

Choosing and Caring for Your New Cat



Before choosing a new adult cat or kitten, it is important to take time to research and think about your options. A cat's personality, age, and appearance, as well as the kinds of pets you already have at home, are all things you should keep in mind when choosing a cat. And if you've never owned a cat before, it's also important to know in advance exactly what taking care of your new cat will involve.

What age and type of cat should I get?

In choosing a cat, you must first decide whether you want to bring home a kitten, a juvenile, or an adult. Generally, kittens are curious, playful, and energetic. You get to watch them grow and mature, and can influence the development of their personality. A kitten may also be more readily accepted by pets that you already have. An adult cat's personality is already established, so you'll have a better idea of what kind of pet it will be in your home situation. Adult cats also usually require less intensive care and supervision than kittens or juveniles do.

A second thing to consider in choosing a cat is whether you want a pedigreed or a mixed-breed animal. Mixed-breed cats are generally categorized as either domestic shorthairs or domestic longhairs. Mixed-breed and pedigreed cats both can be excellent companions. The greatest advantage of getting a pedigreed kitten or adult is that its size, appearance, and to some extent, personality, are likely to fit the profile of its particular breed. With a mixed-breed kitten, you will be unable to predict its adult size and appearance as accurately.

Many of these considerations come down to personal preference. Truly, the most important factor in choosing a cat is to determine how healthy it is.

How can I tell if a cat is healthy and friendly?

There are several visible indicators of good health and temperament. Healthy cats should have clear, bright eyes with little or no tearing, and the nostrils should be clean. Runny eyes, sneezing, or a nasal discharge can indicate a respiratory infection. The inside of the cat's ears should be clean and free of any discharge. A black, tar-like discharge in the ear canal usually indicates an ear-mite infestation; a pus-like discharge may be visible in the ear canal if there is a bacterial or yeast infection. The mouth and gums should be pink, with no evidence of ulcers or sores. The cat's coat should be glossy, and there should be no bare spots, dry skin, dandruff, or any evidence of external parasites. The cat should not be too thin or

have a protruding belly, because either condition can indicate the presence of internal parasites or some other medical disorder. If possible, make sure the cat's feces appear to be normal and well formed.

The cat should be friendly and comfortable with people. A physically sound kitten is active, bright, responsive, rambunctious, and eager to join in play. Beware of a cat that frequently runs away and hides, or that appears lethargic and sleeps more than seems normal.

What about litter boxes and food dishes?

Before bringing your new cat home, make sure that you already have the basic provisions it will need. First, your cat must have access to a litter box. Cats are naturally fastidious, and most will instinctively use a litter box. The litter box can be simple or extravagant, but most cats prefer simple boxes without hoods. Keep in mind that kittens will need a box that's low enough for them to enter easily. Unscented, fine-textured litter is preferred by the majority of cats. At first, you will choose the type of litter and litter box; later, your cat may demonstrate its preferences.

Be sure to keep the litter box and surrounding area clean, and change the litter frequently. Cats may avoid a litter-box area that isn't clean. Also, providing just one litter box may not be sufficient. Animal behaviorists suggest providing as many boxes as you have cats, plus one. For example, if you have two cats, you should have three litter boxes. (For more-detailed information on litter and boxes, see our brochure *Feline Behavior Problems: House Soiling*.)

Your new cat also will need separate food and water dishes, kept far away from the litter-box area, to avoid contamination. It is important to keep the dishes clean, and the contents fresh. Cats may reject old food or stale water.

Will I need a scratching post?

Because scratching on objects is a normal marking behavior for cats, it is difficult to stop or even curb. However, cats can be taught to claw appropriate objects like scratching posts. Once you've figured out your cat's preferred scratching materials and orientation, you'll be better equipped to buy a suitable scratching substitute. For example, if your cat likes to scratch on furniture, a vertical carpet-covered post might be a good choice. But a cat that likes the horizontal motion of scratching on a floor carpet may be more likely to use a flattened cardboard box or a log placed on its side. A cat that scratches on drapes would probably prefer a vertical post tall enough for a long stretch, such as those that mount on a wall or door. Take your cat to the new scratching area or object that you've approved, and reward the cat with treats, strokes, and praise for using it. (For more information, see our brochure *Feline Behavior Problems: Destructive Behavior*.)

What should I feed my new cat?



What to feed, how much to feed, and how often to feed are common concerns of first-time cat owners. First, you should find out what your new cat has been eating. Even if you don't expect to stay with that diet, you should continue feeding some of the old food as you gradually switch to the new. Whether you feed dry, canned, or semi-moist food, be sure to purchase a product that meets the standards established (preferably through animal-feeding trials) by the Association of American Feed Control Officials (AAFCO). The food package's nutrition labels should provide this kind of information.

If your cat is eating a diet that meets the AAFCO standards (see www.aafco.org), you can be assured that it is receiving an adequate supply of vitamins and minerals. Therefore, the use of vitamin and mineral supplements is unnecessary. In fact, the addition of a supplement without a veterinarian's approval may actually harm your cat. (For more-detailed information on nutrition, see our brochure [Feeding Your Cat](#).)

What about grooming?

Grooming is much easier if you begin the procedure when your cat is young. The cat will grow to accept grooming as a pleasant routine rather than as a desperation-based chore. A good brush or a steel comb is a necessity for any cat owner. By brushing or combing your cat regularly, you can keep its hair coat clean, shiny, and sleek. Any loose fur removed during grooming will not wind up on the furniture, and your cat will have fewer problems with fur accumulating in the gastrointestinal tract, leading to hairball formation. An extra benefit is that by regularly grooming your cat, you have an opportunity to examine its skin for parasites or disease.

A good set of nail clippers is another necessity for any cat owner. Regular trimming of nails reduces the likelihood of damage caused by sharp claws, and lessens the possibility of a nail growing into the foot pad and causing infection. If you start the routine early on, you will find the task becomes easier as your cat gets older. Ask your veterinarian for a lesson on how to clip nails. (And/or see our online video [Trimming Your Cat's Claws](#))

What veterinary care will my new cat need?



When you are getting a cat from its current owner, you should ask about prior vaccinations, nutrition, parasite control, and grooming. Any new cat should be checked by a veterinarian as soon as possible after coming home with you. If you already have other cats at home, and especially if the newcomer's health history is not known, keep the new cat separated from your other cats until your veterinarian has had a chance to examine it. If no health history is available, your veterinarian will likely run a few tests to determine that your new cat is free from disease. One of the first may be a test for feline leukemia virus (FeLV) and feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV). Feline leukemia virus and FIV weaken the immune

system, leaving the cat vulnerable to secondary infections and cancer.

In addition to testing for these diseases, your veterinarian will also likely analyze a fecal sample to test for intestinal parasites. Most intestinal parasites deprive the infected cat of important nutrition, causing weakness and susceptibility to viral or bacterial infections. Keeping your cat free of parasites is important for its long-term health. Occasionally, an owner may see in vomit or in feces an intestinal parasite that resembles a white threadlike worm, or the parasite may resemble a rice grain near the cat's tail. If your cat is infected, proper medication should be obtained from your veterinarian, and a fecal sample should be checked after treatment to ensure that the parasites have been eliminated. (For more-detailed information, see our brochures *Gastrointestinal Parasites of Cats* and *Toxoplasmosis*.)

During the physical examination, your veterinarian will also check your new cat for external parasites, such as fleas, ticks, and mites. External parasites cause the most-common skin disorders of cats and can transmit other diseases, such as Lyme disease. Your veterinarian can provide effective treatments and control methods for your cat's external parasites.

What about vaccines?

A series of vaccines for kittens and regularly scheduled vaccines for adult cats are one of the best ways to ensure that your cat is protected from deadly infectious feline diseases. Vaccines help prepare a cat's immune system to fend off invasion by a particular disease-causing organism. Vaccines contain antigens, which to the immune system "look" like the organism but don't cause disease. When a vaccine is administered, the immune system mounts a protective response, so if your cat is subsequently exposed to the disease-causing organism, its immune system is prepared either to prevent infection or to reduce the severity of the disease.

The most-common combination vaccine, usually called FVRCP, protects your cat against three diseases: feline panleukopenia, feline viral rhinotracheitis, and disease caused by feline calicivirus. Feline panleukopenia-also called feline distemper-is a highly contagious and deadly viral disease of cats. Until recently, panleukopenia was the most-serious infectious disease of cats, claiming the lives of thousands every year.

Thanks to currently available, highly effective vaccines, panleukopenia is now considered to be an uncommon disease. Upper-respiratory-tract viruses are extremely common in cats. The two most-common causes of these diseases are feline herpes virus (the cause of feline viral rhinotracheitis) and feline calicivirus. All cats are very likely to be exposed to these viruses and should be vaccinated to provide protection.

Generally, the first FVRCP vaccination is given when your cat is six to eight weeks old. The vaccine is then repeated (or "boosted") at three- to four-week intervals until the kitten is sixteen weeks old. After this initial vaccination series, boosters are given one year later and then every three years, to keep the cat protected.

Your cat should also be vaccinated against rabies-in fact, rabies vaccination is required by law in many states. The vaccine should be given when the cat is eight to twelve weeks old (depending on the vaccine type), then one year later. Thereafter, the vaccine should be given every one to three years, again depending on the vaccine type and the local rabies-vaccination requirements.

Vaccines can also help protect your cat against a number of other infectious agents, including feline leukemia virus (FeLV). Consult with your veterinarian to decide which vaccines might be beneficial to your cat. (For additional information, see our brochure Feline Vaccines: Benefits and Risks.)

When should I have my cat spayed or neutered?

Traditionally, cats are spayed or neutered at six months of age or older. However, some veterinarians recommend performing the procedure at an earlier age, to further ensure against unwanted pregnancies. Spaying-or ovariectomy-is the surgical removal of the female reproductive organs (ovaries, oviducts, and uterus). It is a recommended procedure for all female cats that will not be used in a breeding program. Besides helping to decrease overpopulation, removing a female's reproductive organs eliminates the behaviors associated with the heat cycle, such as howling and restlessness. Spaying also greatly reduces the incidence of mammary cancer.

Neutering-or castration-is the surgical removal of parts of the male reproductive organs (testes, epididymis, and parts of the vas deferens). The benefits, besides preventing impregnation of female cats, include the reduction in the male of excessive aggressiveness, urine spraying, and the pungent odor of intact-male urine.

How will I know in the future if my cat is sick and needs treatment?

Even provided with balanced nutrition and a good amount of love and attention, cats can still get sick. By spotting the signs, you can ensure that your cat gets the proper medical care. A sick cat often has a dull and patchy hair coat, because its skin is one of the first systems to be affected by disease. Another sign of illness is a lack of appetite. Persistent and severe vomiting and/or prolonged diarrhea are sure signs of illness. Red, watery eyes, which may be accompanied by nasal discharge or sneezing, also can indicate problems. Straining to urinate, bloody urine, or frequent urination signify illness and should be treated immediately. Any swelling that appears rapidly or continues to increase in size over time is a cause for concern.

In short, be observant and use good judgment with regard to your cat's health and threats to it. When in doubt, a simple telephone call to your veterinarian can usually determine if your cat should be examined.



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