

# Adopting your cat

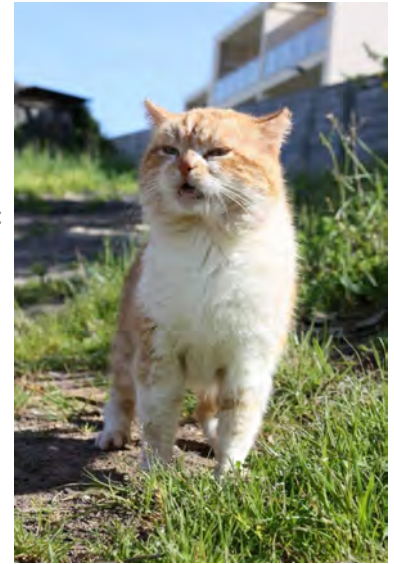


**What is a cat?** We have been domesticating cats as pets for thousands of years but our knowledge and understanding of their medical and behavioural needs has only really come to maturity in the last 30 years. For a long time cats were regarded, both in the veterinary world and the animal rescue world, as little dogs. Something which couldn't be further from the truth.

Our domestic cat evolved from a wild ancestor— something similar to the African Wild Cat of today. From looking at the behaviour of all small felines we can learn a few things....

## **They are broadly solitary and are stressed by unfamiliar cats...**

Unless they have grown up in a “social group” or formed a “social pair” with a new cat, most cats prefer to live alone. In fact, with the exception of lions, all felid species, especially the smaller cats related to our own pet species, live fairly solitary lives. As such keeping them as a group or introducing a pair can bring certain problems. Not being pack animals like dogs, they don't have a worked-out routine for meeting and living with other cats—this can lead to years of stand off if two unfamiliar cats don't get on.



**They are prey animals...** The fact that we suggest this may seem strange to you as they are physically very much predators. However small cat species sit in the middle of the food chain—this means that they are naturally in a state of alert all the time, and vulnerable to fear and stress. As prey animals they don't necessarily display fear and stress very well—but this doesn't mean they don't suffer from it. So it's important to accommodate their natural needs—to climb up high and to hide, for example.

**Can I adopt two cats?** We sometimes house two cats in the same pen here at Oak Tree Farm. In all cases, this will have been from the same household, and in most cases they will be what's called a social pair—cats which clearly have a firm bond and will choose to sleep together, groom each other, and hang out together. We will always insist that social pairs like this are rehomed together. In other cases, we may have two cats from the same home, that are sharing a pen but aren't a social pair. In these cases, we will split these cats up. We won't

normally mix and match cats from different pens to rehome two—we would ask you to choose an existing pair or an existing single. **We always desperately need homes for pairs of cats who have come in to our care together.**

**Should I add a new cat to an existing cat household?** This is a difficult decision and can have benefits but also lots of disadvantages. Cats don't need friends if they have lived as an only cat—they don't need company during the day (they will probably sleep when you are not there) and so you shouldn't feel the need to have more than one. We certainly wouldn't recommend adding another cat to a home with an existing cat who isn't too keen on other cats. And we wouldn't let a cat who we know isn't great with other cats go to a home with an existing cat.



**How many should I have?** We think one or two is a good number. We don't believe that large multiple cat homes are to be encouraged.

**How do I know if my existing cat will accept a new one?** If your existing cat has a very close bond with you or all your family, it is likely that you as humans are meeting their social needs. Additionally, if your cat struggles with encounters with cats outside or is stressed by neighbourhood cats outside your window, that's a clear indication that a buddy is not a good idea.

**Will they fight?** It's more likely that they wouldn't fight, but exist in a constant state of stand-off or feline cold war. The mental harm caused by this “stalemate” far outweighs the physical harm from a scuffle. Fights may be rare.

**Will they become best buddies?** An existing social pair from us would continue to be best friends. Occasionally two “stranger” cats will pair up and become best buddies but this is rarer.

On the first day, leave the cats alone—they will need to cope with the stress of a move and so you should not favour one nor other. Never make a fuss of the new cat or existing cat above and beyond each other.



## Before coming home

Cats are very tuned in to the scent of their environment so if at all possible, you may get the chance to take an item of clothing or a blanket from your home and leave it with the cat for a few days before you bring them home. When you collect the cat, bring the item home and place it in their new “safe room”. If you have an existing cat, you can also scent swap the cats’ bedding before they meet.

## What do I do on the first day?

When you get your cat home, try and confine them to one or two rooms, with food, water and at least two litter trays. The room you choose should be one which will eventually form their safe place. After a few days of settling, gradually increase the number of rooms the cat has access to. Set it up with trays, hiding and climbing spots and food and water as we mention below. If you don’t want them to have access to children’s bedrooms, keep these closed off in the early days.

**How long will the cat take to settle?** Scientific research shows that most cats take between 4 and 14 days to settle into a new home. This can be due to the nature of the cat but is also due sometimes to how complicated the home is. Signs of cats settling will include more relaxed body posture, more purring and chirping, and an willingness to come out and explore. Maintain the safe place during the settling in period and after. Research also shows that cats given lots of boxes to hide in will settle more quickly—more details below.

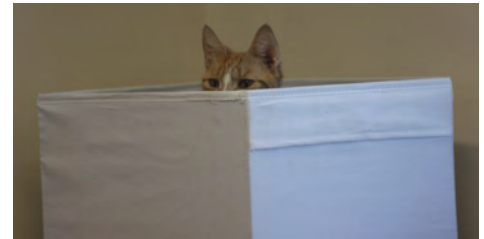
## What litter trays should I use?

You should provide a minimum of 2 trays (1 per cat + 1 extra) and these should be scattered around the house. In a larger household, add more trays, and these, water, and food bowls should not be clustered together but should be as far apart as possible. Try and initially use the litter the cat has been using at Oak Tree Farm (in most cases this will be wood pellets) but many cats may prefer a sandier grainier litter. If you have multiple cats, some may “block” the route to a tray for others, and this can lead to cats soiling the house so do make sure they can all get at trays. Some cats prefer to use an open tray such as that pictured, while others prefer the type that has an enclosed cover.

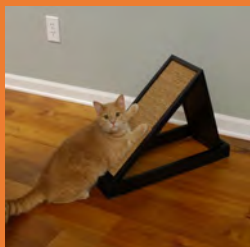
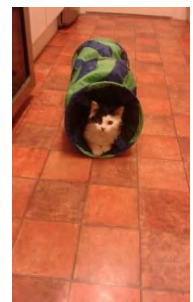


## What about hiding places?

Cats need to hide. This is their number one instinct so provide lots of small, secure boxes. Cardboard ones with a towel or sheet in will do fine. Or cheap fabric ones from furniture shops (see right). Scatter these and include some at high access points so the cat gets to meet two of its natural needs—hide and climb; and maintain this all the time even after the cat appears settled. A clever trick is to include the cat’s carry box to the vets as one of these hiding spots, maybe even feed the cat in the box—this makes them less scared of entering the box if needed for a vet journey.



**Scratching?** Cats love to scratch. It is a natural behaviour and you should never expect a cat not to do this. Provide a convenient scratch post or scratch pad—this will discourage them using the furniture instead. Be aware that the “grain” on scratch posts made from string or rope should run vertically – not horizontally—or be of a non-grain material such as carpet or cardboard. Unfortunately 90% of scratch posts sold are sold with the wrong grain. A scratch pad such as those pictured might be better—as might some tree branches or logs! (Beware of your treasured LP collections, the collected spines of which make a very tempting target)



Good



Good



Good



Good



Bad



Brilliant

**Climbing?** Cats love to climb. It's a natural behaviour and you should never expect not to have a cat that might jump on beds or work surfaces. If you want to discourage the cat from climbing in certain spaces, try providing a different spot instead as a decoy. Some cats may also regard their humans as convenient trees and may perch on your shoulder. This is a very difficult habit to discourage and shouting at the cat or telling it off will probably not cure this and may.



**House soiling?** When you get your cat home, you may find there are a few little accidents over the first few days. This should resolve quickly. If there are soiling issues that persist, please give us a call. The main cause of house soiling is insecurity of environment so do make sure that all the hiding and climbing actions above are carried out. Try moving the tray to somewhere more accessible for the cat and if the cat seems to be put off by the presence of others in the garden, then you may want to consider frosting or covering the lower 90cm of any windows they have access to sit by (especially patio doors).

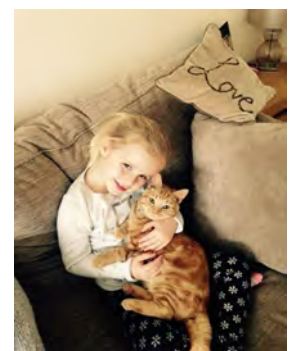
**When can I let the cat out?** Allow a further 10-14 days after the cat appears settled. Let them out early in the day, and make sure that on return, they are fed immediately. Though we are "neutral" on whether collars are a good or bad thing, a collar is a very useful tool to identify a new cat being let out for the first time in a neighbourhood to avoid it being mistaken for a stray.

**Travelling home:** Cats do struggle on car journeys because their environment is suddenly turned upside down. Make sure carriers are secure, with no broken clips. Cover the carrier, line it with familiar bedding, and if need be use a pheromone spray (speak to your vet about these). If using a pheromone spray, apply these to the carrier before collecting the cat.



**Cats meeting dogs:** Sometimes it can be easier to introduce a cat to a dog than another cat, and cats seem to find this meeting easier to deal with. Any meeting should be staggered and gradually the level of contact built up. You can improve the likelihood of success by following all the other tips—providing a safe place for the cat to escape to (especially up high), exchanging bedding between the cat and dog, always avoiding the dog gaining access to the cat's safe place. Don't ever force the issue (i.e. don't plonk the cat in front of the dog as this will encourage hissing growling, and lashing out.)

**Cats meeting kids:** it's easier to phase the meeting of the whole family and leave the loudest and most assertive members of the family to last (this might or might not be the children!). Try to avoid lots of introductions during the initial adjustment period, until the cat is settled. Speak to the children calmly beforehand, before the cat is present, and explain the behaviour expected of them. Of course, be especially careful of kittens who are very vulnerable. In particular, make sure that children avoid pulling tails or prodding tummies, which are vulnerable spots for cats. Avoid the temptation of bringing lots of friends round in the first few days until the cat is adjusted.



Oak Tree Farm, Wetheral Shields, Carlisle, Cumbria, CA4 8JA. Tel: 01228 560082. Web: [www.oaktreeanimals.org.uk](http://www.oaktreeanimals.org.uk)

Registered Charity 1169511.

Many thanks for use of the photos to Lyn Forster, Harry Eckman, Carina Russell.

CE040 document reference

Please remember to review your experience on the website Rescue Review—[www.rescuereview.co.uk](http://www.rescuereview.co.uk)