



Chapter 1

What Is a Healthy Cat?

More than 73 million pet cats live in households in the United States. What is it about these creatures that has made them America's most popular pet in the last decade? Is it their grace and beauty? Or is it their ability to be somewhat independent and fit into our busy lifestyles? Regardless of the reasons, it is definitely cool to be a cat owner.

You have also decided to become a cat owner—or at least, you'd like to think it was your decision. In reality, it is often the cat who chooses you. Each cat has a unique personality and different behavior patterns, so I hope you will find the perfect fit for your household.

CHARACTERISTICS OF A HEALTHY CAT

Bright eyes, a shiny coat and an alert disposition are all characteristics of a healthy cat. Healthy cats have good appetites, groom themselves well and interact with their owners. There is no one best place to find a healthy cat, so in your search consider local shelters, breeders, neighbors, friends, coworkers and veterinary clinics and hospitals.

The most important factor in choosing a healthy cat is a good personality. You can tell a lot about personality even with kittens. To test a cat's personality, hold her in your arms and see if she is relaxed or tense.

2 Guide to a Healthy Cat

Cradle her upside down in your arms, like a baby, and again, see how she reacts. If you are looking for an affectionate cat, and the one you are testing will not let you hold her for more than a second, you may want to reconsider your choice or plan to do some work on gaining the cat's trust and training her to relax.

Two to seven weeks of age is the period considered to be critical to a kitten's socialization. Kittens who are handled by many people and interact with other cats and animals during this time tend to adjust better socially as adults. Ask about a cat's early experiences when you are considering her for adoption.

The next test is to touch the animal's ears, gently open her mouth and touch her toes. Again, the more the cat is willing to let you handle her, the more likely she is to be trusting of you in general. If you put the cat down and walk away, is she interested in you? Does she follow you? I do think there is chemistry between certain cats and certain people. Is the cat alert, responsive and playful? Test this by throwing a small toy, or even make one from a ball of paper. All these little tests will give you some idea of what the cat's personality is like.

Even with a very healthy kitten, the health care costs for a kitten for the first year are generally higher than they are for an adult cat. Kittens have less well-developed immune systems than adult cats, so they are more susceptible to infections. They also require more routine health care during their first year of life than older cats do. This includes initial vaccines, viral and fecal testing and spaying or neutering.

THE LOWDOWN ON ESSENTIAL CARE

Now that you have your cat and have brought her into your home, you need to make sure you adequately provide for her essential needs. In the wild, cats adapt to their environment by hunting for food, seeking safety by climbing trees and finding shelter against the elements. Confined to our homes, cats need help to live harmoniously in our environment.

If you provide the basics of good food, water and shelter, you will be starting your cat off right. Monitoring the ways in which the cat uses these basic provisions will give you a good idea about the animal's health. Cats are creatures of habit, so any changes in their habits warrant investigation.

Privacy is very important to your cat. Even the most sociable cat needs some time alone. Cats typically like privacy when they groom and when they eliminate. Some cats like privacy when they eat, but others eat more readily when their owners are around.

Cats with more timid personalities should be allowed to hide for at least some part of the day. You can work to make your cat more social, but many felines are scaredy cats by nature and no amount of training will change this trait. People often tell me they think their scaredy cat was abused before they found her, but it is more likely the cat was born that way. Timid cats will learn to trust you and can become incredibly loving companions, but they are not likely to ever warm up to strangers.

Cats who have to acclimate to new cats, dogs or children in a household should be given time alone. It is not fair to expect the existing animal to be happy about and willing to accept newcomers. This is just not the nature of cats. Cats hate change. They prefer things to stay the way they are—the way *they* arranged them! It can take weeks to months for a new cat to accept her new surroundings, or at least to be less fearful.

When a new cat or kitten is brought into a household with children, everyone is excited and everyone wants to hold and play with the animal. Being the constant center of attention is not typically what a cat wants. Parents need to control the handling of the cat and be sure the animal is given an opportunity to rest by herself.



Even the biggest scaredy cat will learn to trust and love you, although she may never warm up to strangers.

4 Guide to a Healthy Cat

Entering a new home is stressful to a cat, and not getting a chance to regroup and relax merely intensifies the stress. Stress has a negative impact on the animal's immune system, so be sure to give the cat a break and help keep her healthy. Make sure the cat has a hiding place where she can go to relax, and make it a rule in your house that when the cat is in her hiding place, she is to be left alone. If you cannot isolate a cat in a quiet room for a break, you might consider placing her back in her carrier for a while. The carrier can offer safety and solitude.

THE SCOOP ON LITTER BOXES

Proper placement of the litter box in your home is essential if you want the cat to use it. Ideally, the cat should feel comfortable, safe and undisturbed when she eliminates. Often, elimination problems arise when a cat is unhappy about the location of her box. Areas where you want the box and where the cat wants the box may not be the same. You will have to give in to your cat's preferences.

Bedrooms, secondary bathrooms and garages are good locations for litter boxes. Many owners want to put litter boxes in laundry rooms. This can work for some cats, but others may be frightened by the noises of the washer and dryer and may choose to eliminate elsewhere.

Starting off on the right track with a good litter box setup will make both you and your cat happy. Litter boxes are available in a variety of sizes and shapes. Your cat will probably be more concerned with the type of litter in the box than she will with the type of box you choose—but some cats can be very picky about the box, too.

There are two main types of litter boxes: open and hooded. Litter boxes are generally made of plastic. Almost all cats are satisfied with an open litter box, but each type has its pros and cons, as outlined in the table on page 5.

In this high-tech era, there are also electronic litter boxes. These are the most expensive types of litter boxes, but they offer convenience because they do not require daily maintenance.

One type, called Litter Maid, is an open box that contains an electronic sensor that detects the cat's presence, automatically rakes the litter after the cat has left the box and deposits the waste materials into a closed plastic receptacle. Owners must dispose of the full receptacles every few days. The box is filled with clumping litter, and both the box and rake need to be cleaned regularly.

OPEN LITTER BOX

Pros

Easy for the cat to get in and out
 Easier for you to scoop
 Takes up less space
 Some cats (especially large ones) feel cramped in a hooded box

Cons

Less odor control
 More litter scatter
 Cats can eliminate over the sides
 Accessible to dogs and babies
 Some cats prefer more privacy

HOODED LITTER BOX

Pros

More odor control
 Less litter scatter
 Prevents access for dogs and babies
 Helps contain urine and feces
 Some cats prefer more privacy

Cons

May be harder for cat to get in and out
 Less convenient for you to scoop
 Requires more space
 Some cats (especially large ones) feel cramped

Another type of electronic box that washes, dries and disinfects plastic litter has been invented. This type of cat toilet, which eliminates any routine maintenance by the owner, is likely to be the litter box of the future.

The height of the sides of the box can vary, and that's another thing you need to consider. Kittens and senior cats may have difficulty jumping into boxes with high sides. The same may be true for injured animals.

Be sure to get a litter box that is big enough to accommodate your cat. The cat should be able to turn around and easily scratch and cover up wastes in her box. You may need to buy a larger litter box as your cat grows.

A cat should have unrestricted access to her litter box. Putting it in a room where the door may be accidentally closed or in a garage without a pet door (or where it gets so cold that she is unlikely to go there) will create problems. The location of the box in the house will also encourage or discourage use. Of course you want to put the litter box in the area that is most convenient for you, but your cat's needs and wishes should be considered first.

6 Guide to a Healthy Cat

A good general rule is to have at least the same number of litter boxes as you do cats in a household. This can pose problems in large, multicat homes. One reason for multiple boxes is to spread out smell and wastes so that they do not become too concentrated too quickly and deter a cat from using the box. Even if you have many boxes, not all cats will use all boxes. But it's still important to have them, because some cats simply will not go where other cats have gone.

Today kitty litter is available in numerous varieties. Some are environmentally friendly and some are easier to clean up. Litters are made from a number of different materials, including clay, pine shavings and pelleted newspaper. You need to determine which factors are important to you when choosing litter and then hope your cat feels the same way. Factors for you to consider are cost, presence of deodorizers, size of packaging, ease of scooping, ease of disposal, biodegradability and litter tracking outside of the box. The factors your cat will consider are size and softness of granules, scent (cats prefer no scent) and cleanliness. When given a choice, most cats prefer clumping litter. The benefits of clumping litter are that urine and feces can be easily removed from the box every day. The texture is similar to outdoor sand or dirt, which is what cats are naturally attracted to. If your cat has a urinary tract problem and you are trying to monitor the amount and the frequency of urination, clumps are easy to evaluate. There is no scientific evidence to prove that clumping litters specifically create any health problems in cats. However, clay, clumping and other litters that produce dust have been shown to increase irritation in the airways of cats affected by respiratory diseases.

Cats like to have a minimum of one inch of litter in their boxes, and most like even more. If the litter level drops and you are not ready to empty the box (for example, if you use clumping litter), simply add more litter.

Litter boxes should be scooped at least once a day. More often is even better. Depending on the type of litter used, the box should be completely emptied, cleaned and refilled every one to two weeks. We like using clean bathrooms, and so do our cats. Plastic liners are frequently used to help make box emptying and cleaning easier, but some cats do not like liners. Again, you'll have to follow your cat's preferences.

Empty boxes should be washed with soap and water or white vinegar and water. Products containing ammonia should not be used to

clean litter boxes because urine contains ammonia and cleaning that way will simply intensify the odor.

KEEPING CATS INDOORS KEEPS THEM HEALTHIER

Housing cats exclusively indoors is the best way to keep them safe. The average expected life span of an indoor cat is 13 to 15 years, while outdoor cats may live only five to seven years. Unfortunately, cats are fascinated by the outdoors and some try to sneak out at any opportunity. Some cats like to just bathe outdoors in the sun; others like to hunt and visit neighbors. Once a cat has had a taste of living outdoors, it is harder to keep her inside, but it is possible if you are determined.

Giving cats inside window perches and plenty of interactive play-times will help keep them stimulated and eliminate the need for them to go outside. If you want to let a cat out, but at the same time protect her, you can build an outdoor enclosure that is securely screened to keep her in and to keep danger out. You might also consider training her to walk on a leash or personally supervising her outdoors for short periods of time.

Dangers cats face when they venture outdoors include cars, wild animals, territorial cats, unfamiliar dogs, unkind neighbors, bad weather, fleas and ticks, more risk of exposure to toxins and disease and getting lost. Where I practice in Southern California, the most common cause of death to outdoor cats is coyote attacks. If you are prepared to

SAFE TRAVEL

Cats should always be transported inside a carrier when you travel anywhere with them. Although the cat may cry and scratch in the carrier, it is for her own good as well as yours. You may feel like you have good control of the cat when you are carrying her, but if she's startled, her claws digging into your arms may cause you to release her. There is also danger if you are driving in your car and the cat is not in a carrier. If you slam on the brakes and the cat goes flying, she could end up under your feet or be injured. She might also decide to walk in front of your face or under the brake pedal while you are driving.



8 Guide to a Healthy Cat

take these risks with your cat, then let her go outside. If you are not, then protect your cat by keeping her inside.

If you allow your cat any access at all to the outdoors, it is important to get the cat on a routine where she comes inside from dusk to dawn to limit her exposure to the increased dangers of the night. It is also crucial to place some kind of identification on her such as a collar, tag, microchip, ear tag, tattoo or a combination of these. Nationwide, only 2 percent of the cats picked up by animal control agencies are ever reclaimed by their owners. Without identification these cats are considered strays. Unfortunately, most unclaimed cats face death. If you are concerned about the safety of a collar, breakaway styles are available and work well.

