

Savannah Health and Temperament Survey 2024

Trish Savannahs

Breed History

With almost 30 years of development the Savannah breed has shown a propensity to not only grow, but to flourish. Indeed, Savannahs have earned their spot in the purebred cat fancy. In 2001, the breed was accepted as Exhibition Only in The International Cat Association (TICA) and in 2012, Savannahs were accepted into the Championship rings—able to earn the title of Supreme Grand Champion within the show hall.

Brief Overview of Cats Surveyed

With a breed that has been in existence since 1986, there is a lot of misinformation and lack of general knowledge about Savannah cats within the public sphere. Therefore this survey will hopefully dispel any misguided beliefs as well as assist breeders and owners with furthering their knowledge of the breed's long term health and wellness. This survey is intended to locate areas in which we can improve as a community.

With the inclusion of 315 Savannah cats, including information gathered by both the breeding and pet owning community, this is the most comprehensive survey done as of yet. As hoped, the majority of answers came from owners who are not leery of discussing difficult situations with their cats as 85.1% of the respondents were pet owners with the rest of the responses from breeders.

The majority of cats represented fall between the 0-6 years of range with 23.5% being 1-3 years old. The oldest cat represented in our survey was 25, with 18-22 year olds also being represented albeit in small numbers. The average life expectancy of a normal house cat falls within the 12-15 year range with occasional cats living into their 20s. Our survey reflects the same results with the majority of deceased Savannahs occurring between the ages of 12-15, disease being the primary cause of death at 14.3%. Old age was only listed in 1.3% of loss.

As expected, owners are still seeking Savannah cats through catteries—81.6% of owners reported their cat came from a breeder versus 5.1% from a shelter or rescue. Interestingly, it appears one is more likely to adopt a Savannah from a prior owner than via a shelter as 8.3% of our Savannahs surveyed were adopted as rehomes. This dispels a current misconception that purebred Savannahs are easily adopted from the shelter system. The remainders of cats owned were born into their households therefore we can assume they are breeders' kittens kept within the cattery.

Although the general public thinks of a F1 Savannah as the true representative of the breed—when looking at the numbers, this is categorically untrue. 42.5% of the cats were F5 and upward—F6, F7, etc. The percentages of F1s were the lowest surveyed—at 6.3%. F2 and F3

hover around 18% with F4 sitting at 12.1% and unknown claiming under 3%. While there has been concern about importing within the breed, the majority of F1s (the generation that is most likely to cross borders due to cost)—only 1.6% are reported as imported cats.

Shockingly, Savannahs cats were not sought out as much for their size as for their looks and personality. While approximately 25% of the owners stated they were looking for a larger cat, personality won out as the main reason people flock to the breed at 84.1%.

If the Savannah came from a cattery, approximately 70% of the owners received TICA papers and 40% of those owners then went on to register their cats. As breeders are included in this survey, these numbers may be skewed a bit higher, but it is important to note—the breed is continuing to be registered at the individual level. Also while some breeders provide no papers—others even go so far as registering the kittens themselves for their owners. Unfortunately, the numbers of unaltered kittens being placed into pet homes is 48.6% versus 40% being altered before placement. The additional cats were born into their catteries and kept as breeders.

While the breeding community has not fallen into agreement with pediatric spay/neuter, microchipping before placement is the norm. Over 63% of kittens sent home are microchipped at their cattery and 80% of those kittens will go on to have their microchips registered in a system in case they are lost or stolen.

One statistic that may seem irrelevant to some, but stands out to this author is that the majority of kitten buyers will continue to stay in touch with their breeders to some extent after the point of sale. Only 6.3% of the cats surveyed, the owners have had no contact with the breeder after purchase.

Potential Health Problems of Savannah Cats

While the Savannah is no stranger to health problems, none of the numbers jump out as alarming. In fact, the incidence of disease in Savannahs is often lower than that found in the general population. Example: polycystic kidney disease may be found in approximately 6% of cats worldwide, but in this survey, it is 1.6% of the population. Hypertrophic cardiomyopathy or HCM has been a concern with breeders as of the last decade, yet this survey only finds 5.7% of the cats surveyed to have any form of cardiac disease. Yet according to the National Institute of Health, up to 15% of cats in the general population have HCM. Feline Cornell Health Center states diabetes in felines is 1:100 to 1:500 which falls in line with the survey—there were 2 cats out of the 315 surveyed reported with this diabetes.

Dental disease seems common in the breed at 10.2%, yet this author has to note that approximately 60% of the cats surveyed are over the age of 6. Cornell Feline Health Center writes:

Studies report that between 50 and 90% of cats older than four years of age suffer from some form of dental disease, but fortunately the most common forms of these diseases are largely preventable or treatable with appropriate preventive dental care and monitoring.

Therefore incorporating a daily dental routine may be one way to help prevent this issue in the breed.

Food allergies may also affect Savannahs—however, only 6.7% of the cats involved in the survey had allergies. Chicken and fish were the two main culprits in this regard and when testing novel proteins for food allergies, one should choose lamb, beef, duck or rabbit instead.

Confirmed cases of FIP within the breed sit at 2.2% with unconfirmed adding an additional 2.2 to the numbers. In the *Journal of Feline Medicine and Surgery* article, [2022 AAFP/EveryCat Feline Infectious Peritonitis Diagnosis Guidelines](#) by Vicky Thayer, Susan Gogolski, and Glenn A. Olah, they write, “FIP was present in nearly 1.3% of the pedigree cats [in a North Carolina study] compared with 0.45% of the mixed-breed cats”—therefore 4.4% of Savannahs should be concerning. However, with the cure for FIP now within reach, statistics may shift for all cats in regard to FIP as this disease may have been long underreported in the feline population. Until further time lapses and more studies occur—one should not panic about the potential of FIP in the breed, but simply remain aware of it.

Cancer, however, is a serious concern within the breed—but no more so than with any other cat. While it appears in numerous forms, lymphoma is overwhelmingly the main type seen in the cat population. [In Understanding Cat Lymphoma’s Prognosis and Stages](#) by Imprimedicine, the site states:

Feline lymphoma is one of the most common cancers affecting cats. It’s characterized by the malignant growth of lymphocytes... This cancer can occur in various parts of the body, including the lymph nodes, gastrointestinal tract, liver, spleen, and bone marrow, making it a pervasive and concerning condition for cat owners.

Unfortunately, feline lymphoma is not limited to senior cats, but can occur at any age and owners should always be aware of the potential for this cancer when assessing their cat’s health and wellbeing. Out of the 8.6% of all Savannahs diagnosed with cancer, over 50% were noted as some form of lymphoma.

With the cost of veterinarian visits soaring, it is inspiring to see that over a quarter of the Savannah cats in the survey currently have pet health insurance. While Trupanion comes out on top with 21.2% of these owners, Nationwide is also popular at 15.3%. When given the chance to rate their pet insurance from 1 star to 5 stars, with 1 being the worst to 5 being exceptional, the average rating for carrying pet insurance is 4.14 stars. Obviously, while pet insurance is not a

requirement for Savannah ownership, it appears to have earned a solid reputation amongst the community.

Breed Personality Overview

As we have thoroughly discussed many health issues within the breed and found that the Savannah cat has the same issues as the average domestic cat, we now turn our attention to the overall breed personality. Knowing that the Savannahs developed from an exotic bred to a domestic cat, this section will help answer the question—is the Savannah a wolf in sheep's clothing or an exciting new feline addition to the cat fancy? This section will delve further into this topic.

First, we need to look at the litter box habits of the Savannahs in our survey. As it is well known that even altered African Servals are not loyal to their litter boxes, how do Savannahs hold up in comparison? According to our survey, 91.5% of the Savannahs are either perfect in their litter box habits or have had occasional issues that their owners have worked through (for example: changing the type of litter, litter box placement in the house, etc.) 5.7% of these cats will urinate on inappropriate items if left around the house and only 2.9% are truly recalcitrant in their litter box habits. While it has been noted by countless humane societies and rescues, bad litter box habits are the number one reason cats are relinquished by their owners, it appears that Savannahs are typically very hygienic in this area. Clay and clumping litter are the top choices and uncovered litter boxes still remain the most popular.

While all active breed of cats can participate in some form of household destruction (couch shredding, breakables, etc)—Savannahs tend to be less destructive according to their owners. On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being extremely destructive and 10 being a kitty couch potato, almost 43% of the cats range within 8-10 with 8 being the most popular choice while only 16.6% fall within the 1-3 or very destructive categories.

Without significant studies, it is hard to compare Savannah cats' responses to their families and strangers with the common domestic shorthair, but our survey exhibited that only 2.5% of the cats were avoidant of family and strangers within their home setting. This number may actually be lower as the survey does not inquire as to how long the Savannah has lived in its current settings. A brand new kitten or adopted cat may not exhibit any friendliness in a strange setting versus animals who have been given time to adjust. Almost 70% of the cats exhibited friendly behavior to anyone in the family versus the remaining 27.9% who were more selective and preferred one or two people. When it comes to strangers in the home setting, the minority avoided anyone new while the majority of cats seem to enjoy newcomers to the house.

Another question posited was whether the cats enjoyed other animals in the home, excluding prey animals. 47.9% love both cats and dogs, 29.2% prefer feline company alone and 4.7% actually prefer canine companions. 8.6% of Savannahs prefer no other animals while the remainders of the homes do not have any other pets in the household. However, age, spay/neuter

status, socialization as a kitten and into adulthood, etcetera, may all play a role in how Savannahs integrate with other animals.

One of the most stressful events for all cats and cat owners is the veterinarian visit. In What's New With Feline-Friendly Previsit Pharmaceuticals by Sara A. Gonzalez, she writes:

In the United States, approximately 61 million cats are kept as companions; however, less than half of owned cats visit the veterinarian annually, and cats are more likely... to never visit a veterinarian or only visit the veterinarian on an emergency basis. One barrier to veterinary care of cats is the fear, anxiety, and stress associated with transportation and veterinary visits.

Therefore, it is important to access the ease and accessibility of vet visits for the Savannah cat. In our survey, 68.5% of cats range from well behaved to typically well behaved during their visits versus the 13% who are never well behaved. With the cats that have issues during visits, the pharmaceutical gabapentin is reported as the number one pre-medicine used to help calm and/or sedate the cat before a visit. Gonzalez states, "A randomized, blinded, crossover clinical trial of 20 cats demonstrated that a single dose of 100 mg/cat given 90 minutes before transportation was safe and significantly reduced client perception of transportation stress and veterinarian perception of handling compliance." If one is experiencing difficulties with vet visits, discussing gabapentin may be the appropriate solution versus avoiding these necessary medical exams.

Savannah Cat Enrichment

This survey would be remiss if it did not discuss the dedication and attention put into the breed via their owners. 37.8% of the cats surveyed love time outdoors on the leash, 96.2% of the cats enjoy cat trees within their households and almost 50% of the cats have cat wheels to exercise on. Interactive toys and puzzle feeders are also provided by a majority of owners. From playing tag, fetch, going for walks in a stroller or on the leash to olfactory and clicker training, the cats in our survey have a lot of enrichment opportunities in their homes.

In rating their cats' personalities from 1-10, 1 being unfriendly to everyone to 10 loving everyone they meet, 82.3% of the cats surveyed range from 6-10 with 10 claiming 33.2%, the highest percentage on the scale. If we consider 315 average domestic cats, it is hard to believe the numbers would be higher in comparison. Indeed, the Savannah may simply be a mischievous lamb after all versus the wolf in sheep's clothing that some people have posited over the years.

Summary of Survey & Ways to Improve in 2025

While this survey is the first of its kind, there are a myriad of ways to improve data collection in the winter of 2025 when this survey will repeat. First, the scope is limited with only 315 replies and we would like to see that number continue to grow. Secondly, we need to be

more inclusive towards our overseas community—including more cat associations outside of the United States/Canada. We would also like to add pica as a potential health issue—and follow-up closely on the FIP numbers now that a cure can be obtained via the veterinarian. Potentially, we may need to split the survey into two—one for owners and one for breeders in order to get a fuller picture of the breed. However, even given the limitations—this survey is an exceptional first step into truly looking into the personality and health of the Savannah breed as a whole.

The final question in the Savannah Cat Health and Temperament Survey 2024 is perhaps the most important—would you recommend this breed to other people? This question illuminates the reality of how one feels about the breed. With 315 responses recorded, 314 people said that yes, they would recommend Savannah cats to others. While 66.7% stated that they would want to vet the potential owner before making a recommendation, the other 33% point blank would recommend the breed to anyone. It is phenomenal that 99% of the owners surveyed would recommend Savannahs as a pet to the right home and a true testament to the hard work and ethics of the breeders of yesterday and today.

References:

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Freeman, Lisa M., et al. "Feline Hypertrophic Cardiomyopathy: A Spontaneous Large Animal Model of Human HCM." *National Library of Medicine*, 23 Aug. 2017, [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC5574284/#:~:text=Hypertrophic%20cardiomyopathy%20\(HCM\)%20is%20a,to%20the%20overall%20feline%20population](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC5574284/#:~:text=Hypertrophic%20cardiomyopathy%20(HCM)%20is%20a,to%20the%20overall%20feline%20population). Accessed 15 Jan. 2025.

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"Understanding Cat Lymphoma's Prognosis and Stages." <https://www.imprimedicine.com/blog/cat-lymphoma-prognosis>, 27 Nov. 2024, www.imprimedicine.com/blog/cat-lymphoma-prognosis. Accessed 5 Feb. 2025.

Important Savannah Cat References:

501c3 Savannah Cat Care Fund

Created to ensure Savannah cats are never euthanized due to lack of owner funds during a medical emergency.

<https://savannahcatcarefund.org/welcome/>

501c3 Savannah Cat Rescue:

Created to ensure Savannahs find safe, loving and knowledgeable homes within the community.

<http://svrescue.com/>

Help For FIP:

Created by a Savannah owner to ensure all cats can receive access to FIP treatment.

<https://www.lunasfiplegacy.com/>