

Welcome Home: Preventing Problems from Day One

By Sheila Segurson, DVM

Congratulations – you’ve decided to adopt a cat! In order to ease integration into your home, take into consideration where your cat came from. Was she staying in a cage, in a room, or in a foster home? Were there other cats living with her or was she alone? Was the environment noisy or quiet? How often did she eat and where did she sleep?



Changing all of these factors in her environment all at once can be very stressful. In order to integrate your new cat into your house and life as smoothly as possible, you must be able to recognize the signs of stress while changing her living situation slowly over time. With this method, you are initially maintaining her previous routine, while changing to *your* routine over time.

Recognizing Signs of Stress

Your new cat will likely be stressed initially. Signs of stress can include decreased appetite, decreased grooming, hiding, lack of interest in attention or affection, and sleeping in unusual locations. A stressed cat may be more quiet than usual, which can be difficult to notice. Very stressed cats are more likely to behave aggressively or fearfully.

If you’ve adopted a cat from a shelter, this is most likely your cat’s third “home” in a fairly short time period. Even though your house is probably much more comfortable than the shelter where she came from, change is stressful. Watch for signs of stress, and if you see them, make certain that they lessen over time. If her stress is not slowly decreasing every day, you should seek the help of a behaviorist or your veterinarian.

Your Cat’s Environment

Many cats are fearful when introduced to their new home; being moved from a small enclosure to an apartment or house is a big change. Your home also has different smells and noises than the shelter and the home where your cat lived before. Initially, confine your new cat to one room. Your bedroom or the living room often works well for this. Make sure that you provide your new cat with food, water, and a litter box (see below), and that you regularly spend time in this room with her, so that she is not alone.

Provide her with multiple hiding places. A cardboard box with holes cut in both sides (so she can go in and out each side) and a blanket placed in the bottom can be a great hiding place. Be certain to provide her with hiding places on the ground, as well as up high. When she is in her hiding place, do not disturb her. Her hiding places should be her special places, where she can have privacy if desired.

Place a scratching post or cat tree in her room. Place her scent on the cat tree by gently stroking her cheeks with a towel, and then rubbing the scratching post with the towel. This will transfer her scent onto the scratching post, thereby increasing the likelihood that she will use it.

Let your cat adjust to the room, and to you. Do not force her to stay near you if you wish to pet her. Instead, coax her to you by playing with an interactive toy or staying near her food bowl while she is eating. Once she realizes that this stranger (you) provides all the same good things that her previous owner did (and maybe even more!), she will warm quickly to you and accept your attention.

Things to buy before getting your cat:

- Food and water bowls
- Food (To ease the transition, stick with the food your cat is used to eating at first. Then, if necessary, gradually switch to a higher-quality food.)
- Treats
- Collar with ID tag
- Cat bed
- Cat toys
- Cat brush
- Cat litter box
- Cat litter (Again, stick with the type of litter the cat is used to)
- Scratching post or strips

After three days, or once your cat is comfortably walking around and living in this room, expand her access to the entire house. For some cats, it may take several weeks before they are comfortable in their room and can be allowed access to the whole house.

Diet

Cats eat less when they are stressed, and sometimes stop eating altogether. It is extremely important to make sure that your cat is eating regularly (and adequate amounts) once you have brought him home. If possible, buy the same type of food that the shelter used. If he is not eating, try mixing a little bit of a tastier food, such as canned cat food or baby food, into his meal.

After two days, or once he is eating regularly, slowly change him over to the diet that you would like to feed him (if different from what he got at the shelter). Make sure you feed your cat high-quality food. On the first and second days, feed him 25 percent of your diet and 75 percent of the shelter's diet, mixed together. On the third and fourth days, give him 50 percent of each. On the fifth and sixth days, switch to 75 percent of your diet and 25 percent of the shelter's diet. On the seventh day, feed him 100 percent of your preferred diet. Changing your cat's diet too rapidly can cause upset to his system (decreased appetite, vomiting, and/or diarrhea). If this happens, call your veterinarian.

Decide whether you wish to feed your cat once daily, twice daily or free choice (which means leaving dry food out at all times). Many cats who are fed free choice do not properly control their food intake and tend to be overweight, which predisposes them to health problems. For most cats, twice-daily feeding is ideal. You can also put some of your cat's daily ration into a food-dispensing toy. Food-dispensing toys are a fun way for

your cat to “hunt” for his food, and are a great way to enrich his life. Do not start using a food-dispensing toy until your cat has completely settled into your home, after about two to three weeks.

Litter Box

Provide your cat with an uncovered, clean litter box. Covered litter boxes can trap odors inside the box, which is nice for you, but not for your cat. Cats are often quite fastidious; they are sensitive to the smell of urine and feces, as well as deodorizers. Reducing the smell inside and around the litter box can be very important for them. Scoop out the litter box once daily, and empty it completely to clean it every two weeks. When you clean the litter box, use a mild soap, not strong-smelling detergents or ammonia.

The most common reason that cats are brought to shelters is litter box problems. Following the above recommendations can make the difference between a cat who is house-trained and a cat who isn't. Remember that if you do not like the smell of the litter box, your cat probably doesn't either; keep it clean and you'll have a happy cat.

Toys

There are many different toys that your cat might like to play with. Cats like novelty, so buy several different types of toys for her and try them out. Play with the toys with your cat; do not set them out and expect her to play with them on her own. If she is not interested in them for the first few days, give her time, and try different toys. Do not play with your cat with your hands. Using your hands as a toy teaches your cat that it is okay to bite or scratch you.

Indoors vs. Outdoors

One of the big decisions cat owners must make is whether to allow their cat outside. There are many risks outdoors that can shorten your cat's lifespan. He could be hit by a car, poisoned, attacked by a dog, or infected with an incurable virus. However, many cats really enjoy being outdoors and miss the stimulation of the natural world if they are kept inside all the time.

There are several different ways that you can allow your cat to enjoy the outdoors without the risk. You can install perches on windowsills around the house so that your cat can sit at the window, watch the outdoors, and enjoy the sunlight. With patience, you can teach your cat to walk with a harness or leash, and then you can take him outdoors for walks.

Another option is to build an outdoor enclosure (often called a cattery) for your cat. Prefab catteries and cattery building plans are available on the Internet by searching for “cat enclosures.” At www.cdpets.com, for example, you can buy a prefab cattery. Another popular way to give your cat the freedom of the outdoors is with Cat Fence-In (www.catfencein.com), a product that makes it impossible for cats to climb over regular backyard fencing.

Remember...

The key to successful integration of your new cat into your home is being aware of the signs of stress, and making sure that they remain minimal. Change her environment slowly. Remember that although these recommendations work for most cats, they will not work for every cat. If your cat is showing signs of stress and is not improving, please contact your veterinarian or a behaviorist.

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See also: [Enrichment for Household Cats](#)
[Preventing Behavior Problems in Your Cat](#)