



*Honey relaxes in her new home.*

# Birman cats

## Developing A Wellness Plan

By Dr Hans Andersen

---

Birmans are stunning looking cats, with their pale semi-long silky coat, dark points, unique white socks or gloves, and iridescent blue eyes.

They are relaxed and calm in nature, and fit easily into most households.

---

It is hard to separate fact from fiction when investigating the origin of the Birman breed. Links with Burma are tenuous and it seems likely the breed was developed in France early last century. Recognised as a breed in France in 1925 they almost became extinct after WWII when only two were left. The breed was rescued by being outcrossed with Siamese and Persian cats.

The first Birmans were seal-point. In 1959 blue-points were bred using Blue Persian lines and over the next 20 years further outcrossing led to lilac-points, tortoiseshell- and lynx-points, and chocolate-points.

This background of extensive crossing may be why the Birman breed is a healthy and robust one, with few breed-specific health problems.

### Kidney disease

A 1997 study by Dr Danielle Gunn-Moore in the United Kingdom measured creatinine levels in the blood in 112 clinically healthy Birman cats from 19 households. An unusually high percentage of the cats had higher than normal creatinine values, which can be used to measure kidney function. Many cats were affected at a young age, less than six months. The problem was worse in some families of Birman cats and is likely to be an inherited disorder.

These findings have not been confirmed in follow-up studies in larger groups of Birmans to my knowledge, and they may not be relevant to our New Zealand situation.

Kidney disease is common in cats and dogs. However, because we are born with a lot of spare kidney capacity (this is why we can donate a kidney and still function well) it is not until about 75 percent of our kidney capacity is lost that clinical signs start to become evident.

Kidney function is usually measured in two ways.

The loss of urine concentrating ability is measured by a test called urine specific gravity (USG). Once about 75 percent of the kidney nephrons (filtering units) are lost, the remaining nephrons are overloaded and unable to recover as much of the water used to wash out the wastes. The urine steadily becomes more dilute. This is the first sign of kidney deterioration that an owner may notice – increased thirst and more urine being passed.

The more sensitive and specific way is by measuring the blood levels of two



### Case Study - Honey

Honey, a pure bred blue-pont Birman, came to live with Graham and Diana when she was 17 months old.

“When we first got Honey she was in a much neglected state and was nervous and unsure when around us as a result of the care she had received from her previous owners,” Graham says.

Now, 12 months on the story is much different.

Honey, or Larouge Princess Royal as she is known formally, has taken control of the household.

She is groomed every day and likes to make her presence felt through a series of demands. She has for example, an exact routine for relaxing each morning in the family car and Graham must open the car doors exactly right before she will enter.

Her food must also be warmed slightly before she will eat it, a habit Graham attributes to being a Birman trait.

A very pampered cat, one would say Honey is very much enjoying her new life with Graham and Diana.





## Wellness Plan for Life

Photo credit: Toni Hedge, Larouge Birmans.



### 2 - 3 months

Vet check, nutritional advice, F3 or F4 vaccination, and consider FIV vaccination, especially if a male, since these engage in more fighting than females. Parasite control, kitten kindy and microchipping.

### 3 - 5 months

Finish vaccination course. Pre-anaesthetic screening tests, then de-sex. Check erupting teeth.

### 8 - 12 months

Dental check and change from kitten to adult diet.

### 15 months

Booster vaccinations with F3, F4, FIV as appropriate. Dental health check. Repeat screening tests if creatinine and urea levels were higher than expected in earlier tests.

### 2 - 5 years

Annual health checks, booster vaccinations depending on boarding and territorial exposure.

### 5 - 7 years

Annual health checks should include wellness screening tests; vaccination boosters as appropriate.

### 7 years+

Six-monthly health checks and screening tests of blood and urine. These may now extend to include blood pressure, and retinal examinations. Further testing and diet changes will depend on findings.

waste products normally excreted from the body by the kidneys: creatinine and urea. As the kidneys lose functional capacity, the blood levels of creatinine and urea rise steadily. This change is seen even when the levels are in the normal range. Monitoring this change is an important benefit of annual screening blood tests in a wellness programme. It allows early intervention to slow kidney deterioration.

Birmans should have a pre-anaesthetic blood screen done before they are desexed. If they have higher than normal creatinine and urea levels, they should be given IV fluids before, during and after the surgery, even though it is a relatively brief procedure.

### Other inherited disorders

Other inherited disorders have been found in Birmans but they tend to be rare diseases occurring in situations of close inbreeding.

Two degenerative nerve disorders fall into this category. Spongiform Degeneration was first discovered in Birmans by Dr. Boyd Jones in New Zealand.

Axonopathy affects just female kittens.

In both disorders the kittens are born normal but start to develop inco-ordination and weakness from as young as eight weeks. There is no effective treatment.

Birmans may also rarely be affected by a clotting disorder, Haemophilia B, and abnormalities of the white blood cells called neutrophils.

---

Hans Andersen is the editor of *Paws for thought* and the owner of Halifax Veterinary Centre in Nelson.

---