

# Questionnaire survey identifies potential separation-related problems in cats

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Domestic cat at home, looking outside. Credit: Felipe Santos

The first questionnaire survey to identify possible separation-related problems in cats found 13.5 percent of all sampled cats displayed potential issues during their owner's absence, according to a study

published April 15, 2020 in the open-access journal *PLOS ONE* by Daiana de Souza Machado, from the Universidade Federal de Juiz de Fora, Brazil, and colleagues.

Though many studies have been conducted on owner separation problems in dogs, little work has been done to assess potential separation-related problems in cats. Despite the common belief that cats are happy being left alone for long periods of time, recent studies in cats and their owners suggest that [pet cats](#) are social and develop bonds with their owners.

In order to assess separation-related problems in cats, de Souza Machado and colleagues developed a [questionnaire](#) for use with cat owners. Based on surveys in similar studies with dogs, the questionnaire asked owners to provide basic information on each cat; describe whether their cat displayed certain behaviors when the owner was absent; and describe themselves and their cat interactions, as well as the cat's living environment. The questionnaire was given to 130 owners of adult cats living in the city of Juiz de Fora in Minas Gerais, Brazil, for a total of 223 completed questionnaires (one per cat).

After assessing and categorizing responses for each category, the authors statistically analyzed their results. The data showed 13.5 percent of the sampled cats (30 out of 223) met at least one of the criteria for separation-related problems, with destructive behaviour most frequently reported (present in 20 of the 30 cats). The other behaviors or mental states identified were: excessive vocalization (19 out of 30 cats), inappropriate urination (18 cats), depression-apathy (16 cats), aggressiveness (11 cats), agitation-anxiety (11 cats) and inappropriate defecation (7 cats). The data also showed these cats were associated with households with no female residents, households with owners aged 18 to 35 years, and/or households with at least two female residents, as well as with not having access to toys ( $P=0.04$ ) and/or having no other animal in

the house ( $P=0.04$ ).

This questionnaire still requires further validation based on direct observation of cat behavior. It's also limited by a reliance on owners being able to accurately interpret and report their cats' actions in their absence (for instance, scratching on surfaces is normal in cats, though some owners may consider it destructive).

Although there's more work to be done elucidating the relationship between humans and pet cats, this questionnaire can act as a starting point for future research, in addition to indicating certain environmental factors (like toys) that could help cats with separation issues.

The authors add: "This study provides information about behavioral signs consistent with separation-related problems (SRP) in a sampled population of domestic cats, as well as about the management practices used by their owners. The questionnaire identified that about 13% of cats may have signs consistent with SRP according to their owners' reports, and therefore, it could be a promising tool for future research investigating SRP in [cats](#)."

**More information:** de Souza Machado D, Oliveira PMB, Machado JC, Ceballos MC, Sant'Anna AC (2020) Identification of separation-related problems in domestic cats: A questionnaire survey. *PLoS ONE* 15(4): e0230999. [doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0230999](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0230999)

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