

Tropical Freshwater Fish

How to care for catfish

Catfish are a large group of fish which contains many species. These originate from all over the world but the majority of those in the aquarium trade are captive bred. Due to their diversity, catfish can range from small and peaceful to large and predatory. Always consult your OATA retailer before purchasing any catfish, as some can grow very large.



Water requirements

Catfish are usually undemanding of water chemistry and their suggested parameters are shown below. These parameters are a general guide for this group of fish, so it is important to check with your OATA retailer for any species-specific requirements before purchasing.

Temperature:	between 22-27°C
pH:	6.0-8.0
Ammonia:	Zero mg per litre
Nitrite:	Zero mg per litre
Nitrate:	Not to exceed 20 mg per litre above normal tap water levels
General hardness:	Soft-hard (4-18°dH)
Carbonate hardness:	Soft-hard (3-15°dkH)

Biology

There is a huge number of catfish species, however popular groups in the aquarium trade include corydoras, plecos and syndodontis.

Catfish range in size from small species such as *Otocinclus* (4cm), to red tailed catfish which can grow up to a metre. For more detail on the larger species, please see our Tankbusters care sheet. Regardless of size, these fish can live for several years in a well-matured set up with good water quality.

Some species, such as Corydoras, are shoaling fish and should be kept in groups of at least five. Those which are kept singly or in groups that are too small will often become stressed. Other species will need lots of space and will prefer to live alone.

Sexing catfish can be difficult, however some species, such as bristlenose catfish, can have obvious differences between male and female.



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Care should be taken when handling catfish as most have spines on their front (pectoral) fins and just behind their gills. Please see our “Hazardous Aquatic Animals” guidance for more information.

Aquarium requirements

As a general rule, you should within reason, buy an aquarium as large as possible. It is recommended that an aquarium of at least 80 litres is used for a shoal of the smaller species, such as Corydoras or for the smaller pleco species. However, much larger aquariums will be needed for bigger species, so ask your OATA retailer for guidance. The larger the aquarium, the more stable the environmental conditions such as temperature and water quality will be. Whatever the size, **a filter is always essential.**

Again, tank requirements will vary for different species. For smaller or more shy species, the tank should ideally have live plants present to provide cover. Since some species may eat or dig up live plants, the addition of plastic plants and suitable ornaments is recommended. Many catfish will also appreciate shelter in the form of wood, pots or caves. Other larger or more active species may prefer to have more open space and a cluttered aquarium may inhibit their movement. All catfish have sensitive barbels on their head, so aquarium sand or fine gravel should be placed on the bottom of the aquarium to prevent injury to them.

A heater is required to maintain a suitable temperature all year round. To minimise fluctuations in water temperature, the aquarium should not be situated near any draughts or heat sources. It should also be out of direct sunlight and away from loud noises, vibrations and sudden movements. Overhead tank lighting is recommended to maintain a correct day-night cycle.

Water testing kits are essential so that water quality can be checked on a regular basis (once a week) to ensure it does not slip below the water requirements stated above.

Introducing your fish

Before adding any fish, seek advice from your OATA retailer to make sure that your aquarium is an appropriate size for the catfish you would like to keep. Check that the water quality in your aquarium is suitable i.e. levels of ammonia and nitrite are zero. Only increase the number of fish you have in your aquarium slowly as the population of beneficial bacteria established when maturing your aquarium filter need to increase every time more fish are added and feeding increases. Overstocking or stocking your aquarium too quickly can result in ‘new tank syndrome’. This occurs when there are not enough nitrifying bacteria to cope with the increased waste from the fish, leading to unhealthy levels of ammonia and nitrite, which may cause fish to become ill or die.

Healthy fish have clear bright eyes, undamaged fins, intact scales, no ulcerations or bumps, appropriate swimming behaviour and steady breathing. Do not purchase a



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seemingly healthy fish if sickly fish are present in the tank with it. Signs of disease can include clamped fins, flicking against gravel or décor and shimmying (shaking). Diseases can be easily carried by fish that do not show any clinical signs. If in doubt, ask your OATA retailer for advice as they will have in-depth knowledge and experience.

Your OATA retailer will usually sell your fish to you in a plastic bag. Catfish species should be double bagged to prevent any sharp spines causing a leak. Try not to keep them in this for too long. Once purchased, take your new fish home as quickly as possible because fish are easily stressed by bright lights, extreme temperatures, noise and movement.

Once home, your fish will need to acclimatise to their new environment and a common method of doing this is known as the 'floating bag' method. Switch off the aquarium lights and take the bag containing your new fish out of its outer wrappings carefully, avoiding exposure to bright light. Float the bag in the water of your tank to ensure the temperature in the bag is the same as the aquarium water. After 10 minutes, slowly introduce small amounts of aquarium water into the bag containing the fish for up to 20 minutes. Once complete, carefully release the fish into the aquarium whilst introducing as little bag water into the aquarium as possible. After this, dispose of the bag and any excess water appropriately. Monitor your new fish carefully for the first week, paying particular attention to water quality. If in doubt, contact your OATA retailer for advice.

Maintenance

At least once every week, a partial water change of 25% is strongly recommended (a siphon device is useful to remove solid waste from the gravel). The water should be tested regularly (at least once per week) to ensure that ammonia and nitrites don't build up. Ensure that the replacement water is treated with tap water conditioner to remove any harmful chlorine or chloramine present before adding to the aquarium.

Filters should be checked for blockages. If the filter needs cleaning, do not run it under the tap because any chlorine or chloramine present may kill the beneficial bacterial population that has established in the media. Instead, it should be rinsed lightly in the tank water which is removed during a partial water change as this reduces the amount of bacteria which are lost.

Good husbandry is essential as some catfish can be stressed by even the smallest amounts of ammonia and nitrite which may then cause them to develop various diseases. Test the water to monitor the ammonia, nitrite and nitrate levels, together with pH and water hardness every week, especially during initial set-up and after adding extra fish.



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What to watch out for

All fish will have slight variations in their behaviour or appearance, but keeping an eye on any changes in the following will help to identify any potential problems before they become a real health issue:

- swimming behaviour – hanging at the surface, sitting on the bottom or erratic swimming
- colour – turning a darker or paler colour than normal
- temperament – changes in level of aggression or hiding more than normal
- breathing – gill covers moving at a slower or faster rate than normal
- appearance – development of white spots or fluffy growths, loss of fins or scales
- condition – increase or decrease in body weight and condition
- feeding – reduced intake or lack of interest in food

If you are concerned about the health of any of your livestock, then test your water quality and contact your OATA retailer for further guidance.

Feeding

Catfish vary hugely in their dietary requirements. Some are omnivorous (such as Corydoras), some are herbivorous (such as plecos), and the more predatory species are carnivorous. Ask your OATA retailer for species-specific advice regarding feeding. Although they have a reputation as scavengers, catfish should be fed the appropriate sinking foods to ensure their nutritional needs are met.

Catfish should only be fed what they can eat within a few minutes, once a day. Some grazing species may take longer to feed, so allow 30 minutes if required. Take care not to overfeed as this can lead to a build-up of uneaten food which breaks down releasing toxic waste into the water. If in doubt, ask your OATA retailer for advice on appropriate feeding levels.

Compatibility

Catfish vary in terms of compatibility. Corydoras, Otocinclus and smaller plecos make excellent additions to community aquariums. Other species can be extremely predatory and so should be mixed with caution. Always consult your OATA retailer before adding catfish into a community aquarium.

Breeding

Catfish are unlikely to breed in the home aquarium since many require changes in water conditions which should not be present in the home aquarium. For example, some species of pleco require a rapid drop in water temperature to stimulate spawning behaviour, which is something that should not be found in the home aquarium. The species most likely to breed are bristlenose catfish. The male will entice a female into a cave where she



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deposits her eggs. The male fertilises and then cares for the eggs until the fry are large enough to leave the cave. Some Corydoras species may also spawn in the home aquarium, and you may find eggs stuck to the aquarium glass or décor. These are unlikely to survive unless they are removed and reared in a dedicated set up with specialist fry foods.

Checklist

Before purchase make sure:

1. You have the appropriate equipment and position for the aquarium.
2. You have researched all the species in which you are interested and your final choices are all compatible.
3. You are familiar with how to transport and release your fish.
4. You are aware of the daily, weekly and monthly maintenance your aquarium will require.
5. You are prepared to look after your fish properly for the duration of their life.

Shopping List

- Glass or acrylic aquarium
- Filter*
- Heater
- Lighting (required for live plants)*
- Gravel or sand
- Tap water conditioner/dechlorinator
- Water testing kits (ideally ammonia, nitrite, nitrate, pH and water hardness)
- Gravel cleaner/siphon cleaning device (recommended)
- Aquarium decorations and/or live plants
- Bucket for water changes

*may be included in branded aquarium sets but can be purchased separately.

Before purchase make sure:

- The aquarium is of a suitable size that ideally can accommodate the fish once they are fully grown
- Water parameters are as advised in this leaflet.
- Aquarium is cycled and ready to receive fish

Always buy...

test kits and regularly check the water for ammonia, nitrite, nitrate and pH. This will allow you to make sure the water in your

Establish a routine...

for testing the water in your aquarium. Record your results to enable you to identify fluctuations quickly. Also check the temperature of the water.



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aquarium is not causing welfare problems for your catfish.

Maintain...

the water in the aquarium within the accepted parameters highlighted above. You may need to do regular water changes to achieve this.

Never siphon by mouth...

A fish tank can harbour bacteria which can be harmful if swallowed. Buy a specially designed aquarium gravel cleaner which can be started or primed without the need to place the siphon in your mouth

Always wash your hands...

making sure to rinse off all soap residues, before putting them into your aquarium, or use long sleeved rubber gloves. Wash your hands again afterwards and certainly before eating, drinking or smoking.

Five Welfare Needs Checklist:

The Animal Welfare Act 2006 states that all pet owners have a legal duty of care to their pets. Anyone who is cruel to an animal or is found not to be providing the five animal welfare needs, as listed below, can be prosecuted.

- ▶ A **suitable environment** e.g. appropriately sized tank (with water heater if tropical set up) within a suitable location in your home.
- ▶ A **suitable diet** which meets the needs of your chosen fish.
- ▶ **Behaviour** - Fish are able to exhibit their normal behaviour e.g. hiding places for timid fish, enough room for fish to swim freely.
- ▶ **Companionship** - Ensure you know whether your chosen fish need to be kept with, or apart from, other fish.
- ▶ **Health** - Protected from pain, injury, suffering & disease e.g. you are aware of the daily, weekly and monthly maintenance that your aquarium will need.

- ▶ **Water quality test kits are a necessity not an optional extra**
- ▶ **You must be prepared to look after your fish properly for the duration of their life and provide an aquarium which can accommodate your fish when fully grown**



*Never release your aquarium animals or plants into the wild

It is illegal and for most fish species this will lead to an untimely and possibly lingering death. Any animals or plants that do survive might be harmful to our native countryside. Take care to properly dispose of any soiled substrate (e.g. sand or gravel) or decorations so that non-native organisms do not enter natural watercourses.

Visit ornamentalfish.org to find a full range of how to guides and species-specific care sheets to help you look after your fish successfully.



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