



Pet Behavior Counseling

Helping you and your pet become best friends for life.

GETTING STARTED WITH YOUR NEW CAT OR KITTEN

The Changing Role of The Cat

Cats have surpassed dogs as the number one pet in the country with 37 percent of homes having at least one cat residing in them. A large part of the reason for cats rise in popularity is due to the changes that are occurring in our lifestyles. Many people are now living in more populated areas with smaller yards as well as high rises and apartment buildings which are not always conducive to owning a dog. Additionally, we have become a very busy culture and people often believe that a cat will require less time and energy than a dog. Recent estimates are that there are now roughly 60 million cats living as pets in the United States today.

Unfortunately, however, too many people erroneously assume that having a cat requires little to no work and are troubled when their pet develops habits of which they do not approve. Many of these habits can be appropriately directed and it is important to start off on the right foot. Consider carefully before obtaining a new cat and never get one on a whim. Remember, this animal will be your responsibility for the next 15 years or so.

Before Kitty Comes Home

The best time to prepare for your new companion is before it ever enters your home. Depending upon where you have obtained your cat, you may well be able to gather some information as to your cat's preferences for toys, scratching surfaces, litter boxes, etc. As any of us who have lived with a variety of cats knows, the word finicky can sometimes be an understatement. So ask the breeder or the shelter what they have used for your cat and how the cat has responded.

If you have other pets in the household, particularly cats, it may also be wise to take your cat to visit your veterinarian prior to bringing them into the home. This would be to insure that your new cat is healthy and not a carrier of any diseases such as feline leukemia or upper respiratory illness that may then be conferred onto your existing pets. If there is any indication that your cat is coming equipped with freeloaders (fleas), it would be best to have them receive a flea bath, if they are old enough, **prior** to entering your home. This way you can avoid the hassle of dealing with fleas in the environment. While animal rescues do their best, many animals coming from shelters will have fleas, as the cost of flea prevention for all animals residing in most shelters would be astronomical.

Necessary Supplies

Bringing home your cat will go much more smoothly if you are prepared before you pick up Kitty. There are several items that you will need:

- U **High Quality Cat Food** – Cats are desert animals and by nature get most of their water from the foods that they eat. As such they should be fed both dry and canned food in order to ensure that they are receiving adequate water. Additionally, many foods, particularly dry foods, are very high in carbohydrates which are not a nutritional requirement of the cat. Cats are obligate carnivores and require foods that have high meat content. For more information on foods review the articles on pet nutrition at our website, www.greenacreskennel.com.
- U **Food and Water Bowls** – There are many styles of bowls, from stainless steel to ceramic to plastic, and which your cat will prefer only your cat knows. Many cats like to eat off of flatter surfaces, more similar to a plate than a bowl. Whatever you do, be sure that it is not so deep that your cat or kitten has difficulty accessing their food. You should have at least one bowl of fresh water on each level in a multistory home. Note: some cats are allergic to plastic and will develop sores around their face if fed from plastic bowls.
- U **Toys** – All cats, not just kittens, should have a variety of toys to play with. Some of these toys should be interactive to assist in building a bond between you and your new companion, whereas other toys can be left out for the cat to bat around on their own. Cat toys do not have to be expensive. Many cats have hours of fun with a wadded up piece of paper. Please do not use string or yarn as a cat toy (see hazards).
- U **Bed, Sleeping Area** – Many cats like to have a bed to call their own. Some prefer something soft and cushy while others prefer a firmer surface. A sure hit will be to place a bed for your cat in an area that receives ample amounts of sunshine. While some cats like sleeping areas that are enclosed on several sides with one doorway to enter, many cats will not as they may feel it necessary to have ample escape routes should need be.
- U **Litter Boxes & Litter** – Unfortunately, what your cat will prefer is often learned through trial and error. There are many different types of litter boxes from simple pans with four sides, to covered boxes, to “smart” boxes that scoop the litter for you. What is important is that you get a box that your cat will like and is willing to use rather than one based solely on your preferences. While people often prefer covered boxes, many cats do not like them because they retain the odor and the cats also often feel trapped themselves. Larger cats may have difficulty turning around in a covered box. Be sure for older cats and kittens that the sides of the box are not so high that they struggle to get in. You should have at least one litter box per level in a multistory home and if you have multiple cats the rule of thumb is one box per cat plus one extra. Cats also often have a preference for the type of litter that is in their box. Litter can range from regular clay litter to clumping litter, from wood pellets to recycled newspaper pellets. Cats typically prefer unscented litter to the scented variety.
- U **Scratching Areas** – All cats need to scratch. It is a normal natural feline instinct. Cats should be provided with several scratching posts in areas they frequent. As with everything else, what your cat likes is up to them, however if you have your cat at a young age you can help to mold their preferences. Some prefer cardboard, while others prefer carpeted surfaces or wood. Additionally, some cats like to scratch in a vertical position while others prefer to do so horizontally. For more on scratching see the article on cats and inappropriate scratching at our website at www.greenacreskennel.com.
- U **Grooming Supplies** – While many cats do a nice job in keeping themselves clean this may not always be the case. Long haired cats require combing on a regular basis (at least

3 times per week), and all cats even short coated ones should learn to accept being combed. Often, as cats age they lose the ability to do as meticulous of a job in grooming themselves and may require our assistance. Life is much easier if they have learned that combing is a pleasant experience. Another grooming supply needed is nail clippers. Cutting your cat's nails on a regular basis (once per month is usually adequate) will help in preventing damage to furniture and other possessions

- U **Crate** – Be sure to have a crate to bring your cat home in. It is always unsafe for cats to be traveling loose in vehicles or in somebody's lap.
- U **ID Tag & Collar** – For your cats safety an ID is recommended. Even if you have an indoor cat you will have better success at having your cat returned to you should he ever slip out the door. Be sure that the collar is a breakaway style that will come off should your cat become hung up on something or slip a leg through the collar. Another option is a microchip, which can be inserted by your veterinarian. A microchip is approximately the size of a grain of rice and contains a personal code for your cat. This personal code allows your information to be accessed in the event your cat should be lost. The advantage of the microchip is obvious in that it cannot be lost. A disadvantage however is that your cat would have to be turned into a local shelter, which often requires more effort on the part of the person who has found your cat and thus may be less likely to occur. The best option is to use using both a microchip and a collar with an ID tag.

Household Hazards

People often do not think about cat proofing their home, the way they do about puppy proofing, but we need to change that. Cats and curious kittens in particular, can find themselves in a world of trouble in no time so it is imperative that we take precautions. Some of your typical household hazards are:

- U **Electrical Cords** - Puppies are not the only ones that like to chew and explore the world with their mouths, so be sure that all electrical wires are out of sight or covered with PVC lest your kitten chew a wire and get shocked.
- U **Cords from Venetian Blinds & Curtains** – Cats often see these as great fun, yet they can very easily become tangled in them.
- U **Toilet Bowls** – Be sure to keep your toilet lid down as a curious kitten could easily fall in and potentially not get out. Also be aware of any chemicals that you use in cleaning of your toilet, such as bleach tablets as these most likely are toxic to your pet.
- U **Trash Cans** – Like dogs, cats have fun in the trash too! Purchase covered trash cans or keep your trash securely in a cabinet.
- U **Appliances** – Be aware of hiding places, particularly appliances that give off heat. It is not uncommon for a cat to climb into a dryer, so be sure to keep the door closed when not in use. Additionally, many cats like to climb behind the refrigerator and often get stuck. Block off access prior to bringing your new friend home. Cats are curious, check inside the washer, dryer and dishwasher before you close the doors.
- U **Recliners** – Make sure your cat is not in the inner workings of your recliner before lowering the footrest. These often close with such force that they could do a significant amount of damage to a cat.
- U **Screens** – Cats love to get in windows and look outdoors so make sure that all screens are secure and that your cat will not fall out should they lean against the screen. This is particularly important on upper levels of a home. Contrary to popular belief, cats do not always land on their feet and can be seriously injured in a fall.

- U **Objects on Counters** – Remember, cats love to get up on things so do not leave breakable items or poisons or cleaners on top of tables and counters. It is just good practice to keep surfaces clear. Special attention should be paid to candles, and candles should never be lit if you are not in the room.
- U **String & Yarn** – While we often think of yarn and kittens going together hand in hand, it can actually pose some problems on several levels. If a kitten were to ingest the yarn or string it could create a blockage and just imagine the damage if there were a needle attached. Additionally, cats can become wound up in a ball of yarn and then panic and run away making it difficult to remove the yarn from them.
- U **Plants** – There are many household plants that are toxic to cats so be sure that you have only cat friendly plants in your home. While most of these plants only cause your cat to become ill, some are more deadly in nature. For a complete list of these plants you can log onto <http://www.ASPCA.org>.

Introducing Kitty to Her New Home

While it is tempting to want to have your new cat with you all of the time when you first bring her home, this is not necessarily in your cat's best interest. Cats typically do not like change and can become very fearful at first in their new environment. It is best to introduce your cat slowly and go at her pace, not yours. Start by giving your cat one room to explore and get adjusted to. Be sure that there are no places where she can sneak into where she may become trapped, however do give her a safe place to hide such as under a bed, in a box, etc... Make sure all of the household hazards previously discussed are addressed. Place her litterbox in one corner of the room, and her food and sleeping area in the other. Put your cat's toys and a scratching post in the middle. Do not locate the sleeping area or food near her litter box or else your cat may not use the box, as they do not like to eliminate where they eat and sleep. You should go into this room several times and just sit quietly on the floor and allow your new arrival to come to you on her terms. If your cat is hiding you may try to coax her out with a toy, but don't rush it. If you push your cat too fast you will only reinforce their fear. When your cat has become comfortable in this environment you can gradually introduce her to the rest of her home. Depending on your cat this transition may take three days or three weeks or longer. Additionally, until you have gotten to know your cat and you can trust her loose in the house, continue to use your "cat's room" when you are away from home.

Other Sources:

Spadafori, Gina & Pion, Paul D., 1997, *Cats For Dummies*, IDG Books Worldwide, Inc., Foster City, CA.

www.ASPCA.org

Your Adopted Cat, 2006, DVD, www.petsincredible.com