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All Nine Lives

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1. Origin of the Phrase “Cats have Nine Lives” – The most blessed of numbers in the middle ages was nine, the trinity of Trinity (3 X 3). Because cats are so agile and seem to survive many things that other species don’t (falling from 5 stories) the number nine was assigned to them. In Persia the number 7 is assigned as this is the most blessed number, and in China the cat is said to survive nine deaths.

Another myth associated with the phrase goes as follows:

A very hungry cat entered a house one day and found a plate of nine fish that were going to be eaten for dinner by the nine starving children who lived there. The cat was feeling a little selfish that day and ate up all of the fish in nine quick bites. With no food on the table, the nine starving children died of hunger the very next day, along with the cat who died from eating WAY too much. When the cat went up to heaven and spoke with God, God was so angry with the cat that he threw him out of heaven and made him fall for nine days all the way back to earth. To this day, the cat still holds the nine lives of the starving children in his belly, which is why he must die nine different times before he will stay dead.

2. Cats are very agile and rugged, but not indestructible. They survive best when protected from harm and cherished as a valuable member of a family.
3. From before birth, unborn kittens can be exposed to several viruses that adversely affect their survivability. Feline Panleukopenia can delay the formation of the cerebral cortex, rendering kittens off balance, sometimes to their peril. Feline leukemia (FeL - a retrovirus) can cause abortions, failure to thrive, and an Aids-like syndrome in kittens. Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV – a lentivirus) can be contracted during the passage through the birth canal and cause an AIDS-like disease in kittens.
 - a. Vaccination prior to breeding can prevent Panleukopenia birth defects
 - b. Testing and culling positive cats from a colony can prevent FeL and FIV
4. Intestinal parasites can adversely affect the health of kittens. Roundworms can be contracted through the dam's milk, Coccidia and Giardia can be contracted by fecal-oral exposure when the kittens are nursing and tapeworms can occur when a flea is swallowed while nursing. All these rob vital nutrition for a kitten causing failure to thrive.
 - a. Proper deworming and flea prevention in the dam can eliminate parasites.

- b. Proper deworming of kittens can minimize damage to exposed kittens.
 - c. Avoid using potting soil in the house - Surveys have shown as much as 15% of commercial potting soil may contain roundworm eggs
- 5. Herpes and Caliciviruses from carrier cats can cause deadly upper respiratory disease in young kittens. Also once contracted, these cats are often carriers for life, expressing disease again at times of stress. Strict vaccination protocols can control this disease.
- 6. Vaccine protocols have undergone change in the last 15 years. The history of this change is interesting. When a vaccine is presented for approval to the FDA, it must be shown to be effective at preventing disease for one year in most patients without many adverse affects. This proof is expense so most companies only check for efficacy for one year. Once approved, the vaccine is labeled to be repeated annually because this is all that has been proven. Those that administer the vaccine only know that is effective for one year, so it is given as labeled.
 - a. In the 1980's Pennsylvania had rabies spread through the state. A one for the steps to stem the disease, a law was initiated requiring all cats in the state to vaccinated against rabies. At this time, most injections were given in the scruff of the neck for safety of the administrator. An alert pathologist at Pennsylvania University, Dr Mattie Hendricks, began to notice an increase in the prevalence of an aggressive cancer known as Sarcoma in this area of the cat's body. She also noted the coincidence of the new law and began to wonder if there was a relationship. The American Association of Feline Practioners (AAFP-headed by Dr. Jim Richardson of Cornell's Feline Health Center, who formerly had served at the Cleveland Emergency Clinic in Bedford-some of you may have known him-a delightful man) took up the challenge and raised money to fund the research. As part of that research, they asked the question, if vaccines may be related to the formation of Sarcoma, how often must we vaccinate our cats to provide adequate protection against disease? After several years AAFP was able to publish a position paper. Based on scientific research, that stated that almost all cats are protected from Rabies, Panleukopenia, Herpesvirus and Calicivirus for 3 years it was recommended to only administer these every three years. It was also suggested that the vaccines be administered in certain locations so the profession could more easily determine which vaccines were involved if a Sarcoma occurred.
 - b. This was a bold move. At this point, the labels on the vaccines had not changed, so legally we had no right to change our protocol. But we had good research to make the change. Because we are pledged to first, do not harm, many of us instituted the new protocol. Now, over thirty years later, we can say that we have not seen an increase in the incidence of these diseases and we have seen a reduction on Sarcomas in cats.

- c. But these diseases are still present and will show themselves when proper prevention is not practiced. This is a difficult because shelters and individuals take in strays that have not received proper care before they lovingly offer them shelter. These cats carry the diseases and keep them alive in the population. Our cat's best defense is proper vaccination.
- 7. An emerging disease called Bartonella, is spread by fleas and flea feces. This disease has human as well as feline implications. We are beginning to recommend testing for this disease when gum or eye disease is present. It can be treated with certain antibiotics but is not always eliminated from a cat.
 - a. Strict flea control is more than the elimination of a "creepy" parasite, it is protecting your cat and you from disease.
 - b. I think that this disease is more prevalent in humans, especially those of us who work with many cats but is virtually ignored by human health professionals.
- 8. Annual examination by our Veterinarian will help identify diseases before they get out of hand. Dental disease robs years from our friends and can be managed. Internal organs can become challenged and can be supported if disease is identified early.
- 9. Nutrition plays a key role in cat health.
 - a. We are beginning to understand the negative implications of low protein, high carbohydrate diets. Diabetes, kidney disease, bowel disease and obesity are all associated with food composition. It has been determined that a mouse diet is 47% protein. Why do we persist in feeding diets that are regularly less than this?
 - b. Water consumption is notoriously low in domestic cats. Water helps keep cells plump and supple and helps the kidneys eliminate toxins that form in the body. We need to observe our particular cats to be sure they are getting water in canned food (offering both canned and dry options each day is ideal) and enjoy drinking water. Do they freely drink from the source of water offered? Do they search for fresh water in bathtubs or from faucets? Maybe a water fountain would be a good investment. Will they drink extra water if it is mixed with tuna water or clam juice for flavor? Make ice cubes of the mix, covered with plastic wrap for storage, and offer one defrosted cube daily for each cat.
- 10. Keep your cat's environment enriched so stress diseases do not rob your cats of health. A litterbox for each cat plus one is the stress free option cleaned regularly.
 - a. Perches that allow cats to view the world from above and give a view of outdoors are perceived as safe by your cat.
 - b. Ambient noise such as TV's (especially with loop tapes of fish or birds) during times of quiet, such as winter days or windy storms help reduce stress.

- c. Overcrowding or inter-cat aggressions can result in disease. One of my client reminded me that a cat can guard a litterbox or source of food to the detriment of other cats in the colony.
 - d. Interactive toys help wile away the quiet hours. We like to read books, use our computers or talk on the phone when alone in our homes. Why would your cat do any differently? They after all are at least as intelligent as many of us.
11. These few steps will go a long way to preserving the nine lives of our magnificent feline friends.