

Researchers discover that female cats are more likely to be right-handed

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Researchers at Queen's University Belfast have found that female cats are much more likely to use their right paw than males. Credit: Queen's University Belfast

Researchers at Queen's University Belfast have found that female cats are much more likely to use their right paw than males.

Dr Louise McDowell, Dr Deborah Wells and Professor Peter Hepper from the School of Psychology at Queen's, recruited 44 [cats](#) for the study and found that while there was no overall population [preference](#) like the human preference for right handedness, there was a gender preference. The findings have been published in *Animal Behaviour*.

Until now, studies on limb preference of [animals](#) have focused solely on forced experimental challenges. However, in the Queen's study, the cats - 24 male and 20 female and all neutered - were studied in their own homes so that information could be gathered as they went about their everyday tasks.

The cat owners collected "spontaneous" data on whether the cats used their left or right paws when they stepped down the stairs or over objects and whether they slept on the left or right side of their body. A "forced" test was also carried out where the cats had to reach for food inside a three-tier feeding tower.

The majority of cats showed a paw preference when reaching for food (73%), stepping down (70%) and stepping over (66%) and their preference for right and left was consistent for the majority of the tasks, both spontaneous and forced. In all cases, male cats showed a significant preference for using their left paw, while females were more inclined to use their right paw. However, when sleeping the cats did not appear to have a side preference.

Dr Deborah Wells says that while there is further research needed to investigate why there is a gender preference, it could be down to hormones. She comments: "The findings point more and more strongly to underlying differences in the neural architecture of male and female

animals."

The Queen's University researcher also explains that the findings could help cat owners to understand how their pet deals with stress. "Beyond mere curiosity, there may be value to knowing the motor preference of one's pet. There is some suggestion that limb preference might be a useful indicator of vulnerability to stress. Ambilateral animals with no preference for one side or the other, and those that are more inclined to left-limb dominance, for example, seem more flighty and susceptible to poor welfare than those who lean more heavily towards right limb use," says Dr Wells.

She adds: "We have just discovered that left-limbed dogs, for example, are more pessimistic in their outlook than right-limbed dogs. From a pet owner's perspective, it might be useful to know if an animal is left or right limb dominant, as it may help them gauge how vulnerable that individual is to stressful situations."

More information: Louise J. McDowell et al. Lateralization of spontaneous behaviours in the domestic cat, *Felis silvestris*, *Animal Behaviour* (2017). [DOI: 10.1016/j.anbehav.2017.11.002](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.anbehav.2017.11.002)

Provided by Queen's University Belfast

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