

Cat Care Essentials

Keep your cat or kitten happy and healthy by following our tips



You might think your cat's independent, but she still counts on you to provide her with food, water, safe shelter, veterinary care, a clean litter box, love, and more. Take care of these essentials, and you'll develop a rewarding relationship with your feline companion.

1. Keep your cat safe by keeping him indoors, safely confined to your property, or walked on a harness and leash

Doing so is best for you, your cat, and your community. Here are other ways to keep your cat safe and secure:

- 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.
- Get into the habit of ensuring that drawers, closets, and cupboards are uninhabited before you close them.

2. Outfit your cat with a breakaway collar and visible ID that includes your name, address, and telephone number

No matter how careful you are, there's always a chance she may slip out the door. Your cat is more likely to get home safely if she has a collar and ID. Also, be a good citizen by complying with any local cat licensing laws.

3. Take your cat to the veterinarian for regular check-ups and vaccinations

5. Feed your cat a nutritionally balanced diet and provide fresh water 24/7

6. Keep the litter box clean

Cats are naturally clean, and most will instinctively use a litter box; you just have to show yours where it is. Don't place your cat in the box and make little scratching motions with her front paws. This will probably upset your cat and may make her leery of the box. Scoop the box at least once daily and periodically wash it with dish liquid and hot water. Because cats also value privacy, place the litter box in a convenient but quiet spot.

7. Groom your cat often.

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. Grooming is a good opportunity to discover any lumps, fleas, injuries, etc., and to bond with your kitty.

8. Make time to play and provide entertainment

Give her toys and scratching posts to distract her from your household goods. Ping-Pong balls and opened paper bags (remove the handles) can provide hours of fun. A comfortable perch by a window can become your cat's very own entertainment and relaxation center. Rotate toys to maintain your cat's interest in them.

Teach Your Kitten (and Cat) How to Play Nice



A kitten's life is all about play, and play is all about prey. Soon after they open their eyes and hoist themselves up on their teeny paws, kittens start to play. But if you look closely, you'll notice that you have an itty-bitty hunter in your house.

Every race down the hallway, every pounce from behind a door, every swat and nip is a display of a kitten's hunting skills, instincts that are just as strong in today's housecat as they were in her ancestors thousands of years ago. To a kitten, everything, and we mean everything, in the house is potential prey, including you.

Learning to play nice

A kitten's first playmates are his mother and littermates, and from them he learns how to inhibit his bite. A kitten who is separated from his family too early may not have learned that lesson well enough and won't know when to stop. Acceptable behavior can quickly escalate.

In addition, if people use their hands and/or feet instead of toys to play with a young kitten, the kitten may learn that rough play is okay. In most cases, it's not too difficult to teach your kitten or young adult cat that rough play isn't acceptable.

If playing with your kitten evolves from peek-a-boo to professional wrestling in a matter of seconds, follow these tips to keep playtime interesting and reduce the number of trips to the first-aid kit.

- Don't let your kitten play with your hands or feet (or any other body part). This sends the wrong message.
- Use a toy when playing with her. Drag a toy, preferably a fishing pole-type toy that keeps your hands from kitty's mouth and claws, along the floor to encourage your kitten to pounce on it, or throw a toy for her to chase. Some kittens will even bring the toy back to be thrown again.
- Give your kitten something to wrestle with, like a soft stuffed animal that's about her size, so she can grab it with both front feet, bite it, and kick it with her back feet. This is one of the ways kittens play with each other, especially when they're young. It's also one of the ways they try to play with human feet and hands, so it's important to provide this type of alternative play target.
- Encourage play with a "wrestling toy" by rubbing it against your kitten's belly when she wants to play roughly—and be sure to get your hand out of the way as soon as she accepts the toy.
- Don't hit or yell at your kitten when she nips or pounces. This will only make her fearful of you and she may start to avoid you. The idea is to train her, not punish her.

Discouraging "bad" behavior

Playing is not bad behavior, but you do have to set the rules for your kitten: no biting. Everyone in the household has to be on the same page, too; your kitten can't be expected to learn that it's okay to play rough with dad but not with the baby.

Equip yourself with the right training tools: toys, toys, toys, and a water pistol.

A gnawing problem

As we said, you shouldn't let your kitten play with your body parts. But if you're petting her and she starts gnawing on you, immediately say "no" and carefully take your hands away. Give her a toy to play with instead, but be sure she's not gnawing on you when you give

her a toy or she'll think she's being rewarded for gnawing. Don't try to pet her again until she's tucked out and no longer tempted to "kill" your hand.

You can also make your hands unattractive to your kitten by putting a bad-tasting, but harmless, substance on them, like Bitter Apple or Tabasco sauce. A kitten will catch on quickly.

Gimmie that!

Kittens always seem to want to play with whatever you're using—knitting needles, pencil, telephone antenna. If yours starts "attacking" your utensils, sharply say "no" to disrupt her behavior. Then give her one of her own toys. Be sure she's not attacking when you give her a toy or she'll think she's being rewarded for biting.

On the hunt

Kittens also like to "hunt" you while you're walking around. They'll jump out from behind a door or under a chair and pounce on your ankles. If she doesn't pounce, praise her with "Good kitty." If she does pounce, use your sharp "uh-uh" to distract her and interrupt her behavior and offer her an acceptable toy. Be sure she's not pouncing on you when you provide the toy or she'll think she's being rewarded the bad behavior.

Pay no attention

Withdraw attention when your kitten doesn't get the message. If the distraction and redirection techniques don't work, the most drastic thing you can do to discourage your cat from rough play is to withdraw all attention.

The best way to withdraw your attention is to walk to another room and close the door long enough for her to calm down. If you pick her up to put her in another room, then you're rewarding her by touching her, so you should always be the one to leave the room.

Remember, your kitten wants to play with you, not just toys, so be sure to set aside time for regular, serious, and safe play sessions.

How to Introduce Your New Cat to Other Pets

After you've brought your new cat home, start checking off each of these questions as you go along. Once you're able to answer "yes" to all of them, you'll be off to a good start.

- **Have I slowly introduced the new cat to my other cat(s) or dog by smell? Here's how:**
 - Isolate the new cat in a separate room so the cats (and/or dog) can smell one another through the door. If you don't have a spare room, use your bathroom.
 - Exchange bedding and/or switch their rooms to get them used to each other's scent.
 - Keep this up until there are no signs of stress. With luck this will take a few days, but it might take weeks or months.
- **Have I slowly introduced the new cat to my other cat(s) or dog by sight? Follow these steps:**
 - Set up a strong baby gate (preferably at least 36 inches high) in the doorway of the new cat's room.
 - Let the cats (and/or dog) get a quick look at each other and immediately praise and reward them with a treat if there's no attacking or growling.
 - Close the door.
 - Repeat this process five to 10 times in a row two to three times a day.
 - Pay attention to body language: If they seem relaxed when seeing each other, extend the time they can look at each other.
 - Always quit while you're ahead—don't keep going until the growling or signs of discomfort start. And try always to close the door on a good note.
 - Continue until everyone seems comfortable with one another. Be patient—this might take a while.
- **Have I allowed the cats (and/or dog) to interact with each other under careful supervision? Follow these guidelines:**
 - Once the cats are in view of each other it is a good idea to play with them using an interactive fishing-rod type toy. Play with the cats simultaneously, but give each his own toy to play with (this is easiest with two people). The cats will

learn that being around each other means play time. This fishing-rod toy is also an excellent tool for distracting and redirecting a cat who seems ready to show aggression.

- If you notice tensions, distract and separate everyone quickly and return to the introduction by sight step.
- When they behave well during an interaction, reward everyone with treats and praise, making sure that each cat or dog gets the treat meant for him or her.
- Don't leave them alone together until you're sure that they're comfortable with each other.

- **Have I kept my eye out for general signs of stress?**

- Not using the litter box
- Overgrooming
- Not eating or drinking adequately
- Hiding
- Vocalizations to create distance, such as hissing or growling

- **Have I recognized signs of comfort with one another?**

- Sitting or lying near each other
- Grooming each other
- Walking past each other without signs of tension
- Eating, using the cat box, grooming, or playing near each other
- Ignoring one another (not all cats are going to be friends)

- **Have I given all the cats (and/or dog) daily individual attention, playing with them and making things interesting to keep their stress low?**

- **Do I have enough resources for all the cats in my home?**

- As many litter boxes as cats, plus one additional box
- Food and water dishes for each cat
- Various high resting spaces for cats
- Many different hiding spaces for cat

Are you and your cat ready for litterbox success?

Check off each of these questions as you answer. Once you're able to answer "yes" to all of them, you should have nothing to worry about.

- **Do I have at least as many litter boxes as I have cats, plus one more?**
- **Am I scooping the litter twice a day** and thoroughly emptying and cleaning the box once every 10–14 days, using warm, soapy water?
- **Is the box an uncovered box, with no litter box liners?**
- **Is the box at least as long as my cat's body and wide enough for him/her to turn around in?**
- **Are the sides of the box low enough for my cat to easily step in** (this is particularly important for kittens and older cats who may have arthritis)?
- **Am I pouring the litter approximately two to three inches deep for adults and one half to one inch deep for kittens?** (Cats don't like litter that's too deep—a good sign that you've got the depth or texture right is if your cat scratches around in the litter.)
- **Am I using an unscented, fine-grained clumping litter?**
- **Do I use the same type and brand of litter all the time?** (Cats don't like change.)
- **Have I placed the litter boxes in safe places:** in corners, in low traffic areas that the cats like to be in, far from food and water bowls, and not near any household appliances (washing machines /dryers) that might scare the cats?
- **Do I have at least one litter box on every level of my house?**
- **If I have multiple cats, are the litter boxes in safe locations where a cat can easily dart away if she feels the other cat(s) may try to pounce while she's using the litter box?** Note: Litter boxes in closets and under the sink are of no use to cats who are being bullied by other cats.

Keeping your cat off furniture and counters

High places to climb and rest are important to cats—they allow cats to observe their surroundings from a safe place.

To keep your cat from climbing onto places where you don't want him, it's important to provide places he's welcome to climb.

It's also essential that you make it clear where your cat should climb and where he shouldn't. Once you can answer "yes" to all the questions below, you'll be off to a good start.

- **Have I removed food and other things that may interest my cat from places I don't want her to climb?**
- **Are there high, safe, comfortable, easy-to-reach places for my cat?** These could include a cat tree, windowsill, bookshelf, wall shelf, and desk.
- **Have I placed treats in these cat-friendly places?**
- **Are there cat toys and interesting things on the floor?**
- **Am I giving my cat daily exercise and interesting things to do?**

Try a Deterrent

If none of the above techniques have kept your cat from jumping or sitting on a place where you don't want her, **put something there that will make that spot unpleasant.** You can remove it once your cat has learned to avoid that place.

Deterrents are more effective than squirting your cat with water or making a loud noise. Those things only work when you're around, and they don't teach your cat what you want her to do. Try the deterrents listed below in any order:

- **Double-sided tape** Cats avoid walking on sticky surfaces. Attach a tape such as Sticky Paws (sold at pet-supply stores) to metal, plastic, wood, leather, or fabric surfaces.
- **Bubble wrap** This packing material with bubbles that pop is not something most cats want to walk on. Tape it onto the arms of chairs or counter tops or drape it over couches or beds.
- **Water** Cats typically avoid jumping or stepping into water. Put aluminum trays filled with an inch of water on counter tops, tables, or any area you do not want the cat to go. (This option can cause a bit of a mess.)
- **Rubber nubs** The rubber nubs that hold car mats and carpet runners in place are usually uncomfortable for cats to step on. Flip over a mat or runner and place it on a flat surface: counter top, table, bed, or couch.
- **Plastic shower curtains** Generally, cats dislike stepping on smooth plastic. Drape a thick plastic shower curtain over couches, beds, or tables when you're not using them.
- **Citrus** The smell of citrus is unpleasant to most cats. Using citrus alone isn't usually a strong deterrent, but adding lemon or lime juice (or a citrus spray carried by a pet-supply store) to any of the other materials will make them more powerful deterrents.



Teaching your cat to scratch where you want

Scratching is a natural and healthy thing for cats to do. (This is only one reason why **declawing a cat is almost always the wrong choice**) If you are going to stop your cat from scratching furniture or other things, you must provide things you want her to scratch, such as a scratching post. This checklist will help make sure your cat scratches only where appropriate. Check off each step as you go:

- **Provide a high quality scratching post.** It should be:
 - **At least three feet high and sturdy.** (Cats like to stretch when scratching, so the post shouldn't move or fall down.)
 - Made of sisal, a type of rope many cats enjoy scratching.
- **If your cat is scratching something you don't want her to—such as the arm of a couch or a rug—place the scratching post next to it or, in the case of the rug, on it.**
- **Place the scratching post in other encouraging spots.** Your cat might like to show off in a prominent place (and you can reward him with a treat when he does). Or he might enjoy having the post near a favorite sleeping spot—cats like to stretch when they wake up from a good nap.
- **Encourage your cat to use the scratching post.** Here's how:
 - Rub catnip on the post regularly.
 - Play with him around the post—cats like to scratch while playing.
 - Get on your hands and knees and scratch the post to show her how much fun it is. (Cats are excellent observers.)
- **If your cat doesn't use his scratching post, don't give up.** He may prefer a scratching post made of carpet or a corrugated cardboard scratching pad. (If he's shown he likes to scratch carpets, give him a carpet-covered scratching post.) Or he might like to scratch horizontally, so try something you can lay on the floor.
- **Give your cat enough exercise and interesting things to do.** A bored cat with lots of energy may be more likely to scratch.
- **Make sure that your cat isn't feeling stress.** Cats who are stressed may scratch things to mark their territory to feel safer.

My new cat is hiding and/or not eating

Most cats brought into a new home need some time and the right environment to feel comfortable. It's important to give your new cat a place where she feels safe while she's getting used to her new home.

If your cat hasn't eaten or drunk for more than a day, or seems sick, call your veterinarian.

Use the checklist below to make your cat feel comfortable and secure in his new home.

- **Keep your cat in a small, safe room**—containing a litter box far away from the food and water, a carrier to hide in, and safe toys—until she's more comfortable. (When cats are let loose in a strange apartment or house, they are often scared and will hide; it takes them longer to get comfortable. Start small, then slowly expand the number of rooms to which the cat has access.)
- **Give small meals and treats**, so he learns that good things happen in the new place.
- **If your cat is scared and doesn't want to be touched, sit near her**—but far enough away to avoid frightening her. Avoiding eye contact, gently talk to her for a few minutes at a time, helping her get used to you and your voice and showing that you won't hurt her.
- **Play with him to bond and relieve stress.**
- **As your cat becomes more comfortable, hold out your index finger and let your cat approach and touch his nose to your finger.** (One of the ways cats say hello to each other is by touching noses.)
- **Always let your cat come to you.** Don't chase her or drag her from a hiding place.
- **Only pet or pick your cat up if she's comfortable with it.** You'll know this if she doesn't tense or try to run when you reach to pick her up, and she nestles into you, staying relaxed. Many cats, even those who are otherwise extremely social, don't like to be picked up.

This information comes from the Humane Society of the United States

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