.5% in multi-cat households; 16.6% in single-cat households). Two percent began in multi-cat households but became ‘single cats’ and remained so, whereas 4.2% were initially alone but were joined by one or more cats. The number of cats in ‘multi-cat’ households and changes other than to the overall number was not investigated.

Vaccination data revealed 1324/1404 cats (94.3%) received their two primary vaccines by six months of age. Only 743 (56.1%) of these received their third vaccination a year later.

Relatively few changes occurred during the first 18 months with regards to outdoor access and single/multi-cat households. The lifestyle decisions made at an early age tend to remain consistent to 18 months. It is important for veterinarians to discuss these factors and their implications on health with owners at their first appointment. The suggestion that many cats start but do not complete the initial vaccine course with the first annual vaccine warrants further investigation.