

RAGDOLL CATS: WHAT VETERINARY PROFESSIONALS NEED TO KNOW



In all, 10.4 per cent of households in Ireland are reported to own one or more pet cats. Photograph courtesy of author.

Evidence suggests the UK and Irish general public are moving in droves towards owning pure breed cats and away from wanting to own 'moggie' domestic cats. Given the health and welfare crisis enveloping dogs that has been linked to the invention of the 'pedigree dog', is there still an opportunity to prevent a similar downward spiral for cats? A key part of prevention is to have access to solid information on the health and lifespan of each new-wave cat breed so that veterinary professionals can give robust advice to clients. Here, Dan G. O'Neill MVB BSc (hons) GPCert (SAP) GPCert (FeLP) GPCert (Derm) GPCert (B&PS) MSc (VetEpi) PhD FRCVS, Professor of Companion Animal Epidemiology at the Royal Veterinary College, UK, reviews a recent UK study of the health and lifespan of Ragdoll cats. These results are likely to generalise well to the Irish cat population also

Cats are a common domestic pet, with 10.4 per cent of households in Ireland reported to own one or more pet cats. Over the past decade, the popularity of owning purebred cats is reported to be rising steeply in the UK and Ireland. The Governing Council of the Cat Fancy of Ireland (GCCFI) was founded in 1968 and currently recognises 40 different cat breeds, with the Ragdoll breed becoming an increasingly popular choice as a pet. The Ragdoll is a large, semi-

longhaired cat breed invented in the US in the 1960s and first introduced into the UK in 1981. The Ragdoll name originates from their typically placid, friendly nature and tendency to go limp 'like a ragdoll' when picked up. In the UK, the Ragdoll was the second most common pure cat breed under primary veterinary care in 2019, accounting for 1.8 per cent of all the cats, and with this proportion having doubled from the 0.9 per cent reported for 2014. However, humanity has learned



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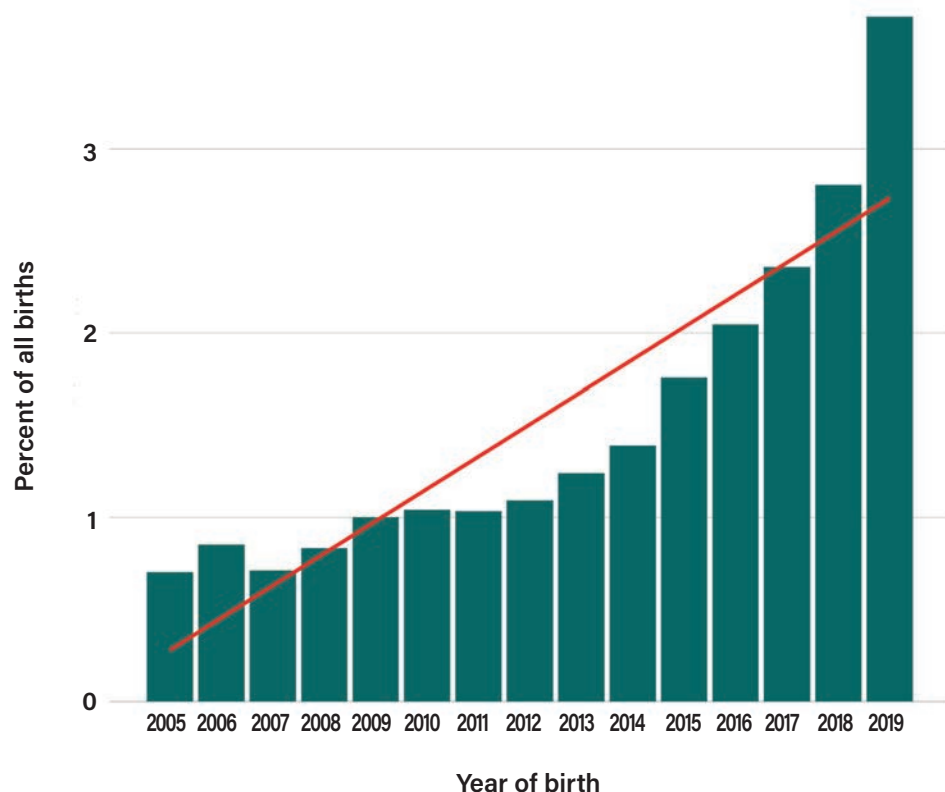


Figure 1: Annual proportional birth rates (2005-2019) for Ragdolls (n = 21,358) among all VetCompass cats (n = 1,254,484) under UK primary veterinary care.

from our experience with dogs that rising public demand for specific pure breeds can often lead to new and serious health and welfare challenges for these breeds. These issues have been evidenced in rapidly popularised dog breeds such as French Bulldogs where effects from high levels of inbreeding and extreme conformation, compounded by direct suffering from farming these animals on an industrial scale, have created a brachycephalic health crisis in dogs that is proving very challenging to resolve. In anticipation of similar potential welfare issues for popularised cat breeds, improved data on Ragdoll demography and health could contribute to better management of changing welfare challenges over time. Using anonymised veterinary clinical data from the VetCompass Programme, this study aimed to characterise the demography, common disorders, cause-specific mortality and life expectancy of the general population of Ragdoll cats under primary veterinary care in the UK in 2019. Given the strong demographic and social links between Ireland and the UK, veterinary evidence on cat breed health is likely to be highly transferrable and generalisable from the UK to Ireland.

The data

The study population included all cats with at least one electronic health record [EHR] at clinics participating in the VetCompass Programme during 2019. Data fields available for the study included a unique animal identifier, species, breed, date of birth, sex and neuter status, along with time-varying variables of bodyweight, free-form text clinical notes, and treatment with relevant dates. A retrospective cohort study design was used. Ethical approval was given by the Royal Veterinary College Social Science Research Ethical Review Board (SSRERB) (reference number SR2018-1652). Cats were classified as Ragdoll or non-Ragdolls. Adult Bodyweight (kg) described the mean bodyweight recorded

from all bodyweight data for cats aged over nine months. Age (years) described the age at the final date under veterinary care during 2019 (December 31, 2019).

The EHRs of a random sample from all available Ragdolls were manually reviewed to identify the most definitive diagnosis term recorded for every disorder recorded as existing during 2019. Diagnosis terms were mapped to a dual hierarchy of precision for analysis: precise-level precision and grouped-level precision. Elective (e.g., neutering) or prophylactic (e.g., vaccination) clinical events were excluded. Cause-specific mortality data (recorded cause, date, and method of death) were extracted on all deaths at any date during the available EHRs. Annual proportional birth rates within VetCompass described the relative proportion of Ragdolls compared with all cats that were born in each year from 2005-2019 from the cohort under veterinary care in 2019. One-year period prevalence values described the probability of diagnosis at least once during 2019 and were reported overall as well as comparing between males and females. Median age (years) was also reported for each of the most common.

Results

Demography

Ragdolls comprised 21,358 (1.70 per cent) of 1,254,484 cats under veterinary care within VetCompass during 2019 in the UK. The overall median age was 2.63 years (interquartile range [IQR] 1.20-6.01, range 0.06-23.18). The median adult bodyweight was 4.46kg (IQR 3.79-5.19, range 1.46-9.80). Adult male Ragdolls (4.97kg, IQR 4.42 - 5.60, range 1.60 - 9.51) were statistically significantly heavier than females (3.83kg, IQR 3.40-4.38, range 1.46-9.80) ($P < 0.001$). Annual proportional birth rates showed an increasing breed popularity during 2005-2019, from 0.70 per cent of all cats born in 2005 to 3.72 per cent in 2019 (Figure 1).

Disorder prevalence

From a random sample of 2,025 (9.48 per cent) of the 21,358 available Ragdolls, 1,241 (61.28 per cent) had at least one disorder recorded during 2019. The median annual disorder count was 1 (IQR 0–2, range 0–9) disorder per Ragdoll. The annual disorder count was statistically significantly higher in males (median count 1, IQR 0–2, range 0–8) than females (median count 1, IQR 0–2, range 0–9) ($P = 0.047$).

The disorders reported during 2019 were spread across 277 distinct precise-level disorder terms. The most prevalent

precise-level precision disorders recorded were periodontal disease ($n = 179$, prevalence 8.84 per cent, 95 per cent confidence interval (CI): 7.60–10.08), diarrhoea ($n = 144$, prevalence 7.11 per cent, 95 per cent CI: 5.99–8.23), obesity ($n = 140$, prevalence 6.91 per cent, 95 per cent CI: 5.81–8.02), overgrown nail(s) ($n = 115$, prevalence 5.68 per cent, 95 per cent CI: 4.67–6.69), and dental disease ($n = 113$, prevalence 5.58 per cent, 95 per cent CI: 4.58–6.58). Among the 32 most common precise-level disorders, females had statistically significantly higher probability of postoperative wound complications and aural discharge, while males had

Precise-level disorder term	No.	Prevalence % (95% confidence interval [CI])	Female prevalence %	Male prevalence %	P- value*	Median age [years] (range)
Periodontal disease	179	8.84 (7.60-10.08)	9.01	8.73	0.883	6.99 (0.84 - 18.35)
Diarrhoea	144	7.11 (5.99-8.23)	6.04	8.08	0.092	1.37 (0.26 - 15.84)
Obesity	140	6.91 (5.81-8.02)	5.09	8.54	0.003	3.53 (0.49 - 13.08)
Overgrown nail(s)	115	5.68 (4.67-6.69)	5.30	6.04	0.540	2.54 (0.23 - 19.51)
Dental disease	113	5.58 (4.58-6.58)	4.98	6.13	0.308	6.65 (0.54 - 19.00)
Flea infestation	91	4.49 (3.59-5.40)	5.41	3.62	0.067	1.58 (0.24 - 15.84)
Vomiting	82	4.05 (3.19-4.91)	3.82	4.27	0.687	3.74 (0.31 - 19.33)
Hair coat disorder	81	4.00 (3.15-4.85)	3.92	4.09	0.943	5.40 (0.73 - 18.31)
Conjunctivitis	51	2.52 (1.84-3.20)	2.65	2.41	0.844	1.32 (0.26 - 15.45)
Aggression	44	2.17 (1.54-2.81)	1.59	2.69	0.124	4.90 (0.80 - 13.74)
Anorexia	38	1.88 (1.29-2.47)	1.27	2.41	0.085	4.45 (0.48 - 19.07)
Thin	32	1.58 (1.04-2.12)	1.91	1.21	0.272	3.84 (0.31 - 18.31)
Ocular discharge	29	1.43 (0.91-1.95)	1.27	1.58	0.697	1.51 (0.26 - 14.79)
Weight loss	29	1.43 (0.91-1.95)	1.17	1.67	0.445	9.76 (2.24 - 18.41)
Postoperative wound complication	28	1.38 (0.87-1.89)	2.23	0.65	0.005	1.25 (0.24 - 5.49)
Aural discharge	26	1.28 (0.79-1.77)	1.91	0.74	0.034	1.18 (0.35 - 11.68)
Cat flu	24	1.19 (0.71-1.66)	1.38	1.02	0.594	1.04 (0.43 - 18.31)
Heart murmur	24	1.19 (0.71-1.66)	1.06	1.30	0.772	8.43 (0.38 - 18.35)
Disorder not diagnosed	24	1.19 (0.71-1.66)	1.38	1.02	0.594	9.72 (0.54 - 19.00)
Wound	24	1.19 (0.71-1.66)	0.85	1.49	0.266	2.71 (0.34 - 11.73)
Chronic kidney failure	23	1.14 (0.67-1.60)	1.17	1.11	> 0.999	14.41 (8.29 - 19.33)
Inappropriate urination	20	0.99 (0.56-1.42)	0.95	1.02	> 0.999	4.12 (0.31 - 15.45)
Sneezing	20	0.99 (0.56-1.42)	1.06	0.93	0.941	0.93 (0.36 - 12.50)
Hairball/furball	19	0.94 (0.52-1.36)	0.74	1.11	0.527	4.90 (0.93 - 13.59)
Abscess	18	0.89 (0.48-1.30)	0.74	1.02	0.668	3.51 (0.71 - 11.58)
Ear mites	17	0.84 (0.44-1.24)	0.74	0.93	0.831	1.71 (0.30 - 5.44)
Cystitis	16	0.79 (0.40-1.18)	1.17	0.46	0.127	7.95 (0.48 - 19.51)
Coughing	15	0.74 (0.37-1.11)	0.42	1.02	0.194	2.72 (0.73 - 18.49)
Upper respiratory tract infection	15	0.74 (0.37-1.11)	0.74	0.74	> 0.999	1.45 (0.30 - 13.54)
Adverse reaction to vaccination	14	0.69 (0.33-1.05)	0.74	0.65	> 0.999	0.82 (0.31 - 13.59)
Lameness	14	0.69 (0.33-1.05)	0.53	0.84	0.578	2.05 (0.26 - 15.51)
Overgrooming	13	0.64 (0.29-0.99)	0.64	0.65	> 0.999	6.76 (1.54 - 11.54)

Table 1: Prevalence of the most common disorders at precise-level diagnostic precision in Ragdolls ($n = 2,025$). *Comparing prevalence between males and females.

statistically significantly higher probability of obesity (two-proportion z-test: $P < 0.05$). The median age of cats for the 32 most common precise-level diagnoses varied from 0.82 years for adverse reaction to vaccination to 14.41 years for chronic kidney failure (Table 1).

There were 56 group-level disorders reported during 2019, of which the most common were dental ($n = 294$, prevalence 14.52 per cent, 95 per cent CI: 12.98-16.05), enteropathy ($n = 273$, prevalence 13.48 per cent, 95 per cent CI: 11.99-14.97), skin ($n = 157$, prevalence 7.75 per cent, 95 per cent CI: 6.59-8.92), obesity ($n = 140$, prevalence 6.91 per cent, 95 per cent CI: 5.81-8.02), and claw/nail ($n = 125$, prevalence 6.17 per

cent, 95 per cent CI: 5.12-7.22). Among the 20 most common group-level disorders, females had higher probability of complications associated with clinical care, while males had higher probability of enteropathy, obesity, and traumatic injury ($P < 0.05$, two-proportion z-test). The median age of cats with the most common group-level disorders ranged from 1.37 years for complications associated with clinical care to 14.63 years for kidney disorder (Table 2).

Mortality

From 133/2,025 (6.57 per cent) Ragdolls that died during the study period, the median age at death overall was 12.85

Diagnosis	No	Prevalence (%)	Female prevalence (%)	Male prevalence (%)	P- value*	Median age (years) of cats with the condition
Dental	294	14.52 (12.98-16.05)	13.68	15.32	0.327	6.62 (0.54 - 19.00)
Enteropathy	273	13.48 (11.99-14.97)	11.77	15.04	0.038	2.33 (0.26 - 19.33)
Skin	157	7.75 (6.59-8.92)	7.74	7.80	> 0.999	5.23 (0.58 - 18.49)
Obesity	140	6.91 (5.81-8.02)	5.09	8.54	0.003	3.53 (0.49 - 13.08)
Claw/nail	125	6.17 (5.12-7.22)	5.83	6.50	0.597	2.86 (0.23 - 19.51)
Parasite infestation	119	5.88 (4.85-6.90)	6.57	5.20	0.223	1.62 (0.24 - 15.84)
Ophthalmological	117	5.78 (4.76-6.79)	5.83	5.66	0.947	1.58 (0.26 - 17.54)
Respiratory tract	86	4.25 (3.37-5.13)	3.82	4.64	0.420	2.54 (0.26 - 19.51)
Behavioural	79	3.90 (3.06-4.74)	3.39	4.36	0.314	4.59 (0.31 - 18.31)
Thin	61	3.01 (2.27-3.76)	3.08	2.88	0.898	7.61 (0.31 - 18.41)
Urinary system	53	2.62 (1.92-3.31)	3.29	2.04	0.108	6.72 (0.48 - 19.51)
Appetite	49	2.42 (1.75-3.09)	1.70	3.06	0.065	4.72 (0.48 - 19.07)
Traumatic injury	46	2.27 (1.62-2.92)	1.06	3.34	0.001	2.31 (0.34 - 14.77)
Heart	41	2.02 (1.41-2.64)	1.70	2.32	0.404	9.87 (0.38 - 19.51)
Ear	40	1.98 (1.37-2.58)	2.44	1.58	0.221	1.80 (0.35 - 13.68)
Complication associated with clinical care	39	1.93 (1.33-2.52)	2.76	1.21	0.018	1.37 (0.24 - 5.49)
Kidney	39	1.93 (1.33-2.52)	1.91	1.95	> 0.999	14.63 (2.51 - 19.33)
Mass/lump	38	1.88 (1.29-2.47)	2.12	1.67	0.563	11.25 (0.61 - 20.90)
Musculoskeletal	37	1.83 (1.24-2.41)	1.38	2.23	0.210	8.38 (0.26 - 18.31)
Lethargy	33	1.63 (1.08-2.18)	1.70	1.49	0.841	3.64 (0.67 - 15.33)

Table 2: Prevalence of the most common disorders at group-level diagnostic precision in Ragdolls ($n = 2,025$). *Comparing prevalence between males and females.

years (IQR 5.71-16.11, range 0.08-21.51). Life expectancy did not differ statistically between females and males (13.72 years, IQR 6.77-16.42, range 0.18-21.51, $n = 58$, and 11.41 years, IQR 5.34-16.08, range 0.08-19.11, $n = 75$, respectively, $P = 264$). Of 107 (80.45 per cent) deaths with a recorded method of death, 98 (91.59 per cent) involved euthanasia and 9 (8.41 per cent) died unassisted. Among 85 (63.91 per cent) deaths with a cause reported, the most common causes of death at group level precision were kidney disorder ($n = 18$, 21.18 per cent, 95 per cent CI: 12.49 - 29.86) and poor quality of life ($n = 11$, 12.94 per cent, 95 per cent CI: 5.81 - 20.08) (Table 3).

Discussion

Cats are increasingly recognised as a key companion animal species. In 2006, there were an estimated 215,542 pet cat owning households in Ireland reflecting that 10.4 per cent of households in Ireland had one or more pet cats. The UK had an estimated 10.6-10.8 million cats kept as pets in 2024, with 24-25 per cent of UK adults owning at least one cat. Historically, the majority of pet cats owned in the UK were crossbred ('moggies') but ownership of purebred cats (i.e., cats with a recognisable breed) has been reported as rising rapidly in recent years, from 35 per cent of all cats in 2021 to 45 per cent of all cats in 2024. The current results report that Ragdolls are one of the most common of the UK-owned cat breeds, making up 1.70 per cent of all UK cats. Even more relevant, the results show that Ragdolls are rapidly rising in popularity, having risen almost five-fold in popularity from 0.70 per cent of all cats born in 2005 to 3.72 per cent in 2019. However, concerns have been raised about the lack of robust evidence on breed health available to prospective cat owners when deciding what type of cat to acquire, with 37 per cent of owners who acquired a cat in 2024 reporting that the background information and the actual purchase relied on information sourced from social media. Therefore, the development and publication of good evidence can help better inform the general public about the relative health and disorders of individual cat breeds and, hopefully, direct public opinion and actions towards prioritising the welfare of cats when making cat acquisition decisions.

Periodontal disease was the most common disorder recorded in Ragdoll cats in the current study, diagnosed in 8.84 per cent of the cats during 2019. Periodontal disease also ranked as the most common disorder of cats overall in the UK in a previous study that used a similar method to the current study, although that study reported a higher prevalence of 15.2 per cent in cats overall. In line with this high frequency but relative protection to periodontal disease for Ragdoll cats, another previous study using a similar method to the current study that specifically explored periodontal in cats reported a 9.4 per cent prevalence for Ragdolls and that Ragdolls have 0.57 times the odds of periodontal disease compared to crossbred cats. Periodontal disease in cats has been linked with increased risk of developing chronic kidney disease and azotaemia as well as also affecting the animal's quality of life and interactions with the owner. Paradoxically, the high frequency of, and welfare impact from, periodontal disease suggests that the condition should still be considered a welfare priority disorder in Ragdoll cats even though the

breed appears to be protected to the condition.

Diarrhoea, with a prevalence of 7.11 per cent, was the second most common disorder recorded in Ragdolls in the current study, with vomiting recorded in 4.05 per cent of the Ragdolls as the seventh most common disorder. These values are higher than previously recorded for cats overall in the UK where vomiting (eighth most common disorder) was recorded in 3.2 per cent and diarrhoea (10th most common disorder) was recorded in 2.9 per cent of cats. These findings suggest the Ragdoll may be predisposed to enteropathy but do not confirm an aetiopathological pathway for such a predisposition.

Haircoat disorder such as matting was recorded for four per cent of the Ragdoll cats in the current study, making this the eighth most common disorder in the breed. This result suggests that the Ragdoll is predisposed to haircoat disorders which were recorded in just 2.6 per cent of all cats in the UK and was the 10th most common disorder in a study using similar methods to the current study. The Ragdoll breed is reported to have been invented by crossing between Persian and Angora cats that both show a long-haired phenotype. Extreme conformation has been defined as 'a physical appearance that has been so significantly altered by humankind away from the ancestral natural appearance that affected animals commonly suffer from poor health and welfare, with negative impacts on their quality and quantity of life.' Haircoat disorder, with a prevalence of 12.7 per cent that was over three times higher than for Ragdolls, was reported as the most common disorder of Persian cats in the UK, in a study using a similar method to the current study. This high prevalence suggests that the long-haired phenotype should be considered an extreme conformation in cats and, therefore, should no longer be selected for if the goal is to select for good innate health. Although the modern Ragdoll is considered as a semi-longhaired breed, there are still warnings from cat organisations that the breed typically has a coat that knots easily, especially under the front and hind legs, if the cat is not regularly groomed, with this predisposition to haircoat disorder supported by the current results.

The 12.85 years median age at death for Ragdolls in the current study is over one year shorter than the 14.0 years previously recorded for cats overall in the UK in a study that used a similar method. However, that study of 4,009 cat deaths that included 91.7 per cent crossbred cats also identified a substantial survival benefit for crossbred cats (median age at death 14.0 years) over purebred cats (median age at death 12.5 years). Therefore, the current results suggest that the Ragdoll life expectancy is largely typical for purebred cats overall and that much of the reduced life expectancy in Ragdolls relative to cats overall is likely a consequence of being purebred rather than specifically related to being a Ragdoll compared to any other individual purebred. Similar reduced longevity have been reported for purebred dogs compared to crossbred dogs, with the underlying reasons for this reduced life expectancy linked to higher levels of inbreeding and extreme conformations in the purebred animals.

Conclusions

The current study reports the Ragdoll as a relatively common

Group-level disorder	No.	% (95% CI)
Kidney	18	21.18 (12.49 - 29.86)
Poor quality of life	11	12.94 (5.81 - 20.08)
Mass/lump	5	5.88 (2.54 - 13.04)
Neoplasia	5	5.88 (2.54 - 13.04)
Respiratory tract	5	5.88 (2.54 - 13.04)
Traumatic injury	5	5.88 (2.54 - 13.04)
Brain	4	4.71 (1.85 - 11.48)
Collapsed	4	4.71 (1.85 - 11.48)
Enteropathy	4	4.71 (1.85 - 11.48)
Spinal cord	3	3.53 (1.21 - 9.87)
Appetite	2	2.35 (0.65 - 8.18)
Behaviour	2	2.35 (0.65 - 8.18)
Incontinence	2	2.35 (0.65 - 8.18)
Viral/infectious	2	2.35 (0.65 - 8.18)
Other	13	15.29 (7.64 - 22.95)

Table 3: Cause-specific mortality at group-level diagnostic precision in Ragdolls (n = 85) under UK primary veterinary care within VetCompass Programme.

purebred cat breed in the UK and with steeply rising levels of ownership that support the value of increased emphasis on evidence generation on the demography, disorder profiles, and cause-specific mortality of the breed. The most common disorder was periodontal disease but the breed appears predisposed to haircoat disorder and enteropathy. While the median age at death of 12.85 years is shorter than for cats overall, this value was in line with the relatively shorter life expectancy for purebred cats overall in the UK. The Ragdoll cat breed appears to be largely typical in terms of disorders and cause-specific mortality for purebred cats overall in the UK. These results are likely to generalise well to the Ragdoll population in Ireland.

This article is a summary of a fuller report: O'Neill, D.G., Bass, O., Brodbelt, D.C., Church, D.B. and Engdahl, K.S. (2025) 'Demography, common disorders, cause-specific mortality and life expectancy of Ragdoll cats under primary veterinary care during 2019 in the UK', *Companion Animal Health and Genetics*, 12(1), 8, available at:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1186/s40575-025-00148-9>

References available on request.

READER QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

1. HOW OLD IS THE RAGDOLL CAT BREED?

- A. Seen on cave drawings from over 5,000 years ago
- B. Present on Egyptian hieroglyphics from over 3,500 years ago
- C. Brought to the UK by the Romans around 2,000 years ago
- D. Popularised by the Victorians when dog breeds were invented in the late 1800s
- E. Invented in the US in the 1960s

2. HOW DOES ADULT BODYWEIGHT COMPARE BETWEEN MALE AND FEMALE RAGDOLL CATS?

- A. Random chance
- B. Males are heavier than females
- C. Females are heavier than males
- D. Males and females have equivalent bodyweights
- E. The study did not provide an answer to this question

3. HOW HAS THE ANNUAL PROPORTIONAL BIRTH RATE FOR RAGDOLLS CHANGED BETWEEN 2005 AND 2019?

- A. Dropped five-fold
- B. Halved
- C. Stayed the same
- D. Doubled
- E. Increased five-fold

4. PERIODONTAL DISEASE AT 8.8 PER CENT WAS THE MOST COMMON DISORDER IN RAGDOLL CATS BUT WAS PREVIOUSLY REPORTED AS THE MOST COMMON DISORDER IN UK CATS OVERALL AT 15.2 PER CENT. HOW SHOULD THIS BE INTERPRETED FOR RAGDOLL HEALTH?

- A. Ragdolls have high prevalence and show predisposition
- B. Ragdolls have high prevalence but show disease prevention
- C. Ragdolls have low prevalence but show predisposition
- D. Ragdolls have low prevalence and show disease prevention
- E. Ragdolls have neither high prevalence nor show disease prevention

5. HOW LONG WAS THE LIFESPAN OF RAGDOLL CATS?

- A. Six years
- B. 8.2 years
- C. 10.65 years
- D. 12.85 years
- E. 14 years

ANSWERS 1E; 2B; 3E; 4B; 5D.