

When Fluffy Meets



These two feline friends have obviously bonded. Will your cat adjust as well? Be prepared and be patient: it usually takes a few weeks to a month for cats to feel comfortable with each other.

Adding a new cat? These steps can foster the most stress-free introduction.

Thinking of adding a second cat to your household? You're not alone. The most recent national census reports that 27 million U.S. cat-owning households averaged 2.2 felines each. That compares to 1.7 dogs in 31.2 million households. The frequency of multicat ownership may stem from a desire to ease the loneliness or boredom folks think a solitary cat feels when they are off to work. Others may not have been able to resist that needy stray that just showed up at the door.

But before you let a second—or third—cat into your home, stop and think. Does your cat really crave the companionship of other cats? What if the cats don't get along? Are there any special medical problems endemic to a multicat household?

Do cats need other cats? According to Debra Horowitz of Veterinary Behavior Consulting in Saint Louis, Missouri, cats do not crave social groups in the same way dogs do. "Do cats get lonely? Probably, but not in the same way that we associate with human beings or even with dogs. Just because a cat seems to want more attention or love from its human owner doesn't necessarily mean that it is lonely for another cat."

Essentially, Horowitz says, the decision whether to add a new cat to your household should be made on a case-by-case basis. "Each cat has its own personality and individual style," says Horowitz. "The best way to determine if your cat would benefit from having a new cat in

the household is to observe its behavior. If your cat starts to hiss or raises its tail when it sees other cats outside, it probably doesn't want to have another cat in its territory. If your cat bats at the window with its paw as though to touch the other animal, it is probably receptive to other cats."

While there are no guarantees of cat compatibility, veterinarian Alexis Higdon, whose Boise, Idaho, practice treats cats exclusively, agrees that observing your pet's behavior offers the best clues on whether it would welcome a new cat in the home. "If possible," Higdon says, "try to visit the new cat beforehand, even several days in a row, to see if its personality will mesh with the personality of your own pet."

While some animal experts suggest that certain breeds may be better suited to multicat households, Higdon says that choosing a cat by breed doesn't guarantee much of anything. "Bringing a new cat into your home, whether it is your first or one of several animals, is always a risk," says Higdon. "Saying that a certain breed of cat is more docile or more accepting of other cats is sort of like saying that all blondes have more fun. Just as every human being is different, so is every cat."

Gender, however, does seem to play a role in which cats get on well together. Horowitz says that studies of groups of cats living together in the wild show that female cats tend to bond most closely with other females, especially if they are directly related.

"Unlike dogs, who establish a hierarchy based on dominance, how cats set up their organization structure

Tigger

By Sandi Sonnenfeld

isn't clear-cut," explains Horowitz. "Behaviorists have observed grandmothers, mothers, and daughters that bond together to form a sort of cluster of their own within a larger social group. But how that applies to a domestic setting isn't exactly clear. I generally advise my clients that if you have a female cat at home, you probably should get another female. If you have a male cat, get a male kitten. But look carefully at the personalities of each of the cats. Male kittens tend to be more assertive than females, so if your own male cat is not very active, you may want to consider getting a female."

Age also plays a significant role in how well a new cat fits into a household. Most vets recommend that the best time to add a new cat is when your own cat is less than four years old. "The older your cat gets, the smaller the chances are of successfully introducing a new cat into the household," says Horowitz. "Older cats tend to be very settled and secure in their place in the home. Bringing a new cat home could cause tremendous stress for older cats, which could impact their health."



Make sure your cat's new buddy gets checked by a veterinarian before coming home. This will reduce the risk of the newcomer transmitting illnesses or parasites to your cat.

Ken Kerby/Pet International

Health concerns are yet another factor to consider. Make sure that the new kitten or cat has been seen by a veterinarian before bringing it home to reduce the risk of transmitting illnesses or parasites to other animals.

"I strongly recommend that cats be screened for feline leukemia and FIV, especially if you aren't sure where the new cat came from," says Higdon. "Kittens are also especially prone to upper respiratory infections, so you may want to separate the new kitten from the other cats in the household for seven days to make sure that it isn't incubating an infection. If, at any time during the

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lives of your cats, one of them starts sneezing regularly or gets diarrhea, immediately isolate the ill cat to reduce the risk of exposure, and take it to your veterinarian to see if it needs treatment."

Regular flea control, maintaining annual immunizations, and spaying or neutering each of your cats at the appropriate time also help keep pets healthy. Neutering will also eliminate sexual behaviors that can cause conflicts among cats.

Still want to add that new cat? There are several steps you can take to help make the introduction go smoothly. Marilyn White, a clinical behaviorist at the University of California-Davis Veterinary Teaching Hospital, suggests that you create a home for cats that is "value-added."

"Cats do well in homes that provide them with the resources they value," explains White. "All cats cover a source of food, water, a place to bury their waste, and a space of their own. A home that is rich in those resources, no matter how many cats reside there, will always be appealing."

With this in mind, White offers the following suggestions:

- ◆ Adding a cat? Add another litter box, too. This reduces the risk of accidents and allows each cat to use the box that it feels the most comfortable with.

- ◆ Never force your cats to eat the same things or use the same type of litter. If you adopt a new cat from a shelter or acquire it from someone else's home, make sure you know what products the cat prefers. If you are going to try to switch the cat over to a new brand of food or

litter, do it gradually, keeping in mind that it may never adjust to what your other cat likes.

- ◆ Create multiple one-cat perches, by clearing a small space on a bookshelf or purchasing multiple cat trees. Cats need to have a space where they can go so they won't be bothered by the other animal(s) in the household.

- ◆ On the day you bring the new cat home, keep the animals separate. Provide both cats with ample food, water, litter space, and plenty of human attention no matter what room they are in. Alternate bringing one cat into the bedroom with you or have one sit on your lap while relegating the other to another part of the house. This gives your new cat time to adjust to its surroundings. It also teaches your current cat that it has to share certain spaces with the other animal.

- ◆ To get the cats used to each other's odors, rub one cat with a towel, then rub the second cat with the same towel. Alternate giving each the towel to sleep with.

- ◆ When you finally allow the cats into the same room, do so gradually and for a few minutes at a time. Try bringing them into the same room for feeding or playtime so that they start to associate positive events with the appearance of the other cat.

- ◆ Have patience. While some cats take to each other within a few minutes of meeting, it usually takes a few weeks to a month for cats to feel comfortable with each other.

Two feline roommates sniff each other in a friendly greeting. Will your cat adjust as well to a newcomer? Before adopting another cat, watch your feline's reactions to other cats for clues.

Diane Galkins/Click the Photo Connection





Younger cats usually adjust to each other faster than older ones.

Cathy Randall/FFG International

Even after your cats have begun interacting positively with one another, you may occasionally have to intercede when conflicts arise. "While it is not unusual for cats to play rough with each other, there is a difference between roughhousing and fighting," advises White. "Two cats who like each other should never injure one another. If one cat walks away from a game, the other cat should respect that. If the cat persists, you should intercede immediately." Hissing and growling are indications that the cats have gone beyond play and into the combat zone.

If you discover that one cat tends to be the aggressor, consider putting a bell on its collar. This will alert the other cat, which can then choose to get out of the way.

Use a squirt gun or shake an aluminum can filled with coins (cats don't like the sound) to punish inappropriate behavior, such as fighting or if one cat attempts to eat the other cat's food.

"If you don't punish a cat right when the behavior occurs, the cat will not understand what it did wrong," says White. "If you continue to have problems, especially with fighting, consult your veterinarian. In certain cases, your veterinarian may need to prescribe antidepressants or anti-anxiety medication to one or more of your cats. While medication is not a permanent solution, it may help make the transition go smoother."

Ultimately, most cats learn to adjust to one another, but it takes time and patience. So take some time to consider your cat's needs, but make sure adding another animal is something you truly want, too. Besides anticipating the love and joy an additional cat brings, you'll be better prepared to deal with any conflicts or problems that might arise.

Sandi Sonnenfeld is a freelance writer based in Seattle.

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