

What to know before you get a Kitten

A new kitten can bring a great deal of pleasure and happiness into your life; they are playful, curious and mischievous, and you will get endless enjoyment from simply watching them playing and running around your house.

So if you are thinking of bringing home a kitten and feel that you can offer a good home to a kitten, what sorts of things should you consider?

1. Everyone in the house is happy to have a kitten and is not allergic to cats

make sure that everyone in the house is happy to have a kitten (and cat, eventually!) as part of the family. If you have pets already in the house, consider whether they would welcome and mix well with the kitten.

Check to see if anyone in the family has an allergy to cats or kittens (some people are fine with short-haired cats but suffer allergic reactions from long-haired cats): visit someone you know who has cats at least a couple of times to be sure. Plenty of cats and kittens end up in rescue centers or shelters because their owners have developed or discovered an allergy.

2. Make sure you can afford to take good care of your cat during it's life

This not only means getting proper food, a scratch-pole (to save your furniture) and toys, but it also means regular visits to your vet for deworming, deflea-ing and vaccinations. If you do not wish a litter of kittens, it is good to get your companion spayed (males from 5.5 months of age, females from 6 months of age). A kitten will grow, and live for sometimes 18-20 years, so be aware of this responsibility.

3. Make sure you pick the right kitten for your household

A kitten can come from a cattery, but also from a shelter or from a friend. Be sure you know the owner, how they treat their cats and visit the litter of kittens to see how the mum and siblings are responding to you. A kitten should not leave it's mum for at least 7 weeks, but preferably 12 weeks. This gives the kitten the time to "socialize" and learn to be "a cat" (how to clean itself, how to react to other cats and to humans).

Your kitten's early experiences

Before your kitten comes to live with you, she will have been interacting with her mother, the other kittens in her litter and probably several different people. Be wary of choosing a kitten that has had little human contact, such as a kitten that has been raised in a shed or pen far from the house. Kittens need to get used to being handled by people very early on, preferably by several people so they don't just learn to accept a single caregiver. They also need to become accustomed to the sights, smells and sounds of everyday life. Assuming she's already had lots of human contact, it shouldn't be too difficult for you to reinforce all the good work and help her grow into a friendly, happy, confident cat.

Collecting your kitten

If your kitten has been kept with siblings or the mother, take a towel with you when you go to collect her and gently stroke the kitten's family with it so that you have something that smells familiar to take your kitten home with.

Have everything ready such as a litter box and litter; a scratching post (if you value your furniture); and food and water bowls. (Note: Many cats and kittens do not like things touching their whiskers when they eat or drink, so if you have deep bowls you may find that they eat only the top layer — try serving their food on plates and their water in a shallow dish instead).

If your kitten is long-haired, get her used to being groomed as early as possible, when the kitten feels safe and relaxed so that she will accept grooming later.

Introducing the kitten to your household

When your kitten first arrives home with you, remember it can all be a bit overwhelming for her. Take her to a quiet, safe place and show her where her bowls and litter boxes are. Give her lots of love and reassurance and pet her gently, talking to her in a soft, calm voice. Playing is also a great way to socialize your kitten and form a bond with her early on in your relationship.

Finally, introduce your kitten to the family by letting her stay in the carrier you have used to transport her until she feels safe enough to come out. If you have other cats in the house, keep your kitten confined to a room where the other cats can smell and see her but let them get used to her before letting her have the run of the house. Then enjoy getting to know your new kitten!

Socializing your kitten

You'll want your kitten to become a cat that relates well to people and is a friend and companion. To achieve this, you need to bear in mind that cats have a very short socialization phase. So the first four to 16 weeks of life are a critical time for behavioral and social development.

Kids and kittens

Your kitten should be socialized with children as early as possible, as she may reject or bite them later if she hasn't become used to them early on.

If you have children, they will naturally be very excited about the arrival of a new kitten. Your job is to teach them that your kitten is not a toy and must be treated carefully. Play time must end when the kitten has had enough. It's also a good idea to warn the children that she may scratch or play-bite.

Your kitten and other people

People come in all different shapes and sizes and your kitten should have the opportunity to encounter them all. Get her used to strangers but be careful that they don't scare or overwhelm her with a strong show of affection.

It's a good idea to introduce your young kitten to as many people as possible. That way, you're likely to avoid her developing a fear of strangers in later life.

Don't forget that kittens can become tired quickly; make sure that meeting times with new people are kept quite short so your kitten has time to rest.

Introducing your kitten to other pets in the home

Before introducing your new kitten to other pets in your household, visit your veterinarian to ensure all pets are healthy and their vaccinations are up to date. Smell is the most important sense for cats, so it's a good idea to transfer some of the smells of your home onto the coat of your new kitten before the introductions. Mix the scents by stroking first your resident cat, then the kitten, without washing your hands, and vice versa.

Introduce your new kitten to other pets gradually and one at a time. Keeping your new kitten in a carrier or behind an expandable baby gate is a good way to supervise the first encounter.

During the introduction, separate the pets at any sign of aggression. Acceptance may take time, so never leave your new kitten unsupervised with any of your other pets until you are certain they get along well. Always keep smaller pets, such as hamsters, fish and birds safely out of reach.

Separation anxiety

The good news is, you've done a great job raising your kitten to get along well with people. The bad news is, she's now so attached to you, she won't like it when you go out.

Separation anxiety, previously only recognized in dogs, is now acknowledged to occur in cats. Signs that your kitten may be suffering from separation anxiety include seeming stressed by you going out. She could be excessively vocal perhaps or soil the house in your absence.

Tips on dealing with separation anxiety include limiting the time you leave your kitten alone as much as you possibly can and trying not to make a big "production" out of leaving the house. If your kitten does soil the house, don't punish her. Cats don't understand punishment and, since her behavior is a result of stress, you'll actually be making the problem worse.

You can easily teach your kitten to tolerate short absences by leaving her in a room, closing the door and walking away. After a few minutes, go back in but don't greet her. When you've done this several times, extend the absences to 30 minutes. But if she begins to get distressed, and starts meowing or scratching at the door, you should shorten the absence period.