

Results of a pet ownership and cat health survey in the UK

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There is a lack of knowledge about how many pet cats there are in the UK and what diseases they commonly suffer from. In order to identify cat-owning households, a pet ownership survey was carried out as a cross-sectional study of 10,000 randomly selected households via a postal questionnaire. The owners of cats were invited to participate in a second postal questionnaire to collect health and lifestyle information about each cat that they currently owned. Frequencies are reported with 95% confidence intervals (CI) where appropriate and averages are reported as median (minimum – maximum) for continuous variables.

The overall response rate was 21% with a total of 1571 useable forms for a final response rate of 16%. A total of 57% of households (95% CI: 51 – 57) reported owning a pet(s) and 31% of households (95% CI: 29 – 33) reported owning a cat(s). With an estimated 25 million (M) households in the UK, there are an estimated 14.3 M pet-owning households (95% CI: 13.7 – 14.9 M), 7.7 M cat-owning households (95% CI: 7.1 – 8.3 M) and 12.7 M cats (95% CI: 11.8 – 13.7 M). A total of 327 households owning 559 cats were willing to participate in the cat health survey. The response rate for the cat health survey was 49% with 160 households reporting on the health of 244 cats. Most households owned 1 cat with an average of one cat/household (1 – 8). The average age of the cats was 8 years (1.5 months – 20 years). 63% of cats were reported to have visited their veterinary surgeon on average once in the previous 12 months (1 – 12). 34% of reported veterinary visits were for routine vaccination. 63 cats (25.8%, 95% CI: 20.6 – 31.9) were reported to have been diagnosed with a disease(s). Dental disease was the most commonly reported disease, affecting 6% (95% CI: 3.6 – 10.0) of cats, followed by trauma which affected 3.7% (95% CI: 1.8 – 7.1) of cats. Acute upper respiratory tract infection, feline lower urinary tract disease and flea allergy dermatitis were each reported to affect 3.3% (95% CI: 1.5 – 6.6) of cats.

The low response rate to a cold mailing in this study highlights the limitations of postal surveys. The results of this study provide baseline information with limited generalisability due to the potential for the respondents to be a biased sample of UK households. These data highlight the need for further work in this area: a larger pet ownership survey with an aim to achieve a better response rate through a different sampling frame is needed. The results are being used to formulate specific hypotheses for a cohort study to evaluate associations and clarify causation of specific disease conditions in UK cats.