

One of the Smartest Cats on Earth

These sociable cats love to hang out with and chat up their humans. But their brain comes with a caveat that could be amusing for some, vexing for others.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Ocicats may look wild, in fact closely resembling an ocelot, but they're completely domestic, having been developed from a mixture of Siamese, Abyssinian and American shorthairs
- Muscular and larger than many other cats, these felines are also active and athletic, with fur that comes in shades of brown, blue and cream or fawn
- Highly intelligent, sociable and energetic, ocicats are also affectionate and get along with dogs, other cats, strangers and children, and should be kept inside to remain safe from disease and the elements (along with given access to a safe outdoor space)
- These cats have an interest in playing with puzzle toys, learning tricks that occupy their minds and may even be trained to come when called, so reward them with treats to reinforce good behavior
- While ocicats may have a few genetic problems to be aware of, the list is rather short; however, always feeding your pets a species-appropriate diet will keep them healthy and happy longer

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Looking like a peculiar creation from a fanciful storybook, ocicats are nevertheless quite real, complete with the striking “thumbprint” pattern in black, gray or brown spots on a comparable background. In a word, ocicats are beautiful, with their tall, pointed ears, long, slender tails and glossy fur.

As you may have guessed, the ocicat is a breed created from other breeds. Despite the fact many people disagree with breeding, the fact is it's happening and people that own or rescue these cats need medical advice about their furry family members.

In this case, they're a cross between **exotic Siamese cats** with their attractive “points;” sleek, athletic Abyssinians and the amiable, versatile American shorthairs. The combination happened to produce cats with a pleasing combination visually, such as having the “legginess” of the Siamese and Abyssinians, but also in their health tendencies and personalities. According to Vetstreet:

“The Ocicat was a happy accident, the surprise result of a cross in 1964 between a ruddy Abyssinian male and a seal point Siamese female, with the goal of developing a Siamese with Aby-like points. Breeder Virginia Daly kept a female from the litter — all of which resembled Abyssinians — and bred her to a chocolate point Siamese. That time she got the hoped-for Siamese with Abyssinian points and repeated the breeding.

The next litter contained something new: an ivory kitten with gold spots. Daly's daughter remarked on the kitten's resemblance to an ocelot and said he should be called an Ocicat. The kitten, named Tonga, was beautiful, but he wasn't what Daly was looking for.”¹

The next step Daly undertook with her breeding endeavors resulted in another cat that resembled Tonga. The “legginess” that transferred to the ocicat was the source of a problem that weakened the new breed's knees. As a result, an American Shorthair was added to the mix to make them much heavier and more muscular, and rules were eventually developed regarding what traits would define the breed.

Twelve colors are approved to gain championship status, as well as four patterns involving their spots, including “broken lines, the more the better,” Vetstreet's Hope Gramlich explains. Their fur comes in shades of gold, brown, blue and cream or “fawn,” as well as shimmery or tabby versions of the same colors. Ocicats have gold or green eyes and usually range in size from 6 to 15 pounds.

Physical and Temperament Tendencies

Graceful, swift runners who require lots of activity, ocicats are also highly sociable and get along equally well with strangers, dogs and other cats. However, it's always best to make sure children are older and understand the concept of gentleness and respect for all animals, especially the pets in their household. Toddlers and other youngsters should never be allowed to snatch at them, pull their tails or otherwise pose a threat, or it will likely backfire.

Ocicats can see humans as potential equals with whom they can chat and share companionship. Probably as intelligent as any cat out there, they relish any chance to use their brains. Most want nothing more than to be in the same vicinity as their human “peers,” which is why many owners enjoy them as lap kitties and don't even mind being carried and will often be found following their humans from room to room. Cat Time notes:

“As with any animal, they come in a range of personalities, so some are more shy than others. Favorite activities include retrieving toys and learning to walk on a leash. Ocicats are highly intelligent and learn tricks easily. Puzzle toys are a good way to keep them occupied and entertained.

Carefully put away anything you don't want him to have. He is perfectly capable of figuring out how to open doors or undo latches. His Siamese ancestors bequeathed the Ocicat a tendency to be vocal, but he is not as loud or as demanding. He is sensitive and will respond to nothing more than a verbal correction.”²

Some cat breeds are typically independent and aloof, even if they've been raised by the same person since kittenhood; others bond closely to one person and are indifferent to everyone else; and some shower the whole family with affection. Breed isn't the only factor that goes into affection levels; cats who were raised inside a home with people around feel more comfortable with humans and bond more easily.

Genetic Health Predispositions of the Ocicat

Being generally healthy, the ocicat can live to be anywhere from 10 to 15 years old and doesn't have a lot of problems that potential owners need to be aware of. Observed among ocicats most often include these four disorders:

- **Amyloidosis** — Also known as liver or renal amyloidosis, this hereditary disease occurs when the insoluble protein amyloid is deposited in these organs, resulting in lesions, dysfunction and eventual organ failure.
- **Pyruvate kinase (PK)** — This hereditary condition is caused by a recessive gene that results in a shortage or absence of a key regulatory enzyme responsible for energy metabolism needed for the creation of red blood cells, preventing cats from creating the erythrocytes they need and causing mild to severe anemia.³

Vetstreet notes that Abyssinians can develop PK, and its intermittent anemia can appear in cats as young as 6 months or as old as 12 years. The hereditary condition is caused by a recessive gene. While not every PK-deficient cat develops symptoms, the most common signs are jaundice, pale gums, lethargy and an enlarged abdomen. Vetstreet⁴ notes that while there's "no best treatment" for PK deficiency, it's still a good idea to have your cat tested.

- **Hypertrophic cardiomyopathy (HCM)** — The most common form of heart disease in felines, HCM causes thickening or hypertrophy of the heart muscle. Subsequent oxygen starvation to the heart decreases the heart's efficiency either by slowing or accelerating the rhythm and causing related problems.⁵ American shorthairs bring this heart-related problem to the table in ocicats, which can be confirmed by having your cat screened via echocardiogram.
- **Periodontal disease** — Tartar build-up and bad breath are two signs of this tooth-related ailment. Left untreated, it can progress to tooth loss but, worse, associated bacteria can show up in other areas of your cat's body and cause damage. The process starts when bacteria form plaque on the teeth.⁶

While these are the most prevalent problems in ocicats, that's not to say they won't develop any other problems besides the above. According to Cat Time,⁷ progressive retinal atrophy has also been detected in a few cats but isn't considered a major problem. In addition, there are a few issues that may occur due to the Siamese connection, according to Vetstreet:

*"The modern Siamese cat with his wedge-shaped head may be more prone to respiratory and dental problems than cats with a less extreme head type, and some Siamese occasionally have problems with crossed eyes or a kinked tail. Other problems reported in the breed include bladder stones; eye problems like glaucoma and progressive retinal atrophy; heart problems; and certain types of cancer."*⁸

Finding Your Perfect Ocicat

As always, if you're interested in the ocicat, your first thought might be to contact a breeder. However, there are multiple organizations focused on rescuing animals, and reputable ones will be able to supply pertinent information about each of their animals. As Vetstreet observes:

*"The Ocicat is an unusual and uncommon breed. It is unlikely that you will find one in a shelter or through a rescue group, but it doesn't hurt to look. Sometimes pedigreed cats end up at the shelter after losing their home to an owner's death, divorce or change in economic situation."*⁹

Also, if you're interested in getting an adult cat, ask your veterinarian about the possible availability of a retired show cat, one used for breeding or one who needs a new home. Here are some other ways to find the right cat from a rescue center or shelter:

- **Use the web** — Petfinder.com¹⁰ is a good site to look at as a source of the ocicat you're looking for. AnimalShelter.org¹¹ can point you to animal rescue groups in your area.

- **Get in touch with area experts** — Call or email the pet pros in your area, such as vets, cat sitters and pet groomers, about your quest for an ocicat. Those individuals are far more “in the know” for trusted recommendations.
- **Try contacting breed clubs** — While breed clubs may not be where you might think of on your quest, individuals in such organizations may be aware of homeless cats who need a home. Fanciers Breeder Referral List¹² is another source to explore.

You can also peruse the “pets needing homes” section of local, online periodicals and newspapers. Social media may be a goldmine in terms of finding your forever kitty. Just post what you’re hoping for so your “friend” community can be on the lookout. Once you find your ocicat, make an appointment with your veterinarian as soon as possible so that he or she will be able to identify potential problems.

Final Notes on the Ocicat

Gramlich stresses that if you plan to bring an ocicat home, you should prepare your house for a 2-year-old, because if they’re left alone, they can be surprisingly destructive, even opening doors and drawers and removing the contents. For that reason, and because they’re such social animals, oicats left alone at home for any length of time, especially on a regular basis, should have a companion to be with, whether it’s another cat or a dog.

As with all pets, one health problem that’s all too widespread is obesity, and it’s your responsibility as an owner to monitor what your pets eat. In addition, ocicats should always be kept inside to stay safe from disease and the elements (aside from having access to a safe outdoor area). Because their fur is short, grooming should involve nothing more than a gentle brushing once a week or so.

When pets eat a highly processed, biologically inappropriate diet rather than one that is species-appropriate, their health in later months or years could be seriously compromised. The best thing you can do for your cats (and dogs) is to feed them either a balanced diet of homemade food or one made up of commercially available food that’s both species-appropriate and fresh.

Sources and References

^{1, 4} [Vetstreet 2001-2018 - Abyssinian Health](#)

^{2, 7} [Cat Time 2018](#)

³ [Wagwalking.com](#)

⁵ [Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine 2016](#)

⁶ [Vetstreet April 2, 2014](#)

⁸ [Vetstreet 2001-2018 - Siamese Health](#)

⁹ [Vetstreet 2001-2018 - Ocicat Finding](#)

¹⁰ [Petfinder.com](#)

¹¹ [AnimalShelter.org](#)

¹² [Fanciers Breed Referral List 1994-2018 \(Archived\)](#).
