

Unlocking Cat Mysteries From Tails to Tongues

In this installment of 'Why does my cat ...?' we attempt to sort out just a few of the many complexities of our enigmatic feline family members. Let's jump right in!

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- We cherish our cats for their uniqueness — from their mysterious behavior to their grace and flexibility, to their love of napping
- Did you know that cats often land on their feet from a fall due to their “righting reflex,” or that their tongues are covered with tiny barbs?
- And did you know your feline friend’s whiskers are very important organs and not just random hairs sticking out here and there?

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Why Does My Cat ...?

- **Why do cats land on their paws, and what makes them so flexible?** — Among the many fascinating physiological facts about cats is they have 32 muscles in each of their ears, can hear sounds up to 60 kHz (while humans can only hear up to 20 kHz), and as noted above, have super-sensitive whiskers that help them navigate and sense movement.

Further, your cat has an innate “righting” instinct that allows him to reflexively correct his position while he falls so his feet hit first. Cats also have a flexible backbone that helps them to right themselves during falls.

As for fitting into small spaces, if they can fit their head in, the rest of their body will tuck in there as well, seemingly like magic, in large part because cats don’t have rigid collarbones. The pelvis and shoulders are only loosely attached to the spine, which is part of what makes kitties so flexible and able to squeeze into tight spaces.

- **Why does my cat’s tail sometimes look like a question mark?** — If your cat’s tail is standing tall with a slight curve on the end, like a question mark, it means he’s feeling playful and ready for human interaction and communication.
- **Do cat whiskers serve a purpose?** — Absolutely. Cat (and dog) whiskers, called vibrissae, are sensory organs that transmit important information to the brain. The follicles are loaded with nerve endings, which makes them very sensitive. Whisker trims are like temporary amputations and should never be done, because your cat uses her vibrissae to feel things in her environment, including airflow.

Depending on who you ask, there may be a condition known as “whisker fatigue,” in which kitty’s whiskers brush the side of her food bowl and cause irritation. To be on the safe side you might want to feed kitty in wide, shallow food and water bowls.

- **What is my cat saying when she purrs?** — It depends. Most likely, she’s either feeling content, or looking for attention or a snack. Rarely, kitties purr when they’re anxious or ill, in which case there should be **body language** to confirm there’s something else going on.
- **Do I need to be concerned about my cat’s mental or emotional health?** — Your kitty’s environment and living conditions are hugely important in terms of her ability to feel safe, in control, and generally content. Many indoor-only cats tend to develop recurrent urinary problems, the most common of which is **feline interstitial cystitis** (FIC). Research into FIC points to the importance of stress reduction and environmental enrichment in treating the disorder.
- **How fast can cats run?** — Really fast. Felines are incredibly agile and can accelerate and change direction quickly. The Egyptian Mau is the fastest domestic cat breed in the world and can run up to 30mph. Other **fast felines** include the Abyssinian, Somali, Bengal, Savannah, Manx, Siamese, Ocicat, and the Oriental.

Also, when cats walk or run, rather than a left-right or right-left movement, they move both left legs, then both right legs.

- **What does it mean when my cat hisses?** — Hissing is a sign of an agitated cat. It’s a warning that he feels threatened and wants you to back off, so he doesn’t have to attack. Most cats prefer flight to fight.
- **Why does my otherwise fit, lean cat have a sagging belly?** — Believe it or not, that saggy belly, aka paunch, isn’t really a belly at all, but a feature of feline anatomy known as the primordial pouch. It’s comprised of fat, skin, and fur and sits below a kitty’s abdominal organs.

This protective layer is entirely normal and healthy — it’s just that it’s more obvious on some cats than others. There are three main theories for the presence of the primordial pouch:¹

1. It protects a cat’s internal organs in the event of a fight; the extra layer of fat defends against claws and teeth.
2. It helps cats move faster because it stretches as they run, allowing extra flexibility and the ability to cover more ground while pursuing prey or evading predators.
3. It’s a fuel source. Cats may store extra calories (as fat) in the pouch area to fuel their bodies in between hunts.

In **domestic cats**, both males and females, the pouch starts to develop around 6 months of age. As cats age, the pouch often becomes much more noticeable.

- **Why does my cat sometimes open his mouth slightly, crinkle his nose and pull back his upper lip?** — Cats can actually smell through their mouths. Your kitty is drawing in air, capturing the scent, and moving it to his vomeronasal organ or Jacobson’s organ, which is a small sac located high up in the roof of the mouth. The vomeronasal organ traps the odor molecules and sends info to your cat’s brain regarding the scent.
- **Why does my cat sleep so much?** — The average kitty sleeps about 16 hours a day. That’s because as an obligate carnivore, your cat is designed for intense, brief bursts of energy to catch prey, followed by a meal, followed by a long period of rest to prepare for the next hunt.
- **Why is my cat’s tongue so scratchy?** — Cats’ tongues are actually covered with tiny, rear-facing barbs. These little protrusions have several jobs to do, including helping your kitty lap up water and pull food into

her mouth. Another thing those tiny tongue barbs do is help your cat groom herself efficiently by scraping away loose fur and debris on the skin.

Sources and References

[The Guardian, December 27, 2023](#)

¹ [LiveScience, Why do cats have belly 'pouches'?](#)
