

Seeing with New Eyes: Tips to Enjoy Life with Your Blind Cat

Whether your longtime feline companion has recently lost or is slowly losing her sights due to old age or illness, or you've taken in a cat who was born blind, you face the same challenges: helping your cat adjust to her surroundings. With a little understanding and patience, a lot of TLC and these handy tips, this obstacle is easy to overcome.

Most cats take blindness in stride, especially once they've mapped out their world and figured out the best and safest way to live in it. They never 'mourn' their blindness as humans do; they just adjust and move on.

Through memorization, blind cats train themselves to know where things are located in their home, from food and litterboxes to water bowls and scratching posts. Keeping surroundings familiar will help your cat adjust and build confidence. Moving furniture, leaving clutter and debris lying around, not putting objects back into their proper places . . . these can all have detrimental effects on your cat's ability to move from Point A to Point B. When cats rub their faces against objects, they are actually 'marking' this spot with a facial pheromone, and this can be used by the sightless cat for navigation as well.

Place litterboxes and food and water dishes near each other to make it easier for your cat to fulfill basic needs in one location. If you have more than one floor in your house that the cat has access to, place these items both upstairs and downstairs to avoid confusion. However, block off access to stairs and high places until your cat can learn to navigate them safely. Assist your cat up and down steps and keep furniture placement consistent until they are comfortable compensating for their lack of vision with their other senses. Remember, however, that blind cats will always be more at risk for falls from high places or missing their mark when they jump.

There is nothing wrong with wanting to help your cat while it is learning its environment, but doing so too frequently (especially if she has not yet learned to navigate fully on her own) can place her in a vulnerable position and disorient her. Avoid carrying her to different areas of the house, as this may confuse her. If you carry her, put her down in a place she is already familiar with such as a litterbox or food dish area so she can re-orient herself.

Training your blind cat can provide peace of mind for the times when she disappears within the house, leaving you panicked that she has somehow escaped. Training your cat to come when called (with a clicker or by name) can be comforting.

A cat's sense of smell, hearing and touch (via whiskers) are already extremely sensitive, so when there is a loss of vision, these senses along with memorization become the mainstay of getting around their environment. A cat relies on these senses in day-to-day life, and when they lose their vision, they rely on them even more.

Appealing to these senses is crucial. Avoid frightening your cat with sudden appearances; speaking to him when you are near and allowing your cat to hear your footsteps can be helpful when approaching him. In a multi-pet household, place bells on collars so he can determine the location of other pets and so they can't sneak up on him! Catnip laced toys or toys with rattles, squeaks, and bells can entice him to play.

A cat's quality of life does not decrease due to blindness; it merely prompts the cat (and you!) to see the world through new eyes.