

Everything You Need To Know About Looking After Your Cat

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A cat can be a really great addition to your family, providing love and companionship to your children, while also teaching them about responsibility and empathy.

Cats make great starter pets as they've less demanding and much cleaner than dogs, while also being very self-sufficient once they're fed and given a little love. However, while it may seem like a decision you could make and action over a weekend, it is important to do some research beforehand to make sure your situation suits a pet and that you're ready for everything that comes with cat ownership.

What type of cat should I get?

In the same way not every animal will suit your family's situation, not every cat will thrive in your home. Consider where you live, how much time you have to devote to the animal, any allergies and what age your children are. Here are some things you should be looking for in a cat when you have kids at home.

- Fine with loud noises and sudden movements
- Enjoys being handled and pet
- Doesn't nip or scratch when handled
- Sociable
- Easy-going
- If a cat is overly nervous or hides from people, they probably aren't the best choice for a family with young children. Kids are naturally curious and the younger they are, the less they can sense boundaries, which means a very stressed out cat that may lash out at your child.



Why an older cat may be better for your family

Yes, we know kittens are cute, but in reality that are a lot of work and can cause all kinds of trouble in the house. If you're busy with children and work or your kids are very young, a kitten is going to present a lot of problems. Rescuing an older cat from a shelter is a lovely thing to do, but is often the best choice for families. Here's why...

They aren't teething: Kittens have a tendency to chew things, like shoes, the corners of books, ear lobes and fingers, electrical wires, curtain cords and more. Most adult cats have grown out of this habit.

They make better companions: While kittens prefer an action packed evening, an adult cat will greet you at the door and be more than happy to curl up while you watch your favourite shows on TV. They also tend to sleep or amuse themselves during the night, while a kitten will most likely run around, doing anything possible to wake you up for more games.

They're better for younger kids: Kittens often play rough, are constantly underfoot and can sometimes seem as though they are all teeth and claws. Generally speaking, adult cats are mellow, and often more patient with young children.

They need less supervision: Kittens are troublemakers, but older cats don't need to be monitored when they're in the house, which means less work for Mum.

They're trained: Most older cats already know how to behave in the house, and know all about litter boxes and scratching posts. Kittens are cute, but they require a whole lot of patience and teaching.

You'll be doing a good deed: For the abandoned adult cats, you may well be their last chance to know the love of a family and the warmth of a home where they can live out their years in comfort.

Indoors or outdoors?

Generally indoor cats live longer than outdoor only cats, as they are at much lower risk of diseases and assault from other animals or humans, as well as being safe from cars.

However, if you do decide to keep your cat strictly indoors, is there enough room in your home? While cats don't require as much space as dogs, they do need to run, roam, play and jump. Experts advise that any home smaller than 700 sq. feet is too small for one cat.

Also keep in mind that if you keep your cat solely indoors, you will need to have a litter tray. This needs to be cleaned regularly and there is potential for accidents. Make sure you have somewhere hygienic to store the box that also provides your cat with easy access.

Medical things to consider

Food and kitty litter aren't the only expenses to consider when getting a pet cat – medical costs should also be taken into consideration. When adopting cats from the ISPCA, vaccinations and microchipping are included, but if you've taken a kitten from a neighbour's litter or befriended a stray, there are a few things that need to be done.

Vaccinations: Your cat will need a number of vaccinations from the age of nine weeks, with the primary vaccinations setting your back about €90.

Neutering: Your cat will need to be neutered or spayed when you first get them starting at a cost of around €90.

Flea and worm treatments: Apart from essential vaccinations, they also need flea and worm treatments, usually yearly, throughout their life.

Health insurance: It is recommended that all owners take out pet insurance to help vet costs if they are in an accident or if they get sick.



Feeding

As a general rule of thumb, experts recommend that all cats be fed twice daily using the portion control feeding method. To do this, start by dividing the amount suggested on the label of your pet's food into two meals, spaced eight to 12 hours apart. You may need to adjust portions as you learn your cat's ideal daily 'maintenance' amount.

Any food not specifically formulated for cats can affect their tummies, causing vomiting, diarrhoea and loss of appetite, so be wary about feeding your pet the following food.

Chocolate: Consumption can cause heart arrhythmias muscle tremors, or seizures.

Dairy products: Cats can become lactose intolerant when they become adults.

Fat trimmings or raw meat and fish: It's a good idea to consult your vet before adding these foods to your cat's diet, as there is a risk of vomiting, salmonella or E. coli associated with these foods.

Tuna: Tuna made into cat food is perfectly fine, but tuna sold for human consumption may cause digestive upset when given as a treat.

Grooming

All cats, whether long or short haired, should be brushed regularly to keep their coats and skin healthy, prevent matting, and reduce shedding and hairballs. They also need to have their claws clipped to keep them from growing into their paws.

Brushing

If your cat has short hair, you only need to brush once a week, but if they have long hair, it's recommended you brush them every day.

For a thorough and effective brushing, first groom your cat from head to tail with a metal comb to remove knots or debris and then with a bristle or rubber brush to remove dead and loose hair.

Remember to be extra-gentle when brushing your cat's chest and belly.

Nail clipping

Outdoor cats will usually have their nails worn down from scaling walls and running on concrete, but an indoor cat's nails can grow uncomfortably long and need some help from a human.

It's a good idea to get your cat used to having their feet touched before you attempt a nail trim. Rub your hand up and down their leg and then gently press each individual toe. Be sure to give them lots of praise and some food treats as you do this.

To clip your cat's nails:

- Begin by applying gentle pressure to the top of the foot and cushiony pad underneath - this will cause their claws to extend.
- Use sharp, high-quality cat nail scissors to cut off the white tip of each nail, just before the point where it begins to curl.
- Take care to avoid the pink area of the nail, which contains blood vessels and nerves. You should leave at least 2mm of white nail at the end of this area, also known as the 'the quick'.
- If you're at all unsure, get your vet to demonstrate how to do this.

Dental care

This is not something that most cat owners think of, but dental care is actually really important. Here are some top tips for keeping your feline's teeth in good shape.

Yearly check-up: Make sure their teeth are thoroughly examined as part of their yearly trip to the vet.

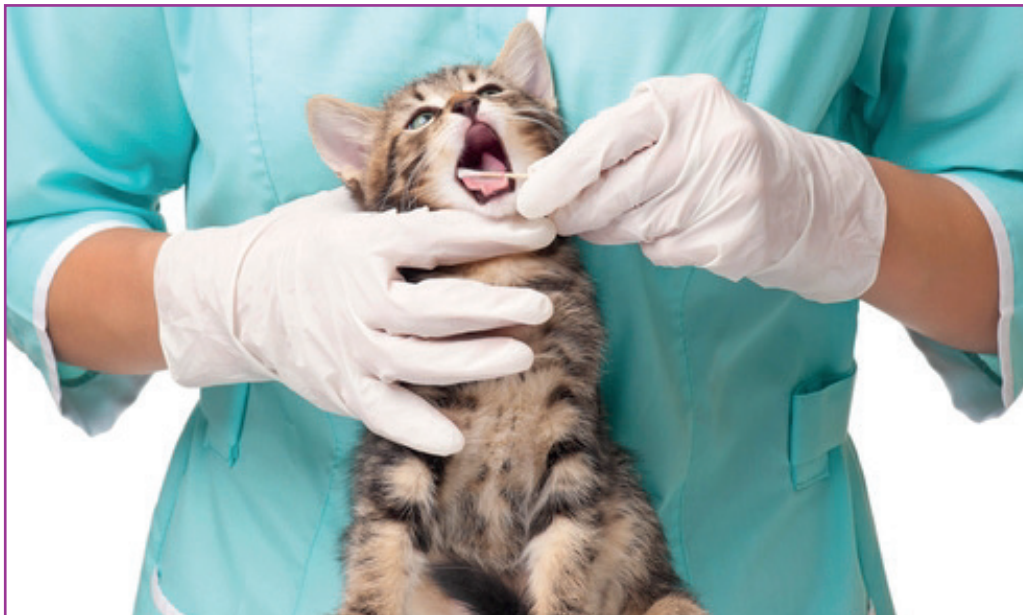
Monitor their breath: That mild fishy scent known as 'kitty breath' is normal, but if your cat's mouth is giving off a foul smell, this is a strong indicator they're having oral problems related to gum disease or tooth decay.

Brushing: Believe it or not, you can brush your cat's teeth and toothpaste specially designed for cats is readily available in flavours they'll enjoy. Do not try to brush your cat's teeth with "people" toothpaste; as this can make your cat severely ill. To brush, cradle your cat from behind, cup their chin, and lift up their lip and their teeth using either a gauze covered finger or a kitty toothbrush.

A good diet: Diet is another important factor in maintaining your cat's teeth. Feed your cat a combination of wet and dry foods and also include deboned raw meat to stimulate chewing, which helps to keep the bones strong. Be sure to consult your vet before giving them raw meat though.

Treats: Tartar control treats and chews are okay in moderation, but they're not sufficient for effectively cleaning your cat's teeth. If, however, you regularly clean your cat's teeth, special food supplements can be a good addition to an already healthy diet.

Bones: Cats are predators, so part of their natural diet consists of gnawing on hard bones, which knock off tartar and help keep teeth and gums healthy. Since most indoor cats don't have access to bones, some veterinarians recommend them as a treat. But, be careful not to give your cat pork, chicken or fish bones. These could splinter and cause severe internal injuries. Raw bones are also better than cooked ones, since they are less likely to splinter.



Scratching furniture

Cats love a good stretch and a scratch, but humans are little less fond of this pastime, especially when it's done on the furniture. Here are some tips to stop your cat from destroying couches and chairs.

Say no: Make sure your cat knows not to scratch a certain area, so say no or clap your hands whenever they start. This will help to reduce their interest in that particular area.

Physically move them: Until your cat has found a new, more appropriate, scratching area you may need to physically remove them and put them somewhere else, preferably in front of a scratching post.

Scratching post: To stop them ruining your furniture, you will need to invest in a scratching post especially for their needs. There are plenty available, but just make sure it is sturdy, big enough and safe (you don't want it to fall on your cat).

The right location: You will need to put the scratching posts up in the areas where your cat has been clawing. So if they are fond of the back of your chair, entice them away by putting the wooden block in front of them.

Keep their nails trimmed: When a cat claws at furniture they are trying to sharpen and even shorten their own nails so keep them nicely trimmed so there won't be a reason for them to keep clawing at it.

Keeping your cat safe

- Always use a cat carrier when transporting your cat.
- Make certain that all windows are securely screened.
- Keep the washer and dryer closed, and check inside before each use - some cats like to climb in these appliances if they're left open.
- Get into the habit of ensuring that drawers, wardrobes and cupboards are uninhabited before you close them - a kitty may be lurking inside.
- No matter how careful you are, there's always a chance your indoor cat may slip out the door. Microchipping will ensure your contact information is available if your cat is found after going missing.