

A quick guide to cats



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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 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 mentally prey animals as well as predators, so feel vulnerable a lot of the time.

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.

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 who have grown up together, for example from the same household, 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. Cats don't need friends if they have lived as an only cat 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. We think one or two is a good number. We don't believe that large multiple cat homes are to be encouraged.

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How do I know if my existing cat will accept a new one?

If your existing cat has a 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 isn't a good idea.

Will they fight?

It's more likely that they wouldn't fight, but exist in constant stand-off or feline cold war. The mental harm caused by this "stalemate" far outweighs physical harm from a scuffle.

Will two cats be 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 few days in a new home, leave the cats well alone.

They will need to cope with the stress of the move (this can take from 3-14 days to settle into a new environment). Don't make a fuss of either a new cat or existing one in this time.

At home:

Cats are very tuned in to the scent of their environment so if at all possible, try and keep things constant. When introducing a new cat to an existing one, you can swap the scents by interchanging their bedding for a few days as well.

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. 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

Hiding places:

Cats need to hide—from each other and from you. This is their number one instinct so provide lots of small, secure boxes. Cardboard ones with a towel or sheet, or cheap fabric ones from furniture shops work just as well as expensive pet shop ones. 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 from 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 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)

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.

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 have a look at the website for International Cat Care or Cats Protection for some advice. The main cause of house soiling is insecurity 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 could frost or covering the lower 90cm of any windows they have access to sit by (especially patio doors).

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.