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How to Take Care of a Cat

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With their playful personalities, affectionate behavior, and adorable faces, cats can be the ideal pet. But, despite popular opinion, cats are *not* maintenance-free! To keep your cat healthy and happy, you need to know how to take care of and provide the best possible life for your new furry friend.

Method

1

Housetraining Your Cat

1 Encourage the cat to use a litter box.^[1] Most cats will prefer the litter box to other parts of the house because of the texture of the litter. But, there are still steps you need to take to make sure you're offering the litter box as the best place to use the bathroom.

- Place the box in a quiet spot where the cat won't be bothered by people, dogs, or loud noises.
- To keep the litter box clean, make sure you scoop the litter daily, and clean the box weekly. You should also replace or refresh the litter at least once a week.^[2]

- Provide enough litter boxes for more than one cat. If you have 2 cats, you need 3 litter boxes in different areas of the home. One cat might try to intimidate a less dominate cat away from using a single box.

2 Make the litter box a comfortable place. Don't frighten or startle your cat when it's using the box, or it may form a bad association with the box and start avoiding it. Buy a large box, even if you have to spend a little money on it. Cats are more comfortable in a larger (in area, not height) box.^[3]

- Don't switch brands of litter on your cat, because cats don't like sudden change. Switching from a clay litter to a scoopable clumping type of litter or vice versa might upset the cat so much it stops using the box.
- Don't use heavily scented litters that might deter a cat from litter box use.

3 Take young or old cats needs into consideration. Keep in mind that kittens and older cats with arthritis or other health problems may have problems getting in and out of a box that's too tall. Use low-height boxes in an easily accessible area for kittens and cats with special needs, or buy an adjustable litter box.

4 Provide the cat with a scratching post. Scratching is a normal part of cat behavior, and there's no way you can train it out of them. If your cat still has its claws, he'll need one or two scratching posts to keep him from scratching up furniture, woodwork, and so on. By providing a post, you allow the cat to indulge in normal, healthy behavior.^[4]

5 Discourage the cat from exploring forbidden surfaces. Cats are curious, and will jump on counters or other places you'd like them to steer clear of. Scat mats, a perfectly timed mist of water from a spray bottle, or even a stern "no" can correct this behavior. With time and patience, you can teach your cat to stay away from your protected areas.

- You can also use a rattle can (an empty soda can filled with a few pebbles and the opening taped over). Toss it gently on the ground to scare a cat away from forbidden surfaces. DO NOT throw the can at the cat, for that may harm your cat.

6 Consider using feline pheromone products. These products, which fill the air with calming synthetic pheromones, come as sprays or diffusers that plug into electrical outlets.^[5] They can help resolve litter box or scratching issues, and have also been proven to calm stressed or anxious cats.

Method

2

Feeding Your Cat

1 Decide what type of food to feed your cat. Cat food comes in a vast array of types: dry food, semi-moist, and canned are the common types. Dry food is easily and efficiently stored, but cats go wild for the taste of semi-moist and canned foods. The latter types can add more fluid to the cat's diet than dry foods. In general, food type comes down to owner preference.

- Occasionally, a cat with a medical condition might need one type over another. Consult your veterinarian for recommendations.

2 Choose a good brand of cat food. Like other animals, cats have some specific nutritional needs. They are "obligate carnivores," which means they need animal proteins to avoid severe health consequences.^[6] Ask your vet for suggestions about a good quality food. Cheaper products may not provide enough nutrition to keep your cat happy and healthy.

- Look for cat foods that list large amounts of animal meat like beef, chicken, turkey, or fish.^[7]
- Also look for important amino acids like taurine and arginine and fatty acids like arachidonic and linoleic acid.^[8]
- Avoid feeding your cat human foods unless you have cleared the food with your veterinarian. Some human foods can make a cat severely sick or are even toxic to cats (e.g., chocolate).

3 Follow your cat food's suggested feeding guide.^[9] 🌱 In general, cats are fed according to age, weight and activity levels. They prefer to eat frequent, small meals throughout the day.^[10]

- Ask your vet for recommendations on what and how to feed your cat if you have any reservations.

4 Don't overfeed your cat. Follow your veterinarian's recommendations closely and make sure your cat gets plenty of exercise, as obesity is one of the biggest health issues facing cats today. Obese cats are more likely to develop diabetes when they approach middle age. Extra weight also contributes to arthritis, heart disease, and other health problems in cats.^[11]

Method

3

Keeping Your Cat Healthy

1 Brush your cat depending on it's coat needs. You may think that because cats seem to groom themselves, you don't need to brush them. But you *do* need to brush long-hair cats several times a week and short-hair cats weekly. This will help reduce shedding in your home and also help the cat avoid the dreaded hairballs.

- For cats that tend to shed (long-haired ones especially), use a comb that has fine strands of metal. This gets deep into the undercoat and eliminates shedding.

2 Check the cat for skin conditions as you brush. Be on the lookout for any fleas or other parasites, and for any unusual redness, lumps, bumps, or other skin problems. If you see anything suspicious, let your veterinarian know and ask for advice on how you should take care of it. Make sure to check the under belly of a cat with your hands.

3 Schedule yearly vet visits.^[12] Just like any member of the family, a cat needs regular medical visits. Unlike human children, cats can't let us know when they're not feeling well. They rely on their humans to take them to a veterinarian for regular medical examinations to keep them healthy. It is important that a cat sees a vet at least once a year, for a physical check-up: teeth, ears, eyes, heart, booster vaccinations, and deflea/deworm treatments. All cat owners should consider getting their pet vaccinated against the following: feline infectious enteritis (FIE), cat 'flu and feline leukemia virus (FeLV). All can kill cats if they become infected and so it is important to protect your pet. You may also find that a cattery will not accept your pet, should you need their services, without proof of these and potentially other vaccinations. Your vet can advise exactly what vaccinations are required for your pet. If you are at all concerned about your cat's health or behaviour you should see your vet as soon as possible.

- Older cats might need to see a veterinarian twice yearly for optimal health.

4 Visit the vet more frequently for kittens. Just like human babies, kittens need to see the vet more often than adult cats. Starting at around 8 weeks of age, they'll need 2-3 visits to have their vaccination series and worm

treatments. At minimum, this includes the feline distemper vaccine and a rabies vaccine. Your vet will discuss the benefits of optional vaccinations as well. Ask about the risks of diseases like feline leukemia and make an informed decision about which vaccinations you want.

- The vet will also check the kitten for fleas and ear mites, and treat them if needed.
- Make sure the kitten gets its worm treatment. Most kittens have roundworms that can stunt growth and potentially be transmitted to humans.

5 Get your cat spayed or neutered (or "fixed"). Spaying a female cat or neutering a male cat has many positive benefits. It will cut down on unwanted behaviors like roaming and the tendency to spray urine. Physically, it protects against unwanted pregnancies and diseases like pyometra. The most important thing, though, is that it cuts down on the number of unwanted kittens in the world!

- Ask your vet for a recommendation on when to get kittens spayed or neutered. In general, vets recommend a range from 2-6 months.

6 Get the cat used to tooth brushing. Cats can and do suffer from dental disease. To brush your cat's teeth, you need a soft-bristled toothbrush and veterinary toothpaste. *Never use human toothpaste* — too much fluoride can upset your cat's stomach, and with the high fluoride concentration in human toothpaste, too much could be toxic. Start by offering him/her a taste of the veterinary toothpaste. The next time, let him/her taste the toothpaste, and then run your finger along the gums of the upper teeth. Repeat the process with the toothbrush. Get the bristles of the brush along the gum line of the upper back teeth and angle slightly up, so the bristles get under the gum line. Work from back to front, making small circles along the gum lines. It should take you less than 30 seconds to brush your pet's teeth.

- Do not try to brush the entire mouth at first. If he/she only lets you brush the outside of her upper teeth, it's better than nothing. You're still addressing the most important area of dental disease prevention.

7 Schedule professional tooth cleaning if needed. Even with the best tooth brushing, some cats may still need an occasional professional cleaning. While brushing reduces the plaque and buildup on the visible surfaces of the teeth it cannot get to the buildup just under the gum line. A professional cleaning also gives the vet a chance to fully examine her mouth under sedation. Some signs of dental disease include:

- Bad breath
- Loose teeth
- Discolored teeth or teeth covered in tartar
- Sensitivity or pain in the mouth
- Bleeding
- Drooling a lot or dropping food while trying to eat
- Loss of appetite or weight loss

8 Make sure your cat gets enough play time. Your cat needs interaction with you daily to keep him/her both emotionally happy and physically fit. Use cat toys, talking, and grooming as chances to spend time together. Laser pointers, balls, play mice, and feather toys are also good ways to engage your cat in play.

- Here's a game you can play with your cat: Try hiding a treat somewhere and using a laser pointer to guide your cat to the treat. Make the laser pointer move in a way that a real mouse would move, try pointing it in small places and under hiding spots. Bring the laser pointer to the treat. This will make the cat feel like it's hunting and it will be rewarded in the end!

Method**4****Getting a Good Cat**

1 Decide if you want a kitten or a full-grown cat.^[13] Kittens are adorably tempting, but be honest with yourself about whether you'll be able to match that energy level, and handle that level of responsibility. Shelters are full of loving adult cats who have a much harder time getting adopted. An adult cat will be calmer and quieter than a kitten, but may also have behavioral issues from its early life. Adult cats may also have medical conditions you'll have to address sooner than you would with a kitten. Also, kittens often scratch very painfully; Decide if you want that.

2 Consider medical concerns that may come with a specific cat. If you have your eye on one cat, in particular, ask about its medical history to see if it requires any long-term care. Would you be able to afford this cat's medical needs?

- Even if the cat is healthy, consider its breed. Purebred cats of different breeds can have their own genetic problems to overcome. For example, flat-faced cats like Manx and Scottish folds often develop breathing problems.^[14]
- Purebred cats are more likely to have genetic medical problems than non-pedigreed cats.^[15]

3 Consider the amount of time you have for a cat. While a cat doesn't need daily walking like a dog, don't be fooled into thinking that cats and kittens aren't a time commitment. They're still active pets that need a lot of play, and affectionate companions who demand attention. You'll also spend time cleaning the litter box and giving the cat structured meals.

- The average lifespan of an indoor cat is 13-17 years, so be aware that you're making a long-term commitment to a new family member.^[16] 🌱

4 Calculate whether you can afford a cat. The one-time purchase fee for a cat can range from \$45 for a shelter adoption to several hundred dollars for a purebred cat. Beyond that, though, you'll have to pay for food, litter, toys, and regular medical expenses. The ASPCA estimates that in the first year of owning a cat, you will likely spend about \$1,035 on it.^[17] 🌱 (That amount goes down after you've bought the major equipment and had your initial medical procedures.)

5 Consider adopting a cat from an animal shelter. The cost is minimal considering what you get: a fully vaccinated, health examined, and spayed or neutered cat.^[18] 🌱 Any “free” cat is ultimately going to cost you those things down the line, if you're a responsible cat owner.

Should I Get My Cat Spayed?

Expert Q&A

Question

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How should you split your tin

Pippa Elliott, MRCVS
Veterinarian



Expert Answer



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day, a few minutes each day to groom the cat, and then speak and fuss the cat at mealtimes. Aside from that it only takes a few seconds for an ear or chin rub when the cat strolls by, but your cat will really appreciate the extra affection.

Question

Which breed of cat we should

Pippa Elliott, MRCVS
Veterinarian



Expert Answer



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to have. For example, a single older person might prefer a lapcat to cuddle and fuss, whilst a young family need a bombproof cat who loves to play and isn't phased by activity and noise. Write down a list of what your ideal cat would do e.g. playful, outgoing, loving or likes only one person, intelligent, easy to train. Then do some research online as to whether your preferred breed has those characteristics or not. Happily, there is a breed to match most people's ideal, so enjoy your research!

Tips

- If you are planning on getting a cat, make sure to have pet insurance in case something happens to your kitty. You could be saving thousands!

- Cats have claws and if they are excited, scared, angry, etc., they will use them. So beware, the cat will scratch you. Most scratches are accidental. If your cat scratches you during playtime just say: "NO" and stop playing with him/her. The cat will eventually learn to control their claws while playing.
- Milk can upset a cat's stomach; water is the best fluid to give to your cat.
- Try giving filtered water to your cat, not tap water if your cat is a picky drinker.
- Give your cat the chance to roam free all around the house untouched if it really wants you to pet it. It will come to you by itself.
- If the cat will not drink or use the bathroom, take it to the vet as soon as possible.
- For a fun treat, buy some catnip and pour a tiny pile onto a tile or hard floor (don't use on carpet unless you plan to vacuum!) Cats love catnip! They will frequently roll around in it, or eat it. Warning: cats sometimes get very active after exposure to catnip. It's harmless and a lot of fun.
- Make sure your cat has it's own space; a space that nobody will bother it; a space to go to when it feels stressed or just wants to rest.
- Be careful what types of plants you keep in the house. Certain types of ornamental flowers can be extremely toxic to pets (e.g., Poinsettias).
- If you get bitten or scratched by a cat, clean the wound with soap and water and then alcohol (or some other disinfectant) and apply a bandage. If you see swelling, or signs of infection, go see a doctor.

Warnings

- Never abandon a cat if you don't want it anymore. Always take unwanted animals to the nearest animal shelter. They will take your dog or cat and try to find a good home for them. Abandoning animals is cruel.

- If you play with your cat for a long time please provide water.
- Never use products intended for other animals on your cat.
- Don't make them do things against their will such as:
 - Randomly picking them up whenever you like
 - Squeezing them really tight
- Never declaw your cat, as it is equivalent to cutting a person's finger off at the first knuckle. It causes lifelong pain and makes the cat vulnerable to injury (if a predator somehow attacks it).^[19]
 - Alternatives to declawing include providing scratching posts, trimming claws, and using cat nail caps.^[20]

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