

BREEDER TALK 

Testing for genetic diseases



Photo: Warren Photographic

Responsible breeders will test their cats for inherited genetic diseases, but what is involved?

Some pedigree breeds are known to be predisposed to certain inherited diseases, and for the health and longevity of their breed, responsible breeders will test their cats for these diseases to make sure their lines are healthy and happy.

The Governing Council of the Cat Fancy's (GCCF) Breeding Policy encourages breeders to understand the genetic make-up of their particular breed, to be aware of any genetic anomalies within their breed and promotes testing where these tests are perfected and available. Tests are mostly done using mouth swabs or blood samples and sent to

genetics experts in the UK.

GCCF chairman Steve Crow says: "GCCF's aim is to raise awareness, educate breeders and the general public about the various genetic diseases and to work with the veterinary profession.

"We encourage our breeders to participate in studies, to supply samples etc, all crucial to developing tests and cures for diseases. We also encourage groups of breeders and clubs for an affected breed to work together to operate breeding and registration policies to identify affected cats."

One example of a genetic disease found in certain pedigree cats is polycystic kidney disease (PKD) for

which there is testing available, and Korat breeders have a successful scheme in place to test for gangliosidosis [a progressive disease that destroys nerve cells in the brain and spinal cord], which has now eradicated this disease from UK Korat populations.

Somali breeders also have a testing regime and breeding policy for pyruvate kinase deficiency (PKDef).

"Some other genetic-based diseases are more problematic to tackle, either because there is no test available yet or because regular testing is necessary and a cat may appear clear at one test and then show signs of the disease when tested 12 months later, as with hypertrophic cardiomyopathy (HCM)," Steve continues. "If the disease does not become evident until the cat is older, it may well have been bred from

and passed on the genetic anomaly to its offspring."

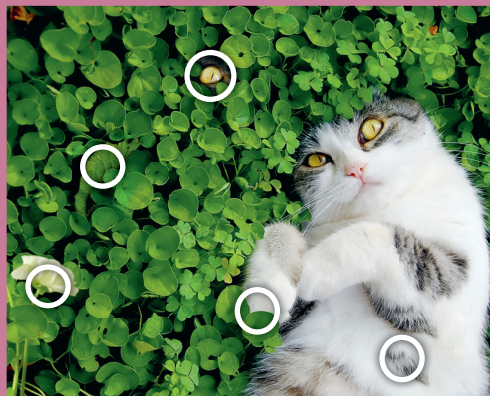
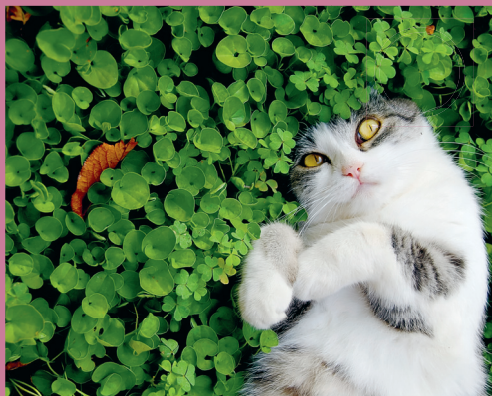
Devon Rex breeder Nicole Rankin is a firm believer in genetic testing to make sure her kittens are healthy. She explains: "I feel that testing for genetic diseases is paramount if tests are available. With different breeds being introduced into the gene pools of pedigree cats to strengthen them, occasionally inherited traits of that breed can bring problems with it.

"The two diseases we test for are Burmese hypokalaemia (HK) and PKD. It is not a breed requirement, but for the money it costs I think it gives peace of mind.

"As a breeder, it is imperative that good communications with other honest breeders is kept, so that certain lines can be strengthened or neutered accordingly."

Nicole says that she practices testing for viruses as well so that her kittens have a healthy environment to live in before they go to their new homes, with paperwork to back this up. "This is obviously expensive and time consuming, but breeding is about improving our breeds, not destroying them with ill health that can create heartache for new owners." ■

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