

Friends for Life

Caring for your older cat



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A Time of Transition

We all want to grow old with grace and dignity.

And we want the same for our pets.

Fortunately, expert understanding of cat health and advances in veterinary medicine mean cats can live longer, better lives than ever before. The American Association of Feline Practitioners (AAFP), a group of several thousand veterinarians committed to the best care for cats, recently appointed a task force to review the many complex health issues that affect cats. The work of this task force resulted in a set of new medical guidelines for senior cat care. Those guidelines, developed for use by veterinarians, also provide the foundation for this handbook.

As the companion who cares for your cat every day, there's much that you can do to keep your cat healthy and happy. Whether it's understanding the common signs of aging, deciding what to feed your cat, looking out for signs of common age-related diseases or ensuring your cat gets proper veterinary care, this handbook provides guidance on making the most of your cat's senior years.

Here's to staying "friends for life"!



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Table of Contents

What Is a “Senior” Cat?	4
Your Role as Caretaker	6
Senior Cat Wellness Visits	8
Making Veterinary Visits Easier	10
Nutrition and Weight Management	12
Proper Feeding	16
Dental Care	18
Managing Disease	20
Quality of Life	28
End-of-Life Decisions	30
A Healthy Partnership	30

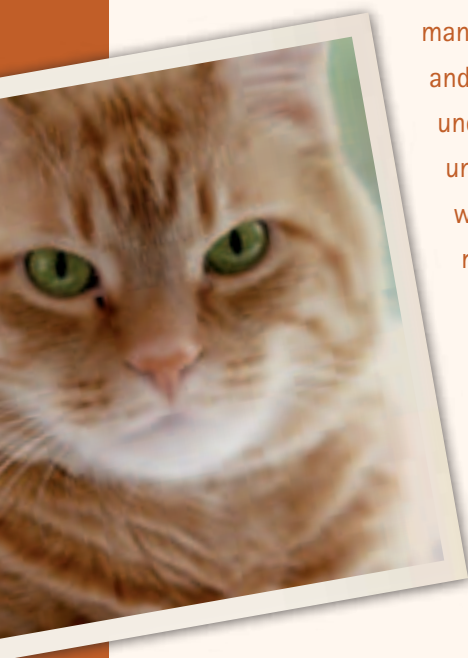
What Is a “Senior” Cat?

There is no one specific age that classifies a cat as senior.

Like people, some cats age faster than others. Generally speaking, however, older cats can be placed into one of three groups:

- ▶ Mature or middle-aged: 7–10 years (44–56 years for humans)
- ▶ Senior: 11–14 years (60–72 years for humans)
- ▶ Geriatric: 15+ years (76+ years for humans)

With good home and veterinary care, many cats can live into their late teens and early twenties. It's important to understand that your cat is likely to undergo certain physical changes with age. Some changes, such as reduced kidney function, may be associated with diseases that affect how long — and how well — your pet will live. Others, such as decreased ability to see, hear and taste, may require certain changes in how you interact with and care for your cat.



Some of the common changes associated with aging include:

- ▶ Altered sleep-wake cycle
- ▶ Changes in vision
- ▶ Appearance of brown spots in the iris
- ▶ Decreased sense of smell
- ▶ Brittle nails
- ▶ Decreased lung reserve
- ▶ Heart or circulatory problems
- ▶ Decreased digestion and ability to absorb nutrients
- ▶ Loose, less-elastic skin
- ▶ Reduced ability to handle stress
- ▶ Changes in behavior

Understanding aging changes, as well as what constitutes "normal" developments and what signals signs of treatable conditions, can be challenging. Some owners might think that, unlike dogs, cats do not need to visit the veterinarian on an ongoing basis, outside of scheduled vaccinations. This couldn't be further from the truth. In fact, by regularly taking your cat to a veterinarian, illness can be diagnosed early and age-related health conditions are delayed or managed.

Your Role as Caretaker

Just as children depend on parents for their well-being, your cat depends on you to provide ongoing care and comfort. This responsibility includes taking your cat in for regular veterinary visits.

Developing a relationship with a veterinarian allows him or her to gain a thorough knowledge of your cat's health history as well as an understanding of your expectations for your older companion. Your veterinarian will rely on you to provide information from your daily interactions with your cat that may uncover relevant signs or behavior changes.

Keep your cat comfortable and healthy by providing these resources.

1 | WATER

2 | FOOD

3 | LITTER BOX

4 | SOCIAL INTERACTION

5 | SLEEPING/HIDING SPACE

5
KEY
RESOURCES



Senior Cat Wellness Visits

Cats are masters at hiding disease and may appear well, despite underlying problems. Examining cats more often as they age will help detect problems earlier, often resulting in easier disease management and a better quality of life.

The American Association of Feline Practitioners recommends that healthy older cats be examined by a veterinarian every six months. In the life of a senior cat, six months is about the same as two years for a person — long enough for significant health changes to occur.

A senior cat wellness visit may consist of updating vaccinations, parasite prevention and treatment, and checking:

- ▶ Weight and body condition
- ▶ Skin and coat quality
- ▶ Mouth, gums and teeth
- ▶ Eyes and ears
- ▶ Thyroid gland
- ▶ Heart and lungs
- ▶ Abdomen
- ▶ Joints and muscles
- ▶ Any changes in condition from previous examinations



In addition, your veterinarian may recommend that samples of blood and urine be taken for routine laboratory testing. This will help your veterinarian detect problems early and enable him or her to closely monitor your senior cat's health.

To obtain the information that can best shape his or her recommendations, your veterinarian may ask you the following questions:

- ▶ What foods is your cat eating?
- ▶ Is your cat eating and drinking more? Less?
- ▶ Have you noticed any changes in litter box use? In stools?
- ▶ Is your cat vomiting and, if so, how often?
- ▶ Have you noticed changes in your cat's behavior or mood?
- ▶ Is your cat interacting with you more or less?
- ▶ Is your cat grooming as usual?

Making Veterinary Visits Easier

Faced with transporting a possibly unwilling passenger, you might feel anxious about taking your cat to a veterinarian. However, there are ways you can help reduce the stress — for your cat and you.

- ▶ Always use a carrier to ensure safe transport. Place a small blanket or favorite toy inside.
- ▶ Keep the carrier out in a comfortable place in the house so that your cat looks at the carrier as a safe haven.
- ▶ Allow enough time to get your cat into the carrier and arrive at the appointment on schedule.



- ▶ Spraying Feliway® into the carrier 30 minutes prior to putting your cat in helps calm an anxious cat. Feliway is a product that simulates feline pheromones, the scent left when cats rub their faces against furniture or other objects.
- ▶ While waiting at the clinic, keep your cat in the carrier, but be sure to maintain visual and spoken connection with your cat. Keeping calm and speaking in soft tones can help your cat remain calm as well.
- ▶ Jot down a list of questions or concerns you would like to review with the veterinarian. This helps save time that can be better spent on your cat and helps you remember what to ask.



Nutrition and Weight Management

You know that in addition to rest and regular exercise, eating the right foods can make a notable difference in your health and energy level. Cats are no different. Eating a proper diet improves your cat's chances of enjoying a long, healthy life. Your veterinarian may make specific recommendations about your cat's diet. A good diet meets the following basic needs:

- ▶ Consists of food your cat enjoys eating
- ▶ Provides complete and balanced nutrition
- ▶ Helps maintain ideal body weight, normal stools, and healthy skin and coat

Body Condition

Your cat's body weight and body condition should be checked by your veterinarian during routine examinations. A body condition scoring system can help determine if your senior cat is overweight, underweight or within normal range.

BODY CONDITION SYSTEM

TOO THIN

- 1** Ribs visible on shorthaired cats; no palpable fat; severe abdominal tuck; lumbar vertebrae and wings of ilia easily palpated.
- 2** Ribs easily visible on shorthaired cats; lumbar vertebrae obvious with minimal muscle mass; pronounced abdominal tuck; no palpable fat.
- 3** Ribs easily palpable with minimal fat covering; lumbar vertebrae obvious; obvious waist behind ribs; minimal abdominal fat.
- 4** Ribs palpable with minimal fat covering; noticeable waist behind ribs; slight abdominal tuck; abdominal fat pad absent.

IDEAL

- 5** **Well-proportioned; observe waist behind ribs; ribs palpable with slight fat covering; abdominal fat pad minimal.**

TOO HEAVY

- 6** Ribs palpable with slight excess fat covering; waist and abdominal fat pad distinguishable but not obvious; abdominal tuck absent.
- 7** Ribs not easily palpated with moderate fat covering; waist poorly discernible; obvious rounding of abdomen; moderate abdominal fat pad.
- 8** Ribs not palpable with excess fat covering; waist absent; obvious rounding of abdomen with prominent abdominal fat pad; fat deposits present over lumbar area.
- 9** Ribs not palpable under heavy fat cover; heavy fat deposits over lumbar area, face and limbs; distention of abdomen with no waist; extensive abdominal fat deposits.



Call 1-800-222-VETS (8387), weekdays, 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. CT

Overweight

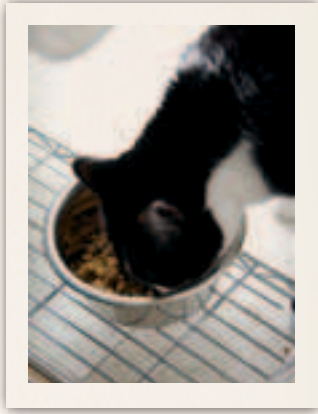
Just like people, cats that consume more calories than they use become overweight. If your cat's body condition reaches a score of 6 or higher on a scale of 1 to 9, your veterinarian likely will review weight management options with you.

Obesity is more than being "fat." Veterinarians today consider obesity to be a disease that alters metabolism and makes a pet more likely to develop certain diseases and conditions, such as diabetes, arthritis, heart disease, breathing problems and lower urinary tract disease.

It's important to consult with a veterinarian if your cat is overweight or obese. Not only can your veterinarian help you calculate precisely what type of food is best for your cat and how much of it should be fed for optimal weight loss, he or she can also make specific recommendations if your cat is obese *and* has a disease or condition that calls for a specific diet.

Underweight

Many cats in the senior and geriatric age groups become underweight, with low body condition scores. This may be caused by a disease, or it may be because some older cats have a decreased ability to digest protein and fat. Finally, the fact that cats lose their sense of taste or smell as they age can cause loss of interest in eating. Gradual weight loss can go unnoticed, especially in long-haired cats, making regular weight checks even more important for older cats.



Dealing With a Finicky Eater

If you have difficulty getting your cat to eat, talk with your veterinarian first to make sure no underlying disease is causing diminished appetite. Other health concerns common in senior cats — such as a broken

tooth, chronic kidney disease or memory problems — can impact the ability to eat and should be discussed with your veterinarian. If no health problems are present, try these tips:

- ▶ Offer a different texture of food; for example, a more finely ground canned food instead of a chunky style.
- ▶ Warm or chill canned food.
- ▶ Add small amounts of flavoring, such as canned tuna juice or low-sodium, unseasoned broth.
- ▶ If you are transitioning your cat to a therapeutic diet, try placing the new food into your cat's old food bowl, while also providing the old food in a new bowl. Gradually offer less of the old food until the diet consists entirely of the new food.

Proper Feeding



A proper diet is key to your cat's continued good health, so your veterinarian may make specific food recommendations based on the age and current condition of your cat, including a recommendation for a therapeutic diet sold exclusively through the clinic to help manage a certain health condition. It is important to follow your veterinarian's feeding instructions to help your older cat enjoy optimal health and nutrition.

Canned or Dry Food

Increased water intake is important for older cats, since they are prone to conditions that can cause dehydration and constipation. Water intake can be increased by offering canned food and using multiple water dishes. If your cat refuses to eat canned food, you can supplement dry food with moisture from canned tuna juice, ice cubes, water added to dry food or a drinking fountain.



Meal Frequency

Feeding small meals frequently often makes food easier to digest for older cats. Offering three or four small meals per day is a reasonable goal.



Dental Care

It is important to maintain your cat's oral hygiene to help ensure continued health. Neglected teeth and gums can result in severe mouth pain and even lead to infection in other organs.

Here are some tips to help keep your cat "smiling":

- ▶ Inspect your cat's mouth regularly for tartar or any changes in gum appearance.
- ▶ Consult with your veterinarian about the most appropriate home-cleaning process or professional cleaning, and ask how often you should have your cat's teeth cleaned at the veterinary clinic.

Dental problems may also result from injury, foreign objects in the mouth, malnutrition or health conditions that affect the mouth as well as other parts of the body.

Common warning signs of dental problems in cats include:

- ▶ Red, swollen or bleeding gums
- ▶ Drooling
- ▶ Bad breath
- ▶ Loss of appetite
- ▶ Sores in mouth

Cats with untreated oral disease and dental pain can experience emotional and physical decline. These cats tend to be thin, drop their food, chew on one side, eat more slowly, eat less or show less interest in food. Tooth decay, gum disease and broken teeth contribute to a diminished quality of life. If you notice any of these symptoms in your cat, schedule an appointment with a veterinarian.

Managing Disease

As with middle-aged and older people, a range of illnesses can occur as your cat ages. Being alert to changes in your cat's behavior and habits and seeking veterinary care will help ensure early detection and timely treatment. Here are some of the common diseases affecting older cats and signs to watch for.

Chronic Kidney Disease

Kidney disease is most common in older cats, but often begins in middle age. Your veterinarian can often diagnose kidney disease with blood and urine tests before any signs occur and make treatment recommendations based on those results. Signs may include:

- ▶ Mild changes in behavior
- ▶ Change in drinking frequency or location
- ▶ Excessive thirst
- ▶ Larger volumes of urine

- ▶ Constipation
- ▶ Decreased appetite
- ▶ Decrease in muscle or weight loss
- ▶ Nausea
- ▶ Poor hair coat

Diabetes

Most commonly diagnosed in obese male cats, diabetes is a significant disease in senior cats, with nearly half of all diabetic cats ranging in age from 10 to 15 years. Blood and urine tests will help your veterinarian determine if your cat has diabetes; treatment may include diet changes and insulin injections. Signs of diabetes include:

- ▶ Excessive hunger
- ▶ Weight loss
- ▶ Excessive thirst
- ▶ Excessive urination



Thyroid Disease

Hyperthyroidism is the production of excess amounts of thyroid hormones, resulting in an abnormally high metabolism. This condition occurs most commonly in cats that are middle-aged or older. If hyperthyroidism is suspected, the veterinarian will run a blood test to verify and then recommend treatment options. Signs of hyperthyroidism include:

- ▶ Weight loss
- ▶ Diarrhea or vomiting
- ▶ Changes in behavior, which may include hyperactivity or not using the litter box
- ▶ Increased or decreased appetite
- ▶ Excessive thirst
- ▶ Hypertension (high blood pressure)
- ▶ Heart murmur or rapid heart rate
- ▶ Thyroid nodule (lump)

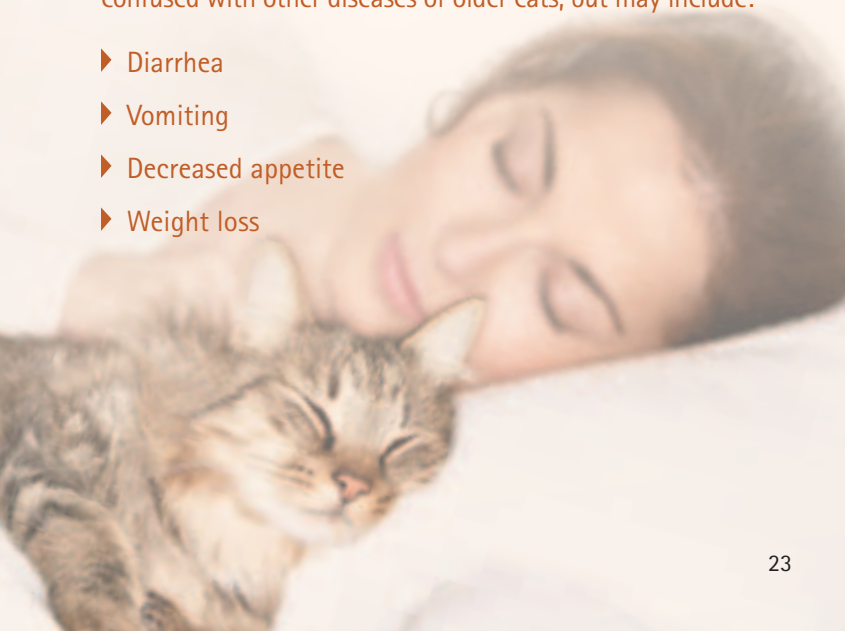
Hypertension

Hypertension, or high blood pressure, most often occurs secondary to another disease such as kidney disease or hyperthyroidism, but can occur in any older cat. Although there are usually no noticeable signs of high blood pressure, it can cause damage to the eyes, heart, brain and kidneys. Your cat's blood pressure can be measured using a cuff placed around a leg or the tail. Although most cats tolerate this painless procedure well, some that are easily stressed make accurate measurement more challenging.

Gastrointestinal Conditions

Inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) is a digestive disorder that begins in adult cats and may require lifelong treatment. Your veterinarian can run tests to determine if your cat has IBD, which may be treated with diet and/or medication. Clinical signs of IBD are nonspecific and can be confused with other diseases of older cats, but may include:

- ▶ Diarrhea
- ▶ Vomiting
- ▶ Decreased appetite
- ▶ Weight loss



Cancer

Many feline cancers are treatable or manageable. Remission and good survival times can often be achieved for cats with the most common cancer, lymphoma. Still, about half of all deaths in cats aged 10 and older are caused by cancer. Biopsy of the affected areas is necessary to obtain an accurate diagnosis and treatment plan. Common signs of cancer in cats include:

- ▶ Weight loss
- ▶ Loss of appetite; difficulty swallowing
- ▶ Lethargy
- ▶ Abnormal swelling
- ▶ Sores that do not heal
- ▶ Bleeding or discharge
- ▶ Difficulty breathing, urinating or passing stools

Arthritis

As in older people, joint pain caused by arthritis is common in older cats. However, this significant problem can be easily overlooked because the signs are often attributed to simply "getting old."

Fortunately, there are steps you can take to help make your cat's life easier. These include managing weight; placing food and water at floor level, but slightly raised; using

a large litter box with a low entry point and higher sides filled with a finer-consistency litter; adding ramps or steps for easier access to favorite areas; and providing softer bedding with more cushion. Your veterinarian may also recommend joint health supplements or pain medications. *(See the Mobility/Cognitive Dysfunction Questionnaire on page 27 for signs of arthritis.)*

Behavioral Issues/ Cognitive Impairment

Older cats can experience behavior changes that you may find confusing and troubling. These changes may be triggered by a number of causes, the most common being an underlying medical problem (such as hyperthyroidism, hypertension, or problems secondary to kidney disease), brain disease (such as a tumor), behavior problems (separation anxiety, for example), or degenerative changes that occur in the brain with age.

(See the Mobility/Cognitive Dysfunction Questionnaire on page 27 for signs of behavior changes.)

If your elderly cat is experiencing these changes, contact your veterinarian to rule out underlying causes. Also discuss with your veterinarian ways you can help your cat remain comfortable in the environment. For example, using a night-light and avoiding moving furniture into new locations may help the cat with declining senses.

Managing Multiple Disease Conditions

As your cat ages, multiple health issues are more likely to develop. Make the veterinary staff aware of any new symptoms or behavior changes you observe, as well as what you are feeding your cat and any medications or vitamins you are administering, since treatment for one disease may affect treatment of another.

Administering medication for multiple illnesses can be stressful for both your cat and you. Ask your veterinarian about ways to reduce that stress and still maintain the bond between you and your cat. For example, pills can sometimes be hidden in food or offered in treat, liquid or paste form. If you are having difficulty coping with this responsibility, ask your veterinarian for advice. He or she can also recommend resources to help you learn how to give pills to your cat.

Mobility/Cognitive Dysfunction Questionnaire*

Courtesy of Dr. Danielle Gunn-Moore

My cat...

- ▶ is less willing to jump up or down
- ▶ will only jump up or down from lower heights
- ▶ shows signs of being stiff at times
- ▶ is less agile than previously
- ▶ cries when lifted
- ▶ shows signs of lameness or limping
- ▶ has difficulty getting in or out of the cat flap/ cat door
- ▶ has difficulty going up or down stairs
- ▶ has more accidents outside the litter box
- ▶ spends less time grooming
- ▶ is more reluctant to interact with me
- ▶ plays less with other animals or toys
- ▶ sleeps more and/or is less active
- ▶ cries out loudly for no apparent reason
- ▶ has become more fearful and/or more aggressive
- ▶ appears forgetful

*Ensure there have been no environmental reasons for the change.

Quality of Life

Even with regular veterinary care and appropriate treatment, many senior cats eventually reach a point where quality of life is profoundly impacted by illness. If this time comes, it is important for you to discuss the best course of action with your veterinarian.

Considerations

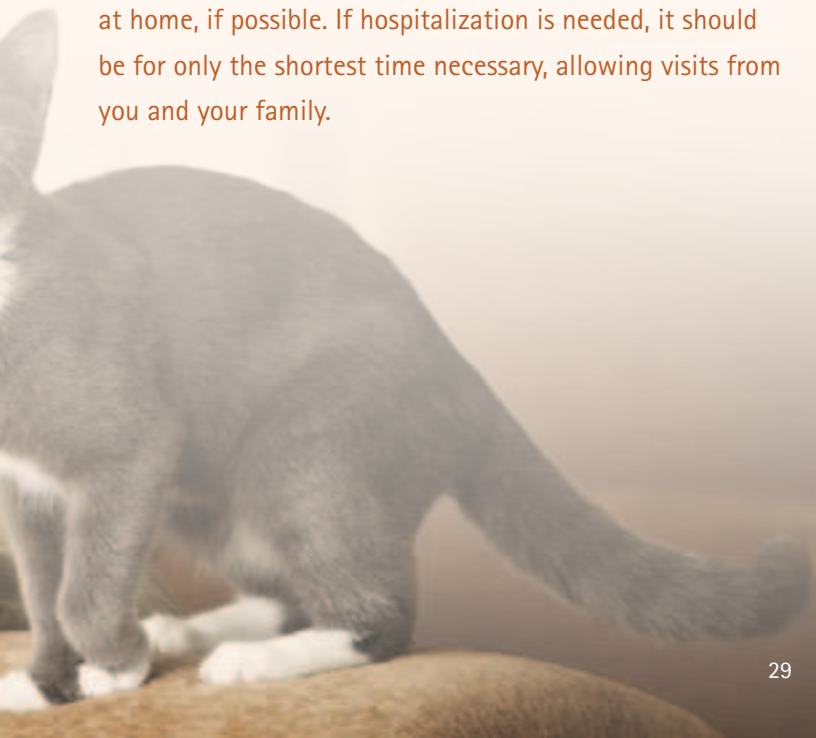
Many pet owners struggle with determining when it is best to discontinue medical intervention to treat illness. Your veterinarian can help you work through a quality-of-life scale that poses questions to help you determine what to do next. Talking with the veterinary team can help you decide what's best for your cat.



Considerations to determine next steps might include:

- ▶ Is pain well controlled?
- ▶ Is your cat able to eat, even with support?
- ▶ Is your cat able to access water, food, litter box, and resting or hiding places?
- ▶ Is your cat able to interact with you, other family members and other cats in the home?
- ▶ Does your cat have more good days than bad days?
- ▶ Does your cat follow predictable routines for sleeping, resting, grooming, eating, playing and socializing?

Since hospitalized cats may become depressed, your veterinarian will likely encourage you to care for your cat at home, if possible. If hospitalization is needed, it should be for only the shortest time necessary, allowing visits from you and your family.



End-of-Life Decisions

Veterinarians can support you and your cat during end-of-life care. Hospice care for cats can be provided at home with close communication between you and your veterinarian. If euthanasia becomes necessary, talk with your veterinarian about what to expect during and after the process. Preparing for the experience will not take away the pain and grief, but will help ensure a calmer, more informed process.

A Healthy Partnership

Our cats can live longer, better lives than ever before. Understanding the range of complex health issues that may impact your cat's life, and yours, is key. While we hope this handbook provides a good base of knowledge for you, it is imperative to regularly consult your veterinarian about what is best for your cat. Together, you can help keep your cat happier and healthier for years to come.

Learn More

For more information on caring for your older cat, visit Nestlé Purina PetCare at:

- ▶ purinaveterinarydiets.com
- ▶ purina.com/cats/health/OlderCats.aspx

Or go to the American Association of Feline Practitioners Web site at catvets.com/healthtopics.



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