



## **The King George Animal Rescue League's Guide to Adopting a Cat**

### **KGARL's Mission**

Educate both adults and youth in the proper care of pets  
Raise funds to provide better lives for the homeless animals of King George  
Promote adoption, spaying/neutering and complete vaccination programs

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# Before you bring a cat home

## *What to Consider Before Adopting a Pet*

It can happen to the best of us. You see a cute, tiger-striped kitten with white paws and green eyes, just begging for attention. Or maybe it's a gorgeous Labrador mix whose tails seems to be wagging just for you. You take one look, and the next thing you know, you're walking down the pet food aisle at the supermarket.

If you're like most of us, falling in love with a pet is easy. And no wonder! Sharing your home with a four-legged friend can be one of life's greatest joys. Dogs, cats, and other pets give us unconditional loyalty and acceptance, provide constant companionship, and even help relieve stress after a hard day's work.

Adopting a pet, though, is a big decision. Dogs and cats require lots of time, money, and commitment—over 15 years' worth in many cases. Pet ownership can be rewarding, but only if you think through your decision *before* you adopt a companion.

### Things to Consider

The fact that you're thinking about adopting from an animal shelter means you're a responsible and caring person. But *before* you make that decision to bring a furry friend into your life, take a moment to think over these questions:

- **Why do you want a pet?** It's amazing how many people fail to ask themselves this simple question *before* they get a pet. Adopting a pet just because it's "the thing to do" or because the kids have been pining for a puppy usually ends up being a big mistake. Don't forget that pets may be with you 10, 15, even 20 years.
- **Do you have time for a pet?** Dogs, cats, and other animal companions cannot be ignored just because you're tired or busy. They require food, water, exercise, care, and companionship every day of every year. Many animals in the shelter are there because their owners didn't realize how much time it took to care for them.
- **Can you afford a pet?** The costs of pet ownership can be quite high. Licenses, training classes, spaying and neutering, veterinary care, grooming, toys, food, kitty litter, and other expenses add up quickly.
- **Are you prepared to deal with special problems that a pet can cause?** Flea infestations, scratched-up furniture, accidents from animals who aren't yet housetrained, and unexpected medical emergencies are unfortunate but common aspects of pet ownership.
- **Can you have a pet where you live?** Many rental communities don't allow pets, and most of the rest have restrictions. Make sure you know what they are *before* you bring a companion animal home.
- **Is it a good time for you to adopt a pet?** If you have kids under six years old, for instance, you might consider waiting a few years before you adopt a companion. Pet ownership requires children who are mature enough to be responsible. If you're a student, in the military, or travel frequently as part of your work, waiting until you settle down is wise.
- **Are your living arrangements suitable for the animal you have in mind?** Animal size is not the only variable to think about here. For example, some small dogs such as terriers are very active—they require a great deal of exercise to be calm, and they often bark at any noise. On the other hand, some big dogs are laid back and quite content to lie on a couch all day. Before adopting a pet, do some research. That way, you'll ensure you choose an animal who will fit into your lifestyle and your living arrangements.

- **Do you know who will care for your pet while you're away on vacation?** You'll need either reliable friends and neighbors or money to pay for a boarding kennel or pet-sitting service.
- **Will you be a responsible pet owner?** Having your pet spayed or neutered, obeying community leash and licensing laws, and keeping identification tags on your pets are all part of being a responsible owner. Of course, giving your pet love, companionship, exercise, a healthy diet, and regular veterinary care are other essentials.
- **Finally, are you prepared to keep and care for the pet for his or her entire lifetime?** When you adopt a pet, you are making a commitment to care for the animal for his or her lifetime.

### **Get an Animal for Life**

Sure, it's a long list of questions. But a quick stroll through an animal shelter will help you understand why answering them *before* you adopt is so important.

Many of the shelter's homeless animals are puppies and kittens, victims of irresponsible people who allowed their pets to breed. But there are at least as many dogs and cats at the shelter who are more than a year old—animals who were obtained by people who didn't think through the responsibilities of pet ownership before they got the animal.

Please, don't make the same mistake. Think *before* you adopt. Sharing your life with a companion animal can bring incredible rewards, but only if you're willing to make the necessary commitments of time, money, responsibility, and love—for the life of the pet.

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## ***Choosing the Right Cat***

You may have heard the saying, "You own a dog, you feed a cat." It's true that cats value their independence a bit more than their canine counterparts. But if you've ever been around cats, you already know they crave and require love and companionship.

Cats make wonderful pets and most will easily adjust to a variety of lifestyles and living spaces. Every cat is a true individual, though, so it's important to take the time to choose a four-footed friend who's right for you. A cat's personality, age, and appearance, as well as the kinds of pets you already have at home, are all things you should keep in mind when making your selection.

### **Choose a Personality**

Stroll past a few cat cages at the shelter, and you'll notice that some cats meow for special attention, while others simply lie back and gaze at you with an air of superiority. There are as many different personalities of cats as there are cats in the shelter. Which disposition is best for you? *You* have to decide.

But regardless of individual personality, look for a cat who's playful, active, alert, and comfortable while being held and stroked. At the shelter, ask an adoption counselor for assistance when you wish to spend some time with individual cats. Keep in mind that, because they are in an unfamiliar environment, some cats who are usually quite social may be frightened or passive while at the shelter.

### **Kitten or Cat?**

As a general rule, kittens are curious, playful, and full of energy, while adult cats are more relaxed and less mischievous. Kittens also require more time to train and feed. Cats are only kittens for a few months, though, so the age of the cat you adopt should really depend on the level of maturity you're looking for. Young children usually don't have the maturity to handle kittens responsibly, so a cat who's at least four months old is probably the best choice for homes with young children.

### **Short-haired or Long?**

Cats can have long, fluffy coats or short, dense fur, and the choice between the two is chiefly a matter of preference, availability, and your willingness to devote time to regular grooming. You'll see more short-haired cats at the shelter since they're the most popular and common cats. Keep in mind that long-haired cats require frequent grooming to be mat-free. Felines with short coats also require brushing, though less frequently. Most cats enjoy a regular brushing and will look forward to this daily ritual with you.

### **Room for One More**

If you already own a cat or dog, you're probably wondering how easy it is to add a cat to the family. The good news is that cats can get along with other cats and—despite the common stereotype—most dogs can get along with cats. The bad news is, introducing a new cat to a home with other pets will require some patience on your part.

The best way to handle adding a new cat to the home is to provide time for a period of adjustment. You can do this effectively by isolating your new feline in a room of his own for a while—something that's a good idea for a new cat anyway.

After several days, supervise meetings between the animals for periods of increasing length. Most cats will soon learn to accept each other, and some may quite possibly become the best of buddies. Some dogs simply won't tolerate the presence of a cat, but by carefully introducing them, most problems can be solved.

### **Be Responsible!**

Regardless of the cat you choose, you'll want to start being a responsible pet owner right away. The easiest way to do that is to keep your cat indoors with you from the very beginning. If you don't let your new friend outside, he'll never miss it, and will have a much better chance of still being around to sit on your lap a few years from now.

The other big staple of responsible cat ownership is having your female cat spayed or your male cat neutered. Spaying or neutering will ensure that your cat never adds to the millions of animals born each year who never find a good home. It'll also help him or her live a longer, healthier life.

### **Adopt a Cat for Life**

Finally, remember that you're making a commitment to love and care for your new pet for his or her lifetime—which could mean 10, 15, even 20 years. So choose your new pal carefully and be a responsible pet owner. In no time at all, you'll know how wonderful sharing your home with a cat can be.

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## ***Supplies That Every Cat Household Needs***

Outfitting a house for a new cat isn't nearly as complicated as it may seem. Just a little advance thought will help make the newcomer feel at home and welcome in strange new surroundings.

Every cat household needs the following:

**Litter box and litter.** The litter box, or pan, should be shallow enough for the cat to jump into easily, but the sides should be high enough to contain scattered litter as the cat scratches in it. Commercially sold plastic litter boxes are excellent. Some have high-domed lids on them to keep flung litter from spreading throughout the house.

You probably won't have to worry about training your cat to use the litter box, but you will need to show your cat where to find it. Cats are fastidious and have a keen sense of smell. It is important to clean the pan daily.

Never place a litter box close to where the cat is fed, because cats believe these two duties are quite separate, and they will choose to do one or the other elsewhere. Many people put the litter box in the bathroom, away from high-traffic areas.

**Cat dishes.** Each cat should have his or her own food and water dishes. These must be shallow; cats like to keep their faces and whiskers clean while they eat.

**Grooming tools.** Although cats groom themselves, they generally love to be brushed and combed. Long-haired cats must be brushed daily to prevent their hair from matting. Even short-haired cats enjoy the attention and the stimulation of being personally attended to. Use a daily brushing ritual to keep an eye on your cat's overall health and on skin and coat conditions. Some rubber brushes have special teeth that dig down and remove loose dander and dead skin cells. Metal, fine-toothed combs are designed to extract fleas from the coat.

**Nail clippers.** You also can use human-nail clippers. Read our tips for trimming your cat's claws (see link below) and, if you have trouble convincing your companion to cooperate, ask your veterinarian or groomer for additional advice or a demonstration.

**A scratching post.** Cats can be easily trained to scratch on a scratching post instead of the sofa arm or mahogany table leg. The scratching post should be untipable and covered in sisal rope or the webbed reverse side of carpet (a fireplace log is also a good alternative). Do not cover the post with the same kind of fabric that you are trying to protect in your home—upholstery or carpeting. That will only confuse your cat.

**An inviting bed.** Cats will sleep where they want to, which is usually with you. If you do not want your cat in bed with you at night, you must provide a more appealing option, such as a soft pillow or an inviting old comforter. Anything soft and warm, especially if it has your scent on it, can attract your cat. But let your cat discover it; a cat who is forced to lie down on a restricted spot will summarily reject that spot. And consider rethinking your policy against animals in bed. A purring companion at your feet is a better sleeping aid than anything you can find in a drugstore.

**Toys.** Many common household items make great cat toys. Ping-Pong balls are fun to chase. Or you can make a "mouse house" by cutting a hole in the bottom and the side of a paper bag; flick a wad of paper inside the bag and watch your cat ingeniously fish it out.

Avoid string, ribbon, or rolls of yarn. Cats' barbed tongues make it difficult for them to spit anything out once they begin to swallow it. Besides the potential for choking, string can cause serious problems if ingested.

When buying commercial cat toys, pick one that you could give to an infant. There should be no parts that can come off and be swallowed. Keep small children's toys away from cats. Contrary to the myth that cats only eat what's good for them, toy soldiers have found their way into cats' digestive tracts.

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## Settling In

### *Bringing Your New Cat Home*

Congratulations! You are the proud new owner of a cat. No doubt you're looking forward to years of happy companionship. But what do you do now?

The first thing you should know about your new pet is that most cats hate to travel. After the ride home from the animal shelter, he will, most likely, not be in the mood for fun. For the trip home, confine your pet in a sturdy cat carrier. Don't leave him loose in your car where he might panic and cause an accident.

To make his transition to your household as comfortable as possible, select a quiet, closed-in area such as your bedroom or a small room away from the main foot traffic, and provide him with a litter box. Let your new pet become acquainted with that limited area for the first few days. Let him sniff all your belongings and investigate all the hiding places. Over a few days, slowly introduce him to the rest of your house, including the other pets and household members. It will take a little while, but he will eventually begin to feel at home.

Cats vary in terms of how demanding they are as pets, so let yours guide you to the level of attention he wants, whether it's your hand for petting or your lap for sitting. Provide him with the necessary creature comforts and give him the companionship he seeks, and he will be content.

The following is a mini-primer of cats' requirements for a happy life:

**Cleanliness.** Your new cat will prize a clean environment and a clean body. Cats are naturally fastidious and most will instinctively use a litter box; for some, you may need to place the cat in the box and make little scratching motions with their front paws so they get the idea. Many place such a premium on cleanliness that you should clean the box daily or several times a week. Cats also value privacy, so place the litter box in a convenient but secluded spot.

Most cats will spend hours grooming themselves, but even the most avid groomer can use a little help from time to time. Nail clipping and ear and teeth cleaning are tasks you can do to keep your cat well groomed. Even short-haired cats benefit from weekly brushing, a task that can be pleasurable for both of you.

**Security.** Provide your cat with safety and security. Always use a cat carrier when transporting your pet. Protect him by making certain that all windows are securely screened, and that the washer and dryer are kept closed and are inspected before each use. Get into the habit of ensuring that drawers, closets, and cupboards are uninhabited before you close them. And for your own security, put a collar and tag on your feline—there's always the chance he may slip outside by mistake, and you want to make sure he can be identified as your pet.

**Health Care.** Animal shelters take in animals with widely varying backgrounds, some of whom have not been previously vaccinated. Despite the best efforts of shelter workers, viruses can spread and may occasionally go home with adopted animals. If you already have dogs or cats at home, make sure they are up-to-date on their shots—including feline leukemia—and in good general health before introducing your new cat.

Take your new cat to the veterinarian within a week after adoption. There, he will receive a health check and any needed vaccinations. If your cat has not been spayed or neutered, make that appointment! There are already far too many unwanted kittens and cats; don't let your new pet add to the problem. Most likely, the shelter will require that you have your pet spayed or neutered anyway. If you need more information about why it is important to spay or neuter your cat, read our online information on spaying and neutering.

**House Rules.** Provide your cat with some "basic training" to help him get along in your home. It's true that cats usually have their own ideas about how to do things. Even so, most cats can be taught to obey simple rules like not scratching the couch, eating plants, or jumping up on the kitchen counter. With repeated, gentle, and consistent training, your cat will learn.

Yelling at your cat never works. Instead, positively reward him and provide him with alternative choices. A good scratching post—coupled with the handy squirt gun filled with water—can save your couch, your chair, and your nerves. If you help your cat understand the rules and give him a satisfying outlet for his scratching impulses, there will be no need to have him declawed, an unnecessary operation *no* cat should endure.

**Room for Fun.** Finally, provide your cat with an interesting indoor environment. Cats love to play and will appreciate simple and inexpensive toys. Ping-Pong balls and paper bags can provide hours of fun. A comfortable perch by a window can become your cat's very own entertainment and relaxation center.

Toys are very important for cats. They not only fight boredom, they also give cats a chance to express their prey-chasing drives. If you're the one moving the toy while your cat chases after it, playtime can be a bonding experience for both of you.

**Enjoy Your Rewards.** Now that you've made certain all the basic provisions are attended to, you can relax and enjoy your new pet. It may take a couple of weeks for him to adjust to life with you. But before you know it, you'll be curled up on the couch together, watching TV like old pals, and you won't remember what life was like without him.

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## ***Introducing Pets to a New Cat***

Wouldn't it be nice if all it took to introduce a new cat to your resident pet were a brief handshake and a couple of "HELLO, My Name Is..." nametags? Unfortunately, it's not quite that simple, which means you'll need to have some realistic expectations from the outset. What are realistic expectations? First, it's recognizing and accepting that your pets may never be best buddies but will usually come to at least tolerate each other. Second, it's understanding the need to move *slowly* during the introduction process to increase your chances for success.

Of course, some cats are more social than other cats. For example, an eight-year-old cat who has never been around other animals may never learn to share her territory (and her people) with other pets in the household. But an eight-week-old kitten separated from her mom and littermates for the first time might be glad to have a cat or dog companion.

Cats are territorial, and they need to be introduced to other animals very slowly so they can get used to each other before a face-to-face confrontation. Slow introductions help prevent fearful and aggressive problems from developing. Here are some guidelines to help make the introductions go smoothly:

### **Confinement**

Confine your new cat to one medium-sized room with her litter box, food, water, and a bed. Feed your resident pets and the newcomer on each side of the door to this room, so that they associate something enjoyable (eating!) with each other's smells. Don't put the food so close to the door that the animals are too upset by each other's presence to eat. Gradually move the dishes closer to the door until your pets can eat calmly while standing directly on either side of the door.

### **The Old Switcheroo**

Swap the sleeping blankets or beds used by the cats so they each have a chance to become accustomed to the other's scent. You can even rub a towel on one animal and put it underneath the food dish of another animal. If there are more than two animals in the house, do the same for each animal.

Once your new cat is using her litter box and eating regularly while confined, let her have free time in the house while confining your other animals to the new cat's room. This switch provides another way for the animals to experience each other's scents without a face-to-face meeting. It also allows the newcomer to become familiar with her new surroundings without being frightened by the other animals.

Next, after the animals have been returned to their original designated parts of the house, use two doorstops to prop open the dividing door just enough to allow the animals to see each other, and repeat the whole process over a period of days—supervised, of course.

### **Slow and Steady Wins the Race**

Avoid any interactions between your pets that result in either fearful or aggressive behavior. If these responses are allowed to become a habit, they can be difficult to change. It's better to introduce your pets to each other so gradually that neither animal becomes afraid or aggressive. You can expect a mild protest from either cat from time to time, but don't allow these behaviors to intensify. If either animal becomes fearful or aggressive, separate them, and start the introduction process once again with a series of very small, gradual steps, as outlined above.

PLEASE NOTE: When you introduce pets to each other, one of them may send "play" signals which can be misinterpreted by the other pet as signs of aggression. If that's the case, always handle the situation as "aggression" and seek professional help from a veterinarian or animal behaviorist right away.

## **Precautionary Measures**

If one of your pets has a medical problem or is injured, the introduction process might be stalled a bit. Check with your veterinarian to be sure all your pets are healthy. You'll also want to have at least one litter box per cat, and you'll probably need to clean all of the litter boxes more frequently. Make sure that none of the cats is being "ambushed" by another while trying to use the litter box, and be sure each cat has a safe hiding place.

Try to keep your resident pets' schedule close to what it was before the newcomer's arrival. Cats can make a lot of noise, pull each other's hair, and roll around quite dramatically without any injuries. If small spats do occur between your cats, you shouldn't attempt to intervene directly to separate the cats. Instead, make a loud noise, throw a pillow, or use a squirt bottle with water and vinegar to separate the cats. Give them a chance to calm down before re-introducing them to each other.

## **Cat-to-Dog Introductions**

You'll need to be even more careful when introducing a dog and a cat to one another. A dog can seriously injure and even kill a cat very easily, even if they're only playing—all it takes is one quick shake to break the cat's neck. Some dogs have such a high prey drive they should never be left alone with a cat. Dogs usually want to chase and play with cats, and cats usually become afraid and defensive. Use the techniques described above to begin introducing your new cat to your resident dog. In addition:

### *Practice Obedience*

If your dog doesn't already know the commands "sit," "down," "come," and "stay," begin working on them right away. Small pieces of food will increase your dog's motivation to perform, which will be necessary in the presence of a strong distraction such as a new cat. Even if your dog already knows these commands, work to reinforce these commands in return for a tidbit.

### *Controlled Meeting*

After your new cat and resident dog have become comfortable eating on opposite sides of the door and have been exposed to each other's scents as described above, you can attempt a face-to-face introduction in a controlled manner. Put your dog's leash on and have him either sit or lie down and stay for treats. Ask another family member or friend to enter the room and quietly sit down next to your new cat, but don't ask them to physically restrain her. Have this person offer your cat some special pieces of food. At first, the cat and the dog should be on opposite sides of the room. Lots of short visits are better than a few long visits. Don't drag out the visit so long that the dog becomes uncontrollable. Repeat this step several times until both the cat and dog are tolerating each other's presence without fear, aggression, or other undesirable behavior.

### *Let Your Cat Go*

Next, allow your cat some freedom to explore your dog at her own pace, with the dog still on-leash and in a "down-stay." Meanwhile, keep giving your dog treats and praise for his calm behavior. If your dog gets up from his "stay" position, he should be repositioned with a treat lure, and praised and rewarded

for obeying the "stay" command. If your cat runs away or becomes aggressive, you're progressing too fast. Go back to the previous introduction steps.

### *Positive Reinforcement*

Although your dog must be taught that chasing or being rough with your cat is unacceptable behavior, he must also be taught just what is appropriate, and be rewarded for those behaviors, such as sitting, coming when called, or lying down in return for a treat. If your dog is always punished when your cat is around, and never has "good things" happen in the cat's presence, your dog may redirect aggression toward the cat.

### *Directly Supervise All Interactions between Your Dog and Cat*

You may want to keep your dog at your side and on-leash whenever your cat is free in the house during the introduction process. Be sure that your cat has an escape route and a place to hide. And until you're certain your cat will be safe, be sure to keep the two separated when you aren't home.

### *Precautions*

It's no surprise that dogs like to eat cat food, so you'll need to keep the cat's food out of your dog's reach (in a closet or on a high shelf). It's not uncommon for dogs to eat cat feces as well, and though there are no real health hazards involved, it's probably distasteful to you and it may upset your cat. Of course, attempts to keep your dog out of the litter box by "booby trapping" it will also keep your cat away as well. Punishment after the fact will not change your dog's behavior. The best solution is to place the litter box where your dog can't access it, for example: behind a baby gate; in a closet with the door propped open just wide enough for your cat; or inside a tall, topless cardboard box with easy access for your cat.

### *Kittens and Puppies*

Because they're so much smaller, kittens are in more danger of being injured or killed by a young energetic dog, or by a predatory dog. A kitten will need to be kept separate from an especially energetic dog until she is fully grown, except for periods of supervised interaction to enable the animals to get to know each other.

Even after the cat is fully grown, she may not be able to be safely left alone with the dog. Usually, a well-socialized cat will be able to keep a puppy in his place, but some cats don't have enough confidence to do this. If you have an especially shy cat, you might need to keep her separated from your puppy until he matures enough to have more self-control.

### **When to Get Help**

If introductions don't go smoothly, seek professional advice immediately from a veterinarian or animal behaviorist. Animals can be severely injured in fights, and the longer the problem continues, the harder it can be to resolve. Punishment won't work, though, and could make things worse. Luckily, most conflicts between pets in the same family can often be resolved with professional guidance.

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## ***Your Cat—Indoors or Out***

Ever wonder what goes on behind closed doors? Healthy, safe cats live out their entire lives, for one thing. If you want your cat to live to a ripe old age, the best thing you can do for her is keep her inside. Allowing your cat to wander around on her own, without your supervision, makes her susceptible to any of the following life-shortening—and often painful—tragedies:

- Being hit by a car
- Ingesting a deadly poison like antifreeze or a pesticide
- Being trapped by an unhappy neighbor
- Being attacked by a roaming dog, cat, or wild animal
- Contracting a disease from another animal
- Becoming lost and unable to find her way home
- Being stolen
- Encountering an adult or child with cruel intentions

Some people believe there are good reasons to allow their cat to be outdoors without their supervision, so we've included a number of these objections along with our comments and suggestions.

### **"But I have a six-foot fence."**

Unless you have special fencing that's designed to prevent a cat from climbing out, your cat will be able to scale your fence and escape the confines of your yard. If you do have special fencing, make sure that it can keep other cats or animals from getting into your yard to injure your cat. Some companies manufacturer ready-made cat fences and backyard enclosures.

### **"But my last cat went outdoors and he loved it."**

Your cat may enjoy being outdoors, but by allowing him to go outside unsupervised, you're putting him at risk for a shortened life span. The expected life span of an indoor-outdoor cat will depend on several factors, including the type of neighborhood you live in and sheer luck. But, on average, cats who are allowed to roam outdoors often don't live to see age five. Cats who are always kept safely confined can live to be 18 to 20 years old.

### **"But my cat's litter box smells."**

Scoop your cat's litter box on a daily basis. How often you actually replace (change) the litter depends on the number of cats in your home, the number of litter boxes, and the type of litter you use. Twice a week is a general guideline for clay litter, but depending on the circumstances, you may need to change it every other day or once a week. Wash the litter box with soap and water every time you change the litter; the use of strong-smelling chemicals and cleansers may cause your cat to avoid the box.

### **"But my cat likes to sun herself."**

Your cat can safely sun herself indoors by lying near a window. If you're really intent on letting your cat outdoors, put her on a harness and leash and stay with her while she's taking in the rays.

### **"But I can't keep him in."**

Keep your windows closed or install screens. Remember to always keep your doors closed and teach your children the importance of keeping the doors closed, too. It may take a few days or a few weeks,

but if there are enough interesting things for your cat to play with indoors, he'll come to enjoy being indoors. Be sure to provide him with a scratching post and safe toys to bat or carry around.

**"But we've always let her out."**

You can change your cat's behavior. It will take time and patience, but it might save her life. When you implement your "closed door" policy, give her a lot of extra attention and entertainment. At first she may cry, but don't give in—more often than not, she'll soon be happy to stay indoors with you.

**"But my cat knows to avoid cars."**

Even if this were true, all it would take is another cat, a dog, or a shiny object to lure your cat into the street and into the path of traffic. Also keep in mind that not everyone will swerve to miss a cat in the road.

**"But my cat needs exercise and likes to play with other cats."**

Stray cats could spread viruses such as feline leukemia and other fatal diseases. If your cat needs a friend, adopt another cat who's healthy and disease-free. Cats kept safely confined *do* need extra attention and exercise inside, so be sure to play with your cats regularly using a variety of toys and chase games.

**"But my cat yowls and acts like he really needs to go outside."**

Your cat may be feeling the physiological need to mate. If this is the case, make sure your cat is spayed or neutered. Sterilized cats don't have the natural need to breed, and therefore, won't be anxious to go out to find a mate.

Transforming a cat who is allowed roam freely outside into a safe cat will take time, effort, and patience; some cats will adapt more quickly than others. And many cat owners report that keeping cats inside actually fosters the bond between feline and human. If, despite your best efforts, your cat simply cannot make the transition, then vow to keep your next cat safely confined from the start.

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## ***Keeping Your Cat Happy Indoors***

While many cats enjoy being outside where they can hunt prey and explore their surroundings, it's a myth that going outside is a requirement for feline happiness. Playing regularly with a cat easily satisfies her stalking instinct, keeps her stimulated, and provides the exercise she needs to stay healthy and happy. In fact, the indoor cat who gets lots of attention and playtime is likely happier than the indoor-outdoor cat who is generally ignored by her human companions.

Here are some tips for safely confining your cat and making the great indoors an interesting, feline-friendly environment that meets all of your cat's needs.

- Start young. Kittens who are kept indoors usually show no desire to venture outside when they grow up.
- Provide a screened porch or other safe way for your cat to experience the outdoors. Consider building or purchasing a "cat fence" or similar enclosure. Such an enclosure can allow your cat to experience all the pleasures of the great outdoors without the risks. However, a fence may not prevent animals from entering your yard, so you should always be present when you allow your cat outside. And be sure to cat-proof the yard by checking that the fence has no escape routes and by making toxic plants, garden chemicals, and other dangerous objects inaccessible.
- If you live in a peaceful neighborhood in which you can walk without encountering loose dogs, consider buying a harness and training your cat to walk on a leash. This training takes time and patience, for both you and the cat, and it's easiest when your cat is young. Some cats can even be trained to sit on your lap while you are on the deck or patio, or harnessed and tied to a stationary object to enjoy the outdoors while you are gardening nearby (but be sure to never leave your cat alone while she is tied to a stationary object).
- Install a perch near a sunny window; padded perches can be purchased at many pet supply stores or through catalog retailers. Another option is an enclosure that sits in a window frame (much like an air conditioning unit) and provides a secure space in which your kitty can "hang out." Larger options are available that attach to the side of a house or ground-floor apartment patio. It's best to allow your cat access to these when someone is home to supervise.
- Buy a ready-made cat tree (often called a "kitty condo"), or make your own. A cat tree may stretch from floor-to-ceiling or be shorter. It provides great climbing opportunities and, in multi-cat households, creates more play and rest areas by taking advantage of vertical space.
- Play with your cat each day. Try different types of toys that recreate "fishing," "chasing," and "flying" prey. And leave "toys" such as paper bags and cardboard boxes out when you are not home.
- Give your cat a feline friend—they can provide one another with companionship and entertainment.
- Plant cat grass (available from pet supply stores) in indoor pots so your feline can graze.
- Clean the litter box regularly.

Even cats who are protected from roaming free should still be outfitted with a collar and visible identification. The occasional open window (make sure your windows have secure screens) or door offers a tempting opportunity for your cat to explore the outdoors. And your cat may become frightened and make her way outside if strangers come to work on your house or if there is a fire or similar disaster. The collar and visible ID could help someone get your pet back to you. For extra insurance, consider having your cat microchipped. If you do lose your cat, contact your local animal shelter immediately to file a report. Shelter workers can give you tips on getting your pet back home safely. Also read our tips for finding a lost pet.

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## ***Preventing Litter Box Problems***

Most of us know cats are finicky eaters, but they can also be pretty picky when it comes to the other end of the digestive process—making use of a litter box. Fortunately, the following suggestions should keep your cat from "thinking outside the box."

### **Location, Location, Location**

Most people are inclined to place the litter box in an out-of-the-way spot to minimize odor and prevent cat litter from being tracked throughout the house. But if the litter box ends up in the basement—next to an appliance or on a cold cement floor—your cat may be less than pleased, for a number of reasons.

So you may have to compromise. The litter box should be kept in a spot that affords your cat some privacy yet is also conveniently located. If you place the litter box in a closet or a bathroom, be sure the door is wedged open from both sides to prevent her from being trapped inside or locked out. Depending on the location, you might consider cutting a hole in a closet door and adding a pet door.

### **Pick of the Litter**

Research has shown that most cats prefer fine-grained litters, presumably because they have a softer feel. The new scoopable (clumping) litters usually have finer grains than the typical clay litter and are very popular. But high-quality, dust-free, clay litters are relatively small-grained and may be perfectly acceptable to your cat.

If you suspect your cat has spent part of his life outdoors and is likely to eliminate in your houseplants, try mixing some potting soil with your regular litter; pellet-type litters or those made from citrus peels are not recommended. Once you find a litter your cat likes, stick with it. Buying the least expensive litter or the brand that's on sale any given week could result in your cat not using the litter box.

Many cats are put off by the odor of scented or deodorant litters. For the same reason, it's not a good idea to place a room deodorizer or air freshener near the litter box. A thin layer of baking soda placed on the bottom of the box will help absorb odors without repelling your cat, and odors shouldn't really be a problem if you keep the litter box clean. If *you* find the litter box odor offensive, your cat probably finds it even more offensive and won't want to eliminate there.

### **What's the Magic Number?**

You should have at least as many litter boxes as you have cats. That way, none of them will ever be prevented from eliminating in the litter box because it's already occupied. You might also consider placing litter boxes in several locations around the house, so that no one cat can prevent the other cats from getting access. We also recommend that you place at least one litter box on each level of your house.

It's not possible to designate a personal litter box for each cat in your household, as cats may use any litter box that's available, and that means a cat may occasionally refuse to use a litter box after another cat has used it. In this case, all of the litter boxes will need to be kept extremely clean and additional boxes may be needed.

### **An Undercover Operation?**

Some people prefer to provide their cats with a covered litter box, but doing so may introduce some potential problems. To discover which type your cat prefers, you may want to experiment by offering both types at first.

### **Potential Problems of Covered Litter Boxes**

- You may forget to clean the litter box as frequently as you should because the dirty litter is "out of sight, out of mind."
- A covered litter box traps odors inside, so it will need to be cleaned more often than an open one. A dirty, covered litter box is to your cat what a portapotty is to you!
- A covered litter box may not allow a large cat sufficient room to turn around, scratch, dig, or position herself in the way she wants.
- A covered litter box may make it easier for another cat to lay in wait and "ambush" the user as she exits the box; on the other hand, a covered litter box may feel more private, and timid cats may even prefer it.

### **Keeping It Clean**

To meet the needs of the most discriminating cat, feces should be scooped out of the litter box daily. How often you actually change (replace) the litter depends on the number of cats you have, the number of litter boxes, and the type of litter you use. Twice a week is a general guideline for clay litter, but depending on the circumstances, you may need to replace it every other day or only once a week. If you clean the litter box daily, scoopable litter may only need to be changed every two to three weeks. If you notice an odor or if much of the litter is wet or clumped, it's time for a change. Don't use strong smelling chemicals or cleaning products when washing the litter box, as doing so may cause your cat to avoid the box. Some cleaning products are toxic to cats. Washing with soap and water should be sufficient.

### **Liner Notes**

Some cats don't mind having a plastic liner in the litter box, while others do. Again, you may want to experiment to see if your cat is bothered by a liner in the box. If you do use a liner, make sure it's anchored in place, so it can't easily catch your cat's claws or be pulled out of place.

### **Depth of Litter**

Some people think that the more litter they put in the box, the less often they will have to clean it, but that's a mistake. Most cats won't use litter that's more than about two inches deep. In fact, some long-haired cats actually prefer less litter and a smooth, slick surface, such as the bottom of the litter box. The fact is the litter box needs to be cleaned on a regular basis, and adding extra litter is not a way around that chore.

### **"Litter-Training" Cats**

There's really no such thing as "litter-training" a cat in the same way one would housetrain a dog. A cat doesn't need to be taught what to do with a litter box because instinct will generally take over. The only thing you need to do is provide an acceptable, accessible litter box, using the suggestions above. It's not necessary to take your cat to the litter box and move her paws back and forth in the litter; in fact, we don't recommend it, as such an unpleasant experience is likely to initiate a negative association with the litter box.

### **If Problems Develop**

If your cat begins to eliminate in areas other than the litter box, your first call should always be to your veterinarian. Many medical conditions can cause a change in a cat's litter box habits. If your veterinarian determines that your cat is healthy, the cause may be a simple behavior problem that can be resolved by using behavior modification techniques. Punishment is not the answer, nor is banishing your cat outdoors. For long-standing or complex situations, contact an animal behavior specialist who has experience working with cats.

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# Cat Behavior

## *Communicating with Your Cat*

You and your cat may speak different languages, but that doesn't mean that you can't communicate with each other. While every cat is different, there is a common code of expression—a set of signals—that you can learn to read easily. Indicators such as the look in your cat's eyes, the tone of her voice, the position of her ears, and the motion of her tail can provide important clues regarding your companion's feelings and intentions.

For starters, you can talk to your cat. Some people feel silly speaking to cats, because they think animals can't understand them. Yet these same people may feel comfortable carrying on long one-sided conversations with infants. Cats do receive information from your conversation: praise, comfort, and a sense of security.

You can get information, too. The more cats are spoken to, the more they will speak back. You will learn a lot from your cat's wide vocabulary of chirps and meows. You will know when it is time to get up (at least in your cat's opinion), when your cat is feeling affectionate, or when your cat is feeling threatened or is in pain. Your cat doesn't necessarily have something urgent to tell you; a passing meow in the hallway may be a simple hello.

You can also tell a great deal about what cats want or how they are feeling simply by the look in their eyes or their reaction to things. Are your cat's ears twitching in your direction like satellite dishes when you are speaking? He is absorbing everything you are saying. Does your cat's back rise up to meet your hand when you pet him? This means your cat is enjoying this contact with you. Does his back seem to collapse away under your slightest touch? Your cat is on his way somewhere and doesn't want to be held up, even by a favorite person.

If your cat crouches low to the ground, he is feeling uneasy. If your cat stands on his toes, you are probably being asked to pick up your cat. Raised hair on the back and a puffed-out tail are universal signs of hostility or defensiveness. But how about a quivering tail? That is the greatest expression of adoration any cat can bestow upon a human. But a thrashing tail shows the mood has shifted to intense agitation.

Most kittens are eager to learn how to please you. You can easily correct behavior in a young cat with a gentle but firm tone and a demonstration of the proper way to do things. Praise your kitten when you point out the litter box and scratching post.

Depending upon how happy and peaceful their former lives were, older cats may be a little more difficult to teach, but they are well worth the effort. Patience and kindness should help maintain most ground rules. Hitting your pet is cruel and accomplishes nothing—it will only teach your cat to be afraid of you. A good discipline tool is a spray bottle filled with water. Catch the cat in the act of scratching the sofa or jumping on the sink and spritz the culprit with a gentle spray of water. (Your cat will associate the behavior with the unpleasant experience of water, but will not associate you with the unpleasant experience.) Then be sure to offer your cat an acceptable outlet for his behavior, and praise him when he does the right thing.

Cats are not spiteful creatures—that's one of their most admirable qualities. Contrary to popular assumption, a cat who has a lapse in remembering ground rules or stops using the litter box is *not* trying to get even with or punish her owner. Your cat may be feeling out of balance, and these signs should alert you that your cat may be unwell or that something else is amiss. There probably is a good reason for this behavior, and it's up to you to figure out what it is.

A cat who stops using the litter box, for example, may be getting a bladder infection. Cats will associate the litter pan with the pain they feel upon urinating and avoid using the litter, or the cat may not like the brand of litter you've started using, or the cat may not feel comfortable using the box where it is kept. Other things that may disturb your cat may have to do with your behavior: Have you changed your routine or are you under stress or feeling sad? Cats' behavior may alter with any alteration in their routine or environment, such as a new cat or a new home. If abnormal behavior persists, have your veterinarian check your cat for any medical problems. If no medical problems exist, your veterinarian may suggest an animal behavior specialist.

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## ***Kitten's Rough Play***

If playing with your kitten evolves from peek-a-boo to professional wrestling in a matter of seconds, follow these tips to keep playtime interesting and reduce the number of trips to the first-aid kit. Cats incorporate a variety of behaviors into their play, such as exploratory, investigative, and predatory behaviors—skills they would normally need for survival. As you've probably already learned, kittens like to explore new areas and investigate anything that moves, and may bat at, pounce on, and bite objects that resemble prey. It's not always easy for cats to draw the line between acceptable play and overly aggressive behavior, so play-motivated, aggressive behaviors are common in young, active cats less than two years of age, and in cats who live in one-cat households.

Kittens learn how to inhibit their bite from their littermates and their mother. A kitten who is separated from her family too early may play more roughly than a kitten who has had more valuable family time. In addition, if humans play with a young kitten using their hands and/or feet instead of toys, the kitten is liable to learn that rough play with people is okay. In most cases, it's not too difficult to teach your kitten or young adult cat that rough play isn't acceptable. Here are some tips:

### **Encourage Acceptable Behavior**

Redirect your kitten's aggressive behavior onto acceptable objects like toys. Drag a toy along the floor to encourage your kitten to pounce on it, or throw a toy away from your kitten to give her even more exercise chasing the toy down. Some kittens will even bring the toy back to be thrown again. You can also try toys that your kitten can wrestle with, like a soft stuffed animal that's about her size, so she can grab it with both front feet, bite it, and kick it with her back feet. This is one of the ways kittens play with each other, especially when they're young. It's also one of the ways they try to play with human feet and hands, so it's important to provide this type of alternative play target. Encourage play with a "wrestling toy" by rubbing it against your kitten's belly when she wants to play roughly—and be sure to get your hand out of the way as soon as she accepts the toy.

Because kittens need a lot of playtime, try to set up three or four consistent times during the day to initiate play with your kitten. This will help her understand that she doesn't have to be the one to initiate play by pouncing on you.

### **Discourage Unacceptable Behavior**

You need to set the rules for your kitten's behavior, and every person your cat comes in contact with should reinforce these rules. Your kitten can't be expected to learn that it's okay to play rough with Dad, but not with the baby.

- **Use aversives to discourage your kitten from nipping.** You can either use a squirt bottle filled with water and a small amount of vinegar, or a can of pressurized air to squirt your kitten when she starts getting too rough. To use this technique effectively, you'll need to have the spray bottle or can handy at all times—it's absolutely essential to use the aversive while the rough behavior is occurring. So either place a spray bottle in each room, or carry one with you as you move around the house. In some cases, you may want to apply taste aversives to your hands. If you have sensitive skin, you can wear gloves and put the aversive on the gloves. The possible disadvantage to this method is that your kitten may learn that "hands with gloves taste bad and those without gloves don't." Remember that aversives will work only if you offer your kitten acceptable alternatives.
- **Redirect the behavior after using the aversive.** After you startle your kitten with the aversive, immediately offer her a toy to wrestle with or chase. This will encourage her to direct her rough

play onto a toy instead of a person. We recommend keeping a stash of toys hidden in each room specifically for this purpose.

- **Withdraw attention when your kitten starts to play too roughly.** If the distraction and redirection techniques don't seem to be working, the most drastic thing you can do to discourage your cat from rough play is to withdraw all attention. She wants to play with you, so if you keep this limit consistent, she'll eventually figure out how far she can go. The best way to withdraw your attention is to walk to another room and close the door long enough for her to calm down. If you pick her up to put her in another room, then you're rewarding her by touching her, so you should always be the one to leave the room.

*Please Note:* None of these methods will be very effective unless you also give your kitten acceptable outlets for her energy—by playing with her regularly using appropriate toys.

### **What *Not* to Do**

- Attempts to tap, flick, or hit your kitten for rough play are almost guaranteed to backfire. Your kitten could become afraid of your hands, or she could interpret those flicks as playful moves by you and play even more roughly as a result.
- Picking up your kitten to put her into a "timeout" may reinforce her behavior because she probably enjoys the physical contact of being picked up. By the time you get her to the timeout room and close the door, she may have already forgotten what she did to be put in that situation.

*A Note About Aggression:* Don't encourage your playful kitten to bite or scratch any parts of your body. Instead, provide appropriate toys for her to bite and scratch. If she continues to bite or scratch you, call your veterinarian, animal shelter, or behaviorist for humane suggestions on how to redirect her behavior to appropriate objects. Also, be sure to thoroughly clean all bites and scratches and apply an antibiotic ointment. If you receive a bad bite, you should seek medical attention immediately.

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## ***Aggression Between Family Cats***

If the battles between your feline family members are anything like the struggle between Cain and Abel, there are a few things you can do to prevent the "sibling rivalry" from reaching biblical proportions. Of course, it's almost impossible to guess how well any particular pair or group of cats will ultimately tolerate each other; some unusually territorial cats may never adjust to sharing their house, and may do best in a one-cat family. But many aggression problems between cats can be successfully resolved, even if the two don't end up best friends when all is said and done. You'll need to commit time and effort to solve aggression problems between cats, and don't give up without consulting the appropriate experts.

### **Common Types of Aggressive Behaviors between Cats:**

**Territorial Aggression:** Territorial aggression occurs when a cat feels that his territory has been invaded by an intruder. Cats are very territorial—much more so than dogs—and female cats can be just as territorial as males. The behavior patterns in this type of aggression include chasing and ambushing the intruder, as well as hissing and swatting when contact occurs. Territorial problems often occur when a new cat is brought into a household, when a young kitten reaches maturity, or when a cat sees or encounters neighborhood cats outside. It's not uncommon for a cat to be territorially aggressive toward one cat in a family yet friendly and tolerant to another.

**Inter-male Aggression:** Adult male cats normally tend to threaten, and sometimes fight with, other males. These behaviors can occur as sexual challenges over a female, or to achieve a relatively high position in the cats' loosely organized social hierarchy. This type of aggression involves much ritualized body posturing, stalking, staring, yowling, and howling. Attacks are usually avoided if one cat "backs down" and walks away. If an attack occurs, the attacker will usually jump forward, directing a bite to the nape of the neck, while the opponent falls to the ground on his back and attempts to bite and scratch the attacker's belly with his hind legs. The cats may roll around biting and screaming, suddenly stop, resume posturing, fight again, or walk away. Cats don't often injure one another this way, but you should always check for puncture wounds, which are prone to infection. Neutered males are much less likely to fight in this way—yet another great argument for having your animal sterilized.

**Defensive Aggression:** Defensive aggression occurs when a cat is attempting to protect himself from an attack he believes he cannot escape. This can occur in response to punishment or the threat of punishment from a person, an attack or attempted attack from another cat, or any incident that makes the animal feel threatened or afraid. Defensive postures include crouching with the legs pulled in under the body, laying the ears back, tucking the tail, and rolling slightly to the side. These responses are not the same as the submissive postures dogs show because they're not intended to "turn off" an attack from another cat. Continuing to approach a cat in this posture is likely to precipitate an attack.

**Redirected Aggression:** This type of aggression is directed toward another animal, or even a person, who didn't initially provoke the behavior. For example, a household cat sitting in the window may see an outdoor cat walk across the front yard. Because he can't attack the outdoor cat, he may instead turn and attack the family cat sitting next to him in the window.

### **What You Can Do**

- If your cat's behavior changes suddenly, your first step should always be to contact your veterinarian for a thorough health examination. Cats often hide symptoms of illness until they're seriously ill, and any change in behavior may be an early indication of a medical problem.
- Spay or neuter any intact pets in your home. The behavior of one intact animal can affect all of your pets.

- Start the slow introduction process over from the beginning. You may want to talk to an animal behavior specialist for help implementing these techniques.
- In extreme cases, consult with your veterinarian about medicating your cats while you're working on a behavior-modification program. Your veterinarian is the only person who is licensed and qualified to prescribe medication for your cat, so don't attempt to give your cat any over-the-counter or prescription medication without some guidance. Animals don't respond to drugs the same way people do, and a medication that may be safe for a human could be fatal to an animal. Also keep in mind that medication, by itself, isn't a permanent solution, and should only be used in conjunction with behavior modification.

### **What *Not* to Do**

- If your cats are fighting, don't allow the fights to continue. Because cats are so territorial, and because they don't establish firm dominance hierarchies, they won't be able to "work things out" as dogs sometimes do. The more often cats fight, the worse the problem is likely to become. To stop a fight in progress, make a loud noise (like blowing a whistle), squirt the cats with water, or throw something soft at them. Don't try to pull them apart.
- Prevent future fights. This may mean keeping the cats totally separated from each other while you're working on the problem, or at least preventing contact between them during situations likely to trigger a fight.
- Don't try to punish the cats involved. Punishment is likely to elicit further aggression and fearful responses, which will only make the problem worse. If you attempt to punish either combatant, you may even become a target for redirected aggression.

Because their social organization is somewhat flexible, some cats are relatively willing to share their house and territory with multiple cats. It's not uncommon for a cat to tolerate some cats, but not get along with others in the house. But the more cats who share the same territory, the more likely it is that some of your cats will begin fighting with each other.

When you introduce cats to each other, one of them may send "play" signals that can be misinterpreted by the other cat. If those signals are interpreted as aggression by one of the cats, then you should handle the situation as "aggression" and seek professional help right away.

There are many factors that determine how well cats will get along with one another, but even animal behavior experts don't fully understand them. What we do know is that cats who are well-socialized (those who had pleasant experiences with other cats during kittenhood) will likely be more sociable than those who haven't been around many other cats. On the other hand, "street cats," who are in the habit of fighting with other cats to defend their territory and food resources, may not do well in a multi-cat household.

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## ***Aggression Towards People***

Cat caregivers sometimes have difficulty understanding why their cats, who seem to be friendly and content one minute, may suddenly bite and scratch them the next. Aggressive behaviors are part of the normal behavioral patterns of almost any animal species. Aggressive cats can be dangerous, so attempting to resolve a chronic cat aggression problem often requires assistance from a professional who is knowledgeable about cat behavior.

### **Types of Aggression**

#### *Play Aggression*

Play-motivated aggressive behaviors are commonly observed in young, active cats less than two years of age, and who live in one-cat households. Play in cats incorporates a variety of behaviors such as exploratory, investigative, and predatory behaviors. Play provides young cats with opportunities to practice skills they would normally need for survival. For example, kittens like to explore new areas and investigate anything that moves. They may bat at, pounce on, and bite objects which to them resemble prey.

Aggressive behaviors can be identified as play based on the type of situations in which they occur, the cats' body postures, and the types of behaviors displayed. Playful aggression often results in scratches and inhibited bites which do not break the skin. Playful attacks often occur when an unsuspecting owner comes down the stairs, steps out of the bathtub, rounds a corner, or even moves under the bedcovers. Play which involves aggression can be initiated by the owner or by the cat. Owners may inadvertently contribute to this problem if they encourage kittens to chase or bite at their hands and feet during play. The body postures seen during play aggression resemble the postures a cat would show when searching for or catching prey. The cat may freeze in a low crouch before pouncing, twitch its tail, flick its ears back and forth, and/or wrap its front feet around a person's hands or feet while biting. Most play aggression can be successfully redirected to appropriate targets. For more information on rough play in cats, please see our online tips about Kitten's Rough Play.

#### *"Don't Pet Me Anymore" Aggression*

It is not uncommon for cats to "suddenly" bite while being petted. This behavior is not well understood, even by experienced animal behaviorists. For whatever reason, petting which the cat was previously enjoying becomes unpleasant. The bite is the cat's signal that she has had enough petting. Cats vary in how much they will tolerate being petted or held. People often describe cats as biting "out of the blue" or without warning; however, their signals may be very subtle and hard to detect. You should become more aware of your cat's body postures and cease petting or stop any other kind of interaction before the bite occurs. Signals to be aware of include:

- Restlessness
- Tail twitching
- Ears turning back or flicking back and forth
- Turning or moving her head toward your hand

When you observe any of these signals, it is time to stop petting the cat immediately and allow him just to sit quietly on your lap or go his own way, whichever he prefers. Any kind of physical punishment almost always makes the problem worse, as it makes the cat more likely to bite either because he is fearful and/or because petting becomes even more unpleasant if it is associated with punishment.

If you want to try to prolong the amount of time your cat will tolerate petting, use some food rewards. Before your cat shows any of the behaviors described above, offer her a special tidbit of food, such as a tiny piece of tuna or boiled chicken. At the same time, decrease the intensity of your petting. Continue to lightly pet your cat for a short time period while offering him tidbits. In this way, petting will come to be associated with more pleasant things, and may help her to enjoy petting for longer time periods. Each time you work with your cat, try to pet her for slightly longer time periods using the food. If you stop petting her when she is aggressive, her behavior has succeeded. She has learned that her aggressive behavior will get her what she wants—the petting stops. Thus, it is important to watch carefully for signals she is growing tired of petting.

### *Fearful/Defensive Aggression*

Cats who are fearful may display body postures which appear to be similar to canine submissive postures—crouching on the floor, ears back, tail tucked, and possibly rolling slightly to the side. Cats in this posture are not submissive, they are fearful and defensive and may attack if touched. For more information on fearful behavior, see our online information about Fearful Cats.

### *Redirected Aggression*

Redirected aggression occurs when the cat is aroused by one person or animal, but then redirects this aggression onto another person or animal. For example, if two family cats have a spat, the losing cat, still aroused, may walk up and attack the family child.

### *Territorial Aggression*

This type of aggression is not commonly directed at people. Usually cats only feel the need to defend their territory from other cats. Cats are, however, highly territorial—even more so than dogs.

## **What to Do**

- Check first with your veterinarian to rule out medical causes for the aggressive behavior.
- Seek professional help. An aggression problem will not go away by itself. Working with aggression problems requires in-home help from an animal behavior specialist.
- Take precautions. Your first priority is to keep everyone safe. Supervise, confine, and/or restrict your cat's activities until you can obtain professional help. You are liable for any injuries caused by your cat's behavior.

## **What *Not* to Do**

- You should never attempt to handle a fearful or aggressive cat. Cat bites and scratches become infected easily. If you do receive an injury from your cat, clean the wound carefully and contact your physician.
- Punishment will not help and will make the problem worse. If the aggression is motivated by fear, punishment will make the cat more fearful, and therefore more aggressive.

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# Health

## ***Common Cat Hazards***

Taking precautions against hazards that threaten the typical feline will help keep your household calm and your cat safe.

- **Unplug dangling cords.** Some cats like to chew on cords. Until you know for a fact that your cat isn't one of them, it's best not to risk electric shock. Also, be alert to potential fire hazards—lamps can tip over while you are out of the room, causing the shade to ignite and start a fire.
- **Beware poisonous plants.** Many common houseplants, like Easter lilies and philodendrons, are toxic to cats and can kill them if consumed. Follow the link at the bottom of this page for a more complete listing of toxic plants.
- **Remove tablecloths from unattended tables.** New kittens will be especially curious about what's up there on the table and will try to use the tablecloth to climb up. The result could be broken china and crystal and an emergency trip to the vet.
- **Cover garbage disposal switches.** Natural climbers, cats usually find their way to the kitchen sink sooner or later. Many have been known to play with electric switches such as the one for a garbage disposal. Special covers are available at hardware stores to help avoid disaster.
- **Keep drapery cords out of reach.** It's a good idea to use childproofing devices to wind up dangling cords—cats can strangle themselves by catching their necks in the loops.
- **Close the dryer door.** Cats love to explore, especially dark, quiet places. Always check inside large appliances before closing their doors to make sure your cat is not inside.
- **Make sure your screen door has a securing latch.** Cats are safe indoors; they are not safe outdoors. Don't run the risk that your cat could slip out unnoticed.
- **Pack away precious breakables.** Cats in a new home will explore. They will jump on tables, cabinets, sideboards, and bookshelves to investigate their strange domain, and they may accidentally knock over or break fragile items and knickknacks.
- **Cover your furniture.** If you don't want cat hair on your upholstery, put an old sheet on your most enticing sofas and chairs. That way your cat can enjoy the furniture along with you without shedding fur all over it. Simply remove the sheet when guests arrive.

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## ***Declawing Cats: More Than Just a Manicure***

People choose to declaw their cats for a number of reasons: Some are frustrated with shredded drapes or furniture, some are worried about being scratched, and others simply feel that a declawed cat is easier to live with. In many cases, cats are declawed preemptively, as a part of a spay/neuter package offered by veterinarians, even before claw-related problems occur.

Too often people believe that declawing is a simple surgery that removes a cat's nails, the equivalent of a person having her fingernails trimmed. Sadly, this is far from the truth. Declawing traditionally involves the amputation of the last bone of each toe and, if performed on a human being, it would be comparable to cutting off each finger at the last knuckle.

Declawing can leave cats with a painful healing process, long-term health issues, and numerous behavior problems. This is especially unfortunate because declawing is an owner-elected procedure and unnecessary for the vast majority of cats.

### **What about Laser Surgery?**

During laser surgery, a small, intense beam of light cuts through tissue by heating and vaporizing it, meaning there's less bleeding and a shorter recovery time. But the surgical technique itself is similar to the traditional method (or "onychectomy"), with the laser simply replacing a steel scalpel blade. So while the use of a laser may slightly reduce the duration of the healing process, it does not change the nature of the procedure.

### **Tenectomy**

Another procedure introduced more recently effectively deactivates cats' claws by severing the tendons that extend the toes. Called a "tendonectomy," the surgery retains the claws in the paws and is often thought to be more humane because of its shorter recovery time. But the method has its own set of problems. Since cats are unable to keep their claw length in check through vigorous scratching, owners must continually trim nails to prevent them from growing into the paw pads and causing infections. And though tendonectomies are generally considered less traumatic because of decreased post-operative pain, a 1998 study published in the *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association* found the incidence of bleeding, lameness, and infection was similar for both procedures. Furthermore, the American Veterinary Medical Association does not recommend tendonectomies as an alternative.

While there have been changes in the way that cats are declawed, it's still true that for the majority of cats, these surgical procedures are unnecessary. Educated owners can easily train their cats to use their claws in a manner that allows animal and owner to happily coexist.

Declawing and tendonectomies should be reserved only for those rare cases in which a cat has a medical problem that would warrant such surgery—or after exhausting all other options, it becomes clear that the cat cannot be properly trained and, as a result, would be removed from the home. In these cases, a veterinarian should inform the cat's caretakers about complications associated with the surgical procedures (including the possibility of infection, pain, and lameness) so that owners have realistic expectations about the outcome. There is just as much evidence to support the case against declawing as there is research to support it, with some studies finding few or only short-term adverse reactions to the surgery and others finding medical complications and significant differences in behavior.

Purchasing or building a scratching post is an important step in training a cat to avoid destructive scratching. Several companies manufacture scratching posts and other products that appeal to cats.

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## ***What To Do For A Poisoned Animal***

### ***Be Prepared for a Poison Emergency***

Your animal may become poisoned in spite of your best efforts to secure your home. Because of this, we urge you to be prepared. Your animal companion should regularly be seen by a local veterinarian to maintain overall health. You should know the veterinarian's procedures for emergency situations, especially ones that occur after usual business hours. You should keep the telephone numbers for the veterinarian, the ASPCA Animal Poison Control Center, and a local emergency veterinary service in a convenient location.

### ***Poison Safety Kit***

Keep a pet safety kit on hand for emergencies. Such a kit should contain:

A fresh bottle of hydrogen peroxide 3% (USP)

Can of soft dog or cat food, as appropriate.

Turkey baster, bulb syringe or large medical syringe.

Saline eye solution to flush out eye contaminants.

Artificial tear gel to lubricate eyes after flushing.

Mild grease-cutting dishwashing liquid for the animal after skin contamination.

Rubber gloves.

Forceps to remove stingers.

Muzzle. An excited animal may harm you.

Pet carrier.

### ***Calling the ASPCA Animal Poison Control Center (888) 426-4435***

A \$45 consultation fee may apply. When you call the center, be ready to provide:

Your name, address and telephone number.

Information concerning the exposure (the amount of agent, the time since exposure, etc.). For various reasons, it is important to know exactly what poison the animal was exposed to. Have the product container/packaging available for reference.

The species, breed, age, sex, weight and number of animals involved.

The symptoms your animal(s) is(are) experiencing.

*The ASPCA Animal Poison Control Center is the source of this material. KGARL has been given express written consent to reprint this article. [www.asPCA.org](http://www.asPCA.org)*

## Referrals

### ***Local Veterinarians***

Ferry Farm Animal Clinic  
(540)371-5090 or 1-800-541-9942

King George Veterinary Clinic  
(540)775-9439

Animal Emergency Clinic of Fredericksburg  
(540)371-0554

Vet Emergency Treatment Services  
Waldorf, MD  
(301)638-0988

### ***Low Cost Spay/Neuter Clinics***

Virginia Kincheloe Spay/Neuter Clinic  
(540) 834-0080  
[www.lionheartsinc.com](http://www.lionheartsinc.com)

Lucky Ones S.P.C.A  
(301) 884-2850  
[www.luckyones.com](http://www.luckyones.com)

Waldorf Well Pet Clinic  
(301) 885-0263  
Poison Control

### ***ASPCA Animal Poison Control Center***

(888) 426-4435  
[www.asPCA.org](http://www.asPCA.org)