

Is a cat the right animal for you?

- Can you be at home for at least part of the day – every day?
- Can you afford up to £5 a week on cat food?



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- Can you give your cat safe access to a garden or somewhere safe outside?
- Can you put up with your cat possibly damaging the furniture?
- Can you afford your cat's regular vaccinations against feline infectious enteritis, feline influenza and feline leukaemia? These could add up to £70 for initial vaccination and £30 each year.
- Can you afford the £30–£50 it will cost to neuter your pet?
- Can you afford to board your cat when you go on holiday or do you have reliable and caring neighbours who will look after your pet for you?

If you can answer a definite YES to all these questions then a cat could be the right pet for you.

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Cats and kittens

Know what your pet needs



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CAT CARE

Finding a healthy cat or kitten

Look out for...

● A nicely rounded animal

Kittens should be plump and at least eight weeks old before they leave their mother. Avoid skinny cats or kittens. Also avoid kittens with bloated tummies as they are quite likely to have intestinal worms.

● Bright clear eyes

Don't be tempted to take kittens with runny eyes or sneezing noses. Avoid coughing kittens too.

● A dry, clean tail

Reject any kitten or cat with a sore anus, wet tail or diarrhoea indicated by yellow stains on the fur.

● A healthy coat

Do a quick check for fleas – many kittens have them. A few can be dealt with quite easily – ask your veterinary surgeon for advice. A fluffy kitten will probably grow up to be a long haired cat which needs daily brushing and grooming to stop hair balls.

● Clean ears

Dry dark grey or brown deposits in the ears are a sign of ear mites. As with fleas they can be treated – your vet will advise.

● Colour

That's up to you! But did you know that tortoiseshell kittens are invariably female and that white cats with blue eyes are almost always deaf?

● Temperament

Remember that a wild kitten may be difficult to tame. Try to choose a kitten who comes to you happily and likes to be stroked and picked up.



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Caring for a cat is great fun but a huge responsibility. All pets need a regular routine and lots of love and attention. But, most important of all, pets need owners who are going to stay interested in them and committed to them all their lives.

If you have a cat, you have a responsibility to meet his/her basic welfare needs. You need to provide a proper diet, shelter and companionship, allowing your cat to express normal behaviour. You will also need to seek advice or veterinary treatment if your cat is sick or injured.

The right choice

● Cat or kitten?

Kittens look cute and cuddly, but they may not be the best choice for all cat owners-to-be. They need house training, can be very destructive and are really not ideal for families which have elderly people or very young children about. Kittens may make an elderly person trip or fall or could be handled roughly or trodden on by a young child. An adult cat is probably the best choice for people in these situations.

When choosing a kitten, make sure you see it with its mother and the rest of the litter – this will give you a good idea of its temperament. Why not think about offering a home to one of the many cats and kittens in RSPCA animal centres throughout England and Wales?

● Male or female?

The sex of your cat is up to you, but always keep neutering in mind, when choosing your new pet. Neutering reduces the large number of unwanted kittens which come into the world and have to be destroyed. It also makes your cat far more pleasant to live with.

Sexing young kittens is not easy – even for experienced people. If you are getting kittens from an RSPCA animal centre or other welfare organisation, they will be pleased to advise you.

● Neutering is best

Unneutered males may fight, wander off for days and spray an unattractive scent all over the place. Unneutered female cats come into season and can become pregnant up to three times a year, having five or six kittens in each litter.

The owner of an unneutered female cat must also be prepared for the legions of loud cat calling suitors their pet will attract.

Cat neutering should be carried out as early as possible in order to avoid unwanted litters. Most cats are sexually mature at six months, but some cats can become pregnant as early as five months. Therefore, the ideal age to neuter your cat is between four and five months. Your veterinary surgeon will be able to offer you further advice on the best time to neuter your cat.

Neutering is a simple operation carried out under a general anaesthetic. Female cats are 'spayed'. This involves removing the womb and the ovaries. In a male cat the testicles are removed and this is known as castration.



● Litter trays

The litter tray must be kept clean and emptied at least once a day, otherwise your cat will refuse to use it and use the carpet instead. When housetraining a new kitten it's a good idea not to empty the tray completely, but to add a little of the old litter to the fresh until the kitten is fully housetrained. Don't use bleaches and disinfectants containing coal tar and carbolic derivatives to clean the tray – these are poisonous to cats.

If your cat has one or two accidents, a spray of plain soda water can help to remove the smell. There are also several proprietary brands of stain and odour remover available which can deal effectively with cat urine.

● Toilet training

House training is the first lesson that every cat or kitten needs to learn. Most cats are instinctively very clean. Your new pet will need a leak-proof litter tray or box (plastic or enamel are best) which should measure 45 x 25cm (16 x 10in) minimum.

Some people find that a large washing up bowl makes a good litter tray as it has deep sides and can be easily scrubbed out.

Making a good home



● Best bed

Cats and kittens spend a lot of time sleeping and need a warm, dry comfortable place for snoozing. Cardboard boxes, especially deep-sided ones, which keep out draughts make useful beds. They can be lined with newspaper, which is warm, inexpensive and easily changed. You could, however, buy a wicker cat bed or one made from plastic which could be easily cleaned.

Your cat or kitten may well reject the bed you have carefully prepared for one it likes better – possibly yours! Don't worry about this – it's just an example of the cat's independent nature. If you don't want your cat to sleep on your bed or any other special place, the only thing to do is to keep the door of the appropriate room shut.

● Toilet training continued

Hooded litter trays are available and are ideal for cats and kittens which like their privacy. Whichever tray you choose, put it in a convenient corner and fill the tray with sand, peat, dry earth – which can be messy – or cat litter readily available from supermarkets or pet shops.

● In and out

Cats should have access to the house at all times during the day and night. If they can't get in when they want to they are likely to wander off for long periods, find another home, get involved in fights with other cats and are at risk of being injured by traffic or even stolen.

A cat door fitted into one of the external doors of the house is useful.

Your cat will be able to get in and out easily. The doors measure about 15 cm/6 in square and are burglar proof if fitted correctly – out of reach of security locks. Many can be adjusted so that your cat can come in but not go out again – useful if you do not want your cat to go out at night.

Feeding well



You can feed adult cats with either tinned food or a mixture of fresh and prepared food. Dried food is suitable as a treat and for occasional use only.

● Prepared food

Most prepared foods contain all necessary vitamins and minerals to provide a balanced diet. Some contain more moisture than others and some have a greater concentration of meat. This method is probably the simplest way of feeding your cat, but make sure that whatever prepared food you use, you follow manufacturers' instructions accordingly – too much food will make your cat overweight.

● Mixture of foods

It is preferable to vary your cat's diet by using a mixture of foods giving freshly cooked fish, rabbit or heart several times a week. You can then fill in with tinned or crunchy dried food which is very good for the teeth. Make sure your cat always has access to lots of fresh clean water.

Uncooked raw meat can carry bacterial/parasitic infections which could be harmful to your cat.

Be careful:

- Don't feed your cat dog food – it doesn't have all the ingredients that your cat or kitten needs.
- Don't try and make your cat or kitten a vegetarian. Cats simply cannot get all of the protein they need from non-meat sources.
- Don't feed your cat from soiled dishes – wash dishes in hot water with detergent, rinse well and allow to drain dry.

● Kitten food

You can use tinned food – giving four or five small meals a day (about one tablespoon of food for each meal) until 12 weeks. Some manufacturers make special kitten food.

You can make your own using finely ground fresh meat, rabbit or fish. If you do this you may need to give a daily yeast tablet or balanced vitamin supplement as well – ask your vet for advice.

After about 12 weeks your kitten can go down to four meals a day and by the age of six or seven months two meals are quite sufficient. As it gets older and has fewer meals you will need to increase the quantities given.

● Greens please

All cats and kittens need to be able to eat grass – this helps them maintain their natural digestive balance.



● Drink up

Give your cat or kitten lots of fresh water, but don't give them too much milk. It can give kittens diarrhoea and sometimes causes stomach problems in adult cats. Some adult cats like milk, others don't, so allow your cat to follow its preferences. If you think your cat is not drinking enough it may be because it doesn't like the chemicals which are present in our tap water. Try clean rain water or bottled still water instead. It is even more important that cats which eat dried crunchy food drink lots of water, otherwise bladder disease can result.

Care for coats



● Grooming

Long-haired cats cannot groom themselves properly. They need to be combed every day to avoid tangled and matted fur and the skin problems which result from neglected coats. Each combing needs to be followed by a brush.

You will need to get your long-haired kitten used to grooming from a very early age.

Short-haired cats also need the occasional grooming session, especially at moulting time. Otherwise, like long-haired cats, they can swallow hairs which ball up in the stomach and can cause serious illness.

To groom your short-haired cat you can use a soft brush. However a damp wash leather is also a useful way of removing loose hair quickly and effectively. Just hold it in both hands and draw it over the cat from head to tail.

● Fighting fleas

Most cats will get fleas at some point – when this happens take the following courses of action quickly.

- Ask your veterinary surgeon for advice as there are many different anti-flea programmes available. Not all flea sprays and powders that you buy in shops are effective. Follow your vet's instructions carefully.

- Don't use any drug on a young kitten without first consulting your vet.
- Never spray your pet in the face.
- Some cats are also terrified by the noise of an aerosol, so be sure to hold your cat firmly as you spray. The sound of water running from a tap will create a distraction. There are alternatives to sprays which are very effective – ask your vet for details.
- De-flea bedding, carpets and corners – otherwise your cat will just get re-infested. Vacuum chairs, skirting boards, carpets, crevices and undisturbed, dusty corners of the house. These are all favourite living spots for fleas. Your vet can also provide you with a surface flea spray. This is **NOT** for use on your cat but on surfaces like floors and skirting boards. Follow the instructions carefully. Be especially careful if you use these sprays near fish as they are very toxic to them.

Flea collars

Some people like to use flea collars, but the RSPCA doesn't recommend them. Flea collars are not always effective and – most important of all – can be dangerous. Your cat could be trapped or even strangled by the collar. Skin problems can also develop around the collar area.

On the move



Cats can be easily car-trained. Whenever you take your cat anywhere by car it should be confined in a suitable, comfortable carrier. Carriers range in quality from the cheapest cardboard type to the more expensive wicker or wire variety. Cats are generally happier if they can see out of their carrier which should measure at least 50 x 28 x 28 cm (20 x 11 x 11 in).

It's often a good idea to let the cat get used to the basket before the journey, but if your cat is obviously terrified by the whole business and you are making a long trip, advice should be sought

from your veterinary surgeon. Some form of tranquillisation may be provided. **NEVER** be tempted to use tranquilisers other than those obtained from your vet – some cats react violently to, for example, dog tranquilisers.

But a noisy and protesting cat does not necessarily mean that it needs tranquilising. Indignation and terror are not the same thing. It is also a good idea not to feed the cat immediately before you start a journey – cats can get car sick too.

● **Holiday home**

How to make sure your cat is well looked after on holiday.

- Take your cat with you. But this may not be the best idea as cats are often not good travellers and yours could get lost while you are at your holiday home. Or he/she might try to get back to your permanent home.
- For those travelling abroad, British quarantine laws have been reformed. Under the Pet Travel Scheme, cats and dogs that have been microchipped, vaccinated against rabies and blood tested can travel to and from some western European countries and some rabies-free islands, without having to undergo quarantine on return. Your vet will be able to advise.
- Arrange for your cat to stay at a boarding cattery. This is a good plan providing you visit the cattery in advance and make sure it really is a suitable place. Your vet, local council or RSPCA branch can advise. Local councils have a list of all registered boarding kennels and catteries in the area.
- When checking out the cattery, ask to see a diet sheet and inspect the facilities. Find out what the health requirements are for boarding cats. Good catteries will insist that boarders are fully vaccinated and will ask to see certificates. Make

sure also that the cattery is never left unattended. Most cats will accept a cattery quite well – just make sure you book early.

- Leave your cat at home to be looked after by a friend or neighbour. Your cat may be happier if left at home, but not necessarily safer. Make sure a responsible neighbour or friend visits twice a day to feed and check water. Ideally invite a relation or friend to stay in your home while you are away. Leave them with details of your vet's telephone number.

● **New house**

If moving house seems traumatic to you, imagine what it feels like for your cat. Your new home will seem very foreign and your cat's instinct may well be to leave to find a place that feels like home.

To stop this happening

- Don't let your cat out of the carrier until you've got one room straight, along with familiar objects where you can safely put him/her.
- Close the windows and doors before you release your cat. Give him/her a meal, a litter tray and then let him/her roam about the room to get acclimatised. Make a big fuss of your cat – this is very reassuring.
- Leave your cat inside overnight. If the house is fairly quiet, let him/her explore, as long as the doors and windows are closed. Don't let him/her outside yet.
- When you feel your cat has settled – this could take two days or even a week – you can slowly start introducing him/her to the outside world. Prepare your cat's food at the usual meal time and make sure he/she knows what you are doing. Don't feed your cat right away but encourage him/her to follow you outside for a short walk. The minute you get back in give your cat some food. If you are worried that your cat may run away if you take him/her into the garden, you could use a lead (proper harness).



Cats and kittens

● New house continued

- Make sure your cat is microchipped – your vet will be able to provide details, but this is one of the best ways to ensure a speedy reunion. Local authorities, dog wardens, veterinary surgeons and RSPCA animal centres all hold scanners which can be passed over lost animals, revealing a code number which can be used to check owner details on a central database. Remember to update your cat's microchip records if you move house.
- You may also, for the first week or so, like your cat to wear a collar giving your name, new address and phone number. Make sure that the collar has a buckle which is designed to snap apart under pressure – otherwise a cat trapped in a tree by its own collar will struggle and may twist the collar into a figure of eight shape until it becomes a noose.

● Settling down

Some cats adjust very quickly to a new home, while others may take up to three weeks to settle down. The important thing to remember is that cats are most likely to get lost or will make an effort to get back to their old home if they've been frightened and are in a panic. As long as they're given time to get their bearings all should be well.

Accidental pregnancy



The RSPCA strongly recommends that both male and female cats be neutered to prevent unwanted kittens coming into the world.

All adopters of animals from the RSPCA must agree to have them neutered.

If you think your cat may be pregnant and are uncertain about finding good homes for her kittens, seek advice from your veterinary surgeon who will be able to advise you if it's possible to spay her.

If the pregnancy goes ahead make sure that you treat her even more gently than usual. Pregnancy lasts 60–70 days, but during the last three weeks a cat is especially sensitive. Don't let anyone pull your pregnant cat about or squeeze her, no matter how affectionately.

The same rules apply to picking up a pregnant cat as to a non pregnant one. The hindquarters always need supporting, so you have to use two hands.

A pregnant cat needs plenty of nourishing food and possibly a vitamin supplement – check with your vet. She will also need a bed in a quiet corner – away from people and dogs – which she can get to easily and it should be lined with newspaper.

Cats usually give birth quite well without human intervention. It might well be sensible to take her in to see your veterinary surgeon a couple of weeks in advance of the expected due date for some veterinary advice. Your vet may also be able to help you find good homes.

Kittens should not be re-homed until they are at least eight weeks old.

If the entire litter is born dead, move the mother into another room immediately and give her a fresh bed to help her forget. Call the vet at once as it may be necessary to dry up any milk present and to check for any retained afterbirth.

Finding a veterinary surgeon



Even the very best kept and healthiest animals need veterinary attention. One of your first tasks should therefore be to register your cat or kitten with a veterinary surgeon. Never let the thought of having to pay for veterinary treatment stop you from making sure a sick or injured animal has the best of care.

If you really can't cover the full cost of veterinary treatment in one payment, be honest with your vet as s/he may be able to suggest a way to help. Your local RSPCA branch may also be able to help with covering the cost.

● Insurance – the best policy

The RSPCA recommends that you take out insurance for any accident or illness that could happen to your cat. The RSPCA's pet insurance scheme offers high quality cover at a competitive price – telephone 0800 032 5952 for further information.

Diseases



Three of the most serious cat illnesses – feline infectious enteritis, feline influenza and feline leukaemia can all be prevented by vaccination. Don't leave it too late!

● Feline infectious enteritis

Spreads so quickly through a neighbourhood, leaving so many cats dead that people often think that there has been widespread poisoning. Young cats are particularly vulnerable and the disease is at its worst in the summer.

The symptoms are a sudden rise in temperature, abdominal pain, vomiting, blood-stained motions and collapse. Death can occur within 24 hours.

● Feline influenza

The symptoms of cat flu are runny eyes and nose, sneezing, excessive salivation and later congestion of the lungs. The cat should be kept quiet and warm and veterinary help should be sought at once. Cats can die of this disease, so rapid treatment and careful nursing are essential. Delayed treatment can leave the cat with chronic snuffles that come and go for the rest of his/her life.

Cats of all ages can get cat flu but it is most likely to occur in catteries or pet shops where animals are crowded together. For this reason it is best not to buy kittens from pet shops. Once a cat has had cat flu he/she may carry the virus which lies in the lining of the nose for the rest of his/her life. Occasionally the virus will reactivate without symptoms, making the cat a cat flu carrier, passing the infection on to other cats.

● Feline leukaemia

One of the most common infectious causes of death in cats. It is caused by a virus FeLV and is mainly spread by saliva, but also by urine and faeces. This slow acting virus attacks the cat's natural defences and allows other serious diseases to develop. These include severe anaemia, tumours of lymph nodes, severe gum infection, kidney failure. The infection is almost always fatal. A vaccine is now available.

● Vaccinate

Fortunately vaccinations can now protect your animal against these diseases. Cat flu and enteritis injections may be started in a young kitten from eight, ten or 12 weeks – depending on the make and then booster shots given regularly on the vet's advice. The boosters are usually given annually. Your vet will advise on the feline leukaemia vaccine. The RSPCA believes that all cats and kittens should be vaccinated against these highly contagious and potentially fatal diseases.

Other diseases and complaints



● Chlamydial disease

Severely inflamed and discharging eyes. The infection is contagious and needs prolonged antibiotic treatment. There is a vaccine available – your vet can advise.

● Feline infectious peritonitis (FIP)

Inflammation of the lining of the abdomen has a variety of causes but is most commonly caused by a virus. It is a serious condition for which there is no known cure.

● Feline immuno-deficiency virus

Occurs mainly in uncastrated tom cats. The virus is nearly always spread by the saliva through bite wounds. Affected cats become chronically ill and debilitated and often there is gingivitis (inflammation of the gums). There is no known cure and veterinary advice should be sought. The risk of contracting the virus is reduced if your cat is neutered.

Your cat may carry the virus for years before any symptoms show.

● Digestive complaints

Cats will try to make themselves better by eating grass. Constipation can be helped by giving your cat a tablespoon of medicinal paraffin which can be repeated twice daily for two days. More serious digestive upsets like persistent vomiting and diarrhoea require rapid veterinary attention.

● Ear problems

A number of irritants can cause cats to scratch persistently at their ears. It could be ear mites (for which your vet can supply drops), a small seed which has worked its way into the ear or an abscessed wound inflicted by another cat. Cats ears are very delicate and vulnerable so seek help from the vet rather than attempting to solve the problem yourself.

● Eye problems

If you think that your cat has any sort of eye problem or injury you must take it to your vet immediately. Quick action could save your pet's sight.

● Hair balls

Long-haired cats, if not groomed well, will suffer from hair balls from time to time. By ingesting their own hair in the course of grooming themselves, a clot of matted hair will form in the gut. Usually a cat will solve the problem by chewing grass. Your vet may suggest a regular laxative dose during moulting.

● Skin diseases

Skin problems could be a sign of mange, ringworm, allergies to fleas or lice or may due to an internal complaint such as kidney disease. Because there are so many different causes for similar looking conditions, veterinary help should always be sought. Medication – ointment – should never be applied without veterinary advice because your cat could be poisoned when he/she tries to lick it off.

● Stings

Cats often play with bees and wasps until they get their first sting. This usually teaches them to keep away from buzzing insects in future. A single sting is painful, but not dangerous unless it is inside the mouth or in the throat.

Remove the sting if present and apply a cold water compress or ice pack if possible.

If the swelling does not go down in a few hours, consult your veterinary surgeon.

● Teeth

Some cats are more prone than others to the build up of tartar around the base of their teeth. Left unchecked this can lead to gum disease (gingivitis) and the premature loss of teeth. Bad breath and difficulty eating are warning signs. If tartar build-up is present, your vet will need to scrape the tartar – which is extremely hard – off and cats don't like having their teeth cleaned. Giving your cat biscuity cat treats will help to prevent a build-up occurring.

● Worms

If your cat starts 'staring' with wide eyes and his/her coat becomes coarse and harsh and she/he is licking his/her anal area, worms may well be the problem.

Cats can be infected by two sorts of worm – roundworm and tapeworm.

■ **Roundworms** are pinky white and curled like a thin coiled rope. They can measure from 5 to 15 cm long. Kittens can be infected with roundworm while in the womb and can fall sick and die as a result. Kittens should be treated against roundworm from the age of two weeks.

■ **Tapeworms** are long strips made up of flat segments filled with eggs which break off from the worm in the body. Segments can come out one at a time so you could miss them. The most common sign is small dried egg sacs like rice grains in the hair around the anus. Segments can also twitch and move. Tapeworms cannot be caught from other cats but from intermediate hosts like fleas or small rodents like voles and shrews.

To keep your cat in good health, you should worm him/her regularly.

Your vet will be able to give you advice on the right treatment.

● Toxoplasmosis

Toxoplasmosis is a serious zoonosis – a disease which can spread between humans and animals. It is caused by a microscopic organism called toxoplasma which affects many animals.

● Toxoplasmosis continued

Cats, however, spread the disease through their faeces and although they will show no symptoms, the parasite can cause congenital defects in unborn children if the mother becomes infected. For this reason, pregnant women should avoid changing cat litter trays.

The normal way to prevent toxoplasmosis in your cat is to feed only heat-processed and well-cooked meat and to try and ensure that your cat does not catch or eat wild prey.

● Ringworm

Ringworm is a fungus infection which may cause characteristic lesions on the skin. Cats with ringworm should be taken for veterinary examination and be treated immediately because it is readily transmissible to man. Children should not be allowed any contact with cats with ringworm because children are most at risk from cross infection.

A kind end



Well cared for cats can live to a good age – occasionally up to 20 years or more. But if a cat is beginning to show signs of a painful disability, has an incurable illness or severe injury, he/she should be gently put to sleep. This can be a very difficult decision to make, but it is one of the kindest things that an owner can do for a suffering animal.

Don't rush into getting a replacement cat or kitten until you really feel ready – give yourself time to grieve.

Try not to blame yourself for your pet's death. If you gave your cat care and attention throughout his/her life and took him/her to your veterinary surgeon when he/she was ill, then you did all you could. Don't be afraid to show how upset you are in front of your vet – he or she will understand your feelings.

If you find a cat which has been severely injured as a result of a road traffic accident, phone the police immediately. The police have the authority to call a veterinary surgeon to the scene. No untrained person should ever try to put a cat to sleep and it is an offence to kill an animal by improper means. If you have problems getting through to the police, call the RSPCA cruelty and advice line on 0870 55 55 999.

Further reading



- *RSPCA Complete Cat Care Manual.*
Andrew Edney (Dorling Kindersley, 2006)
- *RSPCA Pet Guide: Care for Your Cat*
(HarperCollins, 2006)
- *RSPCA Guide Care for Your Kitten*
(HarperCollins, 2004)

The RSPCA also publishes a number of leaflets on pet care – if you would like further information please visit:

- the RSPCA website at www.rspca.org.uk

or write to:

- RSPCA Enquiries Service
Wilberforce Way, Southwater
Horsham, West Sussex RH13 9RS

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