

Meet the cat vet

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Christina Larsen loves her cats.



Written by
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Christina Larsen, DVM, recently joined The Cat Practice veterinary hospital in Birmingham as a feline veterinarian. Larsen is originally from Louisiana and went to veterinary school in Alabama.

Earlier this week, Larsen talked with the *Birmingham Eccentric* about her favorite topic: cats.

Q: First, the big question: who's really smarter, cats or dogs?

Larsen: Why cats, of course!

Q: How long are cats living these days?

Larsen: It is not uncommon for me to see cats over 18, or even 20. I had a patient come in the other day that is 23.

Q: What brought you all the way from Louisiana to Michigan?

Larsen: I was looking at cat-only practices all over the United States. It was more important to me that I work exclusively with cats than it was my geographic location. I figured I could be happy anywhere, as long as I was at the right clinic.

Q: Did you always want to be a veterinarian – and how did you get interested specifically in caring for cats?

Larsen: I always loved cats. I also loved the brain and how things worked. So, when considering career choices, I was considering neurology, psychiatry and veterinary medicine. When I found out that I could become a cat-only vet, well, that was it. Feline behavior is a huge part of being a cat vet. So, I am able to be a kitty psychiatrist as well!

Q: The old adage is that cats have nine lives. Is this true ... are cats a pretty resilient pet?

Larsen: A big reason that cats give this impression is that they're experts at hiding their illnesses. It's important for cat owners to pick up on subtle changes. Changes in appetite, weight loss, excessive drinking, changes in litter box habits, vomiting or "not acting quite right" are all reasons to see the vet. Cats are amazing in what they can endure and how long.

Q: What are some of the biggest health problems that you are seeing in cats? What should cat owners watch out for?

Larsen: Kidney disease, hyperthyroidism, diabetes, intestinal disease, pancreatitis, and arthritis are some of the most common conditions. An increase in drinking and urination, vomiting or diarrhea, increased appetite while losing weight, not wanting to be picked up anymore, not jumping up to usual places or hesitating before making jumps that the cat has always made. A lot of conditions have similar signs. It is important to figure out the underlying cause so that the cat can be treated appropriately.

Q: What advice can you give to cat owners to help their cat live longer?

Larsen: I would encourage exams at least every six months. A year is a long time for a cat. A lot can happen in that time. Recognizing problems early is key. Pain management is also critical in the health and well-being of a cat. They hide pain very well. It is our job to determine if a cat is in pain, and control it appropriately. Many people are still under the impression that dry food is better. We have found that the opposite is actually true. An all-canned diet is best. If you can't do all canned, at least add some wet food. Not only is it better for their digestive system, but you can hide certain medications in there.

And we can't forget about mental stimulation. Put some fun into their lives: hide kibble around the house, put out their favorite toys, teach them some tricks.

Q: Some people feel that cats are aloof and not as friendly or affectionate as dogs. Do you find that this is the case?

Larsen: Absolutely not. Cats are individuals. Some can be quite clingy. Cats can be more independent because their survival skills are very good. They don't "need" us. What makes our relationship with cats so special is that they "want" us. A key example is if you have a cat that goes outside. I refuse to think that a cat stays around just for food and shelter. Many outside cats make their rounds around the neighborhood and are fed by a lot of people. Don't they come back home?

Q: So, how many cats do you have at home?

Larsen: I have three cats. A 13-year-old Bombay boy named Midnight, a 4-year-old Siamese mix girl named Pickles, and a 3-year-old orange boy named Charlie. I also have a 9-year-old Congo African Grey parrot named Amy.

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