



**ONTARIO  
SPCA**  
AND HUMANE SOCIETY  
PROTECTING ANIMALS SINCE 1873

# ADOPTING A SHELTER CAT

## what you need to know

**T**he sight of a cat or kitten may be irresistible to just about anyone, but the decision to adopt a cat should never be made on impulse. Felines make wonderful companions, but they do require a commitment from you to provide for all of their needs. Here are some things you should consider when deciding to share your life with cats.

### Long-term commitment

Are you willing and able to make a 15-to-20-year commitment to caring for your cat(s)? This will include providing food, litter and ongoing veterinary care, including vaccinations, possible surgeries and dental care. Don't forget the ongoing costs of supplies, such as food, dishes, litter box(es), scratching post(s), carrying case, grooming tools and toys. The Ontario Veterinary Medical Association estimates that the average annual cost of caring for an adult 10-pound cat is \$836.18 for an outdoor cat and \$747.72 for an indoor cat; and \$1,558.24 for a female kitten and \$1,481.95 for a male kitten (2005 figures).

### Litter box duty

Cats require a litter box, which you will need to scoop out daily and scrub thoroughly once a week. Cats are very clean animals and they won't "do their business" in a soiled and smelly litter box.

### Tender loving care

Cats require daily love, attention and care. Don't get a cat just because you want a companion animal that can be left alone for longer periods of time. This is not the case. Cats are animals who appreciate routine, so if your life is one where there is no such thing as an 'average day,' you



may want to reconsider adding an animal to your home at this time. If, on occasion, you have to travel or work late for business, are you prepared to have someone to "cat sit" for you? If left home alone, cats should be checked, at minimum, on a daily basis, and should be provided with fresh food and water each day.

### No surprise gifts, please

Ontario SPCA shelters do not adopt out animals as gifts. Adopting a pet is a very personal decision, usually based on lifestyle, financial concerns and personal preferences for the animal's colour, coat/hair length, gender, activity level, etc. Choosing a pet for someone else is not appropriate and pets obtained from other sources and then given as gifts are often returned or brought to the shelter, or given away to another family.

If someone you know is considering adopting a cat, we suggest that you purchase all the supplies a new cat guardian will need (i.e. food/water bowls, toys, scratching post, cat carrier,

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etc.). This way, when they are ready to bring their new companion home, they will already have all the supplies, and can focus on bonding with their new family member.

### Patience needed

Remember that it will take your new feline friend awhile to feel comfortable in her new home. Be patient and allow the cat to explore her new environment. Also provide gentle handling and petting in a quiet, calm place. At first, you should confine your new cat to a single room with food, toys and her litter box. This way, she can become accustomed to her new home and all its scents and sounds without being overwhelmed by having to navigate through the entire house. Even if your home is a small apartment, confinement is usually the best way to introduce your new cat



to her new residence. Keep her confined in this room until she appears to be quite comfortable there - walking around the room freely, tail high, etc. Only then should you leave the door to the room open to let your new cat leave the room when she's ready. Don't pick her up and remove her from the room - let her do it in her own time.

Scent is also incredibly important for cats, so where possible, ask the shelter staff if you may take home something that smells familiar to your

cat to help her feel more at ease in her new environment. Promise that once she's settled in, you will wash the item and return it to the shelter, along with an up-date about how your cat is doing.

### What you will need

So, you have decided that a cat is right for you, and that you are right for a cat. Now, here are some of the more practical things you will need to care for your new feline friend.

### Choosing a veterinarian

Before adopting a cat or kitten, it is a good idea to select a veterinarian to help you care for your new companion. If you don't know of one, ask friends or neighbours for recommendations or consult the Yellow Pages of your phone book.

At the time of adoption, you will usually be urged to make an appointment with your selected veterinarian for an exam of your new family member. This will enable your vet to get familiar with your cat from the outset, and will give you the opportunity to ask any health-related questions you may have.

### Supplies

**Carrier:** A carrier is necessary for safely transporting your cat or kitten. It will keep her safe in the car and give her a sense of security. Make sure the carrier is large enough for your cat and that it is well ventilated.

**Litter box:** A litter box, litter and a scoop are essential. Make sure the litter box is large enough for your cat; if you have selected a kitten, make sure the box-sides are low enough that he can easily get into the box. You will probably need a lower-sided, slightly smaller litter box for the kitten-months, and then will need a larger litter box as your kitten becomes an adult cat.

Line the box with approximately one to two inches of litter. If you have adopted a kitten, use

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non-clumping litter until he is approximately four to six months of age. Kittens can be messy and clumping litter will adhere to his or her fur. The kitten will then attempt to groom himself and will ingest the clumping litter, which can cause stomach upsets, illness and/or intestinal blockages.

Make sure the box is deep enough so the litter stays in the box and doesn't spill onto the floor. Droppings should be removed daily using a litter scoop. Keep the litter box in a quiet, but accessible area (i.e. not next to the washing machine) and away from the cat's food.

Kittens usually require the litter box to be in a very obvious and easily accessible area. When they have to eliminate, kittens aren't usually able to remember that the litter box is down the stairs, and in the back storage area of the basement, and they can't always 'hold it' until they get there. Once the kitten is using the litter box reliably, you can gradually move the litter box to its permanent location. Just be sure he knows where it is when you move it - you can take him to the box's new location, and place him in it as a reminder. Cats have an incredible sense of smell, and will usually be able to follow their nose to the new litter box location.

Adult cats are usually quite capable of locating the litter box on their own. If you want to be certain that he knows where it is, you can take your new cat to the litter box and gently place him in it. That's usually all it takes, and as long as you keep the litter box and area clean, you generally won't have any litter box problems. For more information read the fact sheet [Top 10 Tips to Help Solve Litter Box Dilemmas](#).

**Food and water:** Provide your cat or kitten with a complete and balanced diet. You may want to ask your veterinarian to suggest food that is appropriate for the age and health of your cat. Provide your cat with fresh, clean water to drink on a daily basis. Provide both food and water in clean dishes. Contrary to popular belief, cats should

not be given milk as their main source of hydration. In fact, giving your cat milk will usually upset his stomach.

**Bedding:** Most cats enjoy having their own bed, or a cozy place to nap. While they may discover these cozy nooks on their own, it is still good to provide them with their own bed initially. This doesn't have to be an expensive plush bed; something as simple as a cardboard box lined with a cushion and soft washable material such as a blanket will work just as well. Be sure to wash the bedding often. Place the bed in a quiet, draft-free spot, away from the heavy traffic areas in your home.



**Identification:** Allowing cats to go outside unattended is not recommended. It places them at risk of being hit by cars, being poisoned, getting an infection, being attacked and/or injured by other animals or people, or being stolen. Cats should only be outside of their homes when accompanied by their owners and when wearing a harness and leash.

You cat should always wear a collar and an identification tag and/or be microchipped, just in case he does escape from your home. A safety collar, or "breakaway collar," has an elastic panel that will allow your cat to free herself if the collar becomes caught on something. Through microchipping, a small microchip is placed in the



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scruff of your cat's neck. The chip has a specific number, which allows the microchip company to access your contact information, such as name, phone number and address, through their database. Information about your cat, such as age, sex, colour and breed is also stored by the company. Please remember that identification tags and microchips are essential for your cat's safety - they make it possible for someone to return your cat if she should become lost.



**Scratching post:** Cats use scratching posts to stretch, mark their territory through the scent glands located in their paws and/or to clean away dead scales from their nails. You can make a post yourself with some wood and old carpeting, or you can purchase one. This is an essential item for every cat guardian's home - without somewhere appropriate to stretch and scratch, your cat will make use of your carpeting and/or furniture.

**Toys:** Kittens and older cats love anything that moves, rolls or sways - basically, anything that catches their natural curiosity and instinct to stalk and pounce. This could be anything from a rolled-up ball of paper, to string or a bouncy ball. The key is to make sure the toy is safe for your cat or kitten. Make sure the toy cannot splinter, be torn apart or be swallowed.

**Grooming:** Cats usually keep themselves quite clean. Most cats rarely need a bath, but they do require regular brushing or combing. Frequent grooming will help keep your cat's coat clean and reduce shedding and the incidence of hairballs. The type of brush needed depends on the texture of your cat's coat.

### **Communicating with your cat**

Now the real fun begins! Forming a bond with your new cat is one of the most exciting and interesting components of adoption. If your new cat or kitten doesn't already have a name, choose one as soon as possible and begin using it right away. Your cat should learn his new name quite easily - just call for him frequently at first and reward him with a food treat (not too much, though!) and affection.

**What your cat is trying to tell you:** Your cat's main methods of communicating with you are body language and vocal sounds, so it is important that you can recognize these visual and audio cues. Here are some hints to get you started:

**Purr:** Happy or contented

**Hiss:** Angry or afraid

**Loud or constant meowing:** Attention-getting - he's lonely, anxious or bored

**Relaxed, gently swishing tail:** Pleasure

**Lashing or twitching tail:** Angry

**Tail straight up with the tip turned over:** Content

**Tail Straight up and quivering:** A greeting for someone to whom he is strongly bonded

**Ears pricked forward:** Curious

**Ears laid back:** Fear or Anger

**Ears laid back, back arched, hissing, fluffed-up fur:** REALLY Angry

**Rubbing up against your leg:** Welcome or greeting behaviour