

## **Getting Started**

### **Choosing the right kitten:**

Choosing a kitten who is one among many in a litter, or one among many at a shelter, can be overwhelming. This is especially true if you're picking out your very first kitten! By taking a little bit of extra care in selecting your new four legged friend, you guarantee that you've done everything you can to make sure your new feline friend is going to be the best possible match for your household. Considering the fact that our kitten friends can be with us for well over a decade, it's worthwhile to put a little bit of extra thought into your adoption or purchase decision to ensure that you've got a good friend in your new kitten. Aside from doing your research to choose a reputable breeder or shelter, we recommend you choose a breeder or shelter where you can see any available kittens playing and interacting with one another so you can get a brief glimpse into their personalities. Look for a kitten who is playful and confident rather than timid, and who is comfortable in your presence, as this indicates that he or she has been well socialized with humans and other kittens. The way a kitten was raised can have a huge impact on her personality, so don't be afraid to ask questions about your kitten's young life. Kittens who weren't introduced to humans before they are 7 weeks old can have trouble bonding with them in the future, so it's good to know as much as possible about your kitten's upbringing. We also recommend that you try to select a kitten with a healthy looking haircoat and skin, clean ears, and no visible discharge from the eyes or the nose. It's impossible to know exactly how a kitten's health and personality will develop at only 8 or 10 weeks old, but taking the time to pay attention to these few extra clues can make a world of difference toward ensuring that you pick out a kitten that adjusts easily to life in your household!

### **Congratulations! You've decided to get a kitten- now what?**

Bringing a new kitten home, whether as a first pet or as an addition to your current four legged family, is an exciting event for everyone involved! Keeping your new kitten safe and happy takes a little bit of planning, but is worth every minute as you watch your kitten grow into a confident, loving member of your family. Below, we've compiled a short list of ways to prepare your home for your new kitten's arrival, from supplies and toys to have on hand to ways to kitten proof your home to keep your new little one safe and secure!

### **Supplies you'll need:**

- **Litterbox:** One of the best things about kittens is that they arrive potty trained! You just need to provide the bathroom and make sure your kitten knows where it is. There are many styles and sizes of litterboxes to choose from, but in general, we recommend that you purchase a low-sided litterbox that is easy for your new kitten to access, and large enough that your kitten can continue to use it as he or she grows. Ideally, a litterbox should be 1.5 x the length of your cat from her nose to the tip of her tail when she is full grown. Cats generally prefer to use an uncovered litterbox, but if you prefer to purchase one that is covered in order to minimize the mess in your house, your kitten likely won't mind as long as the box itself is large enough. As long as space permits, you will need to have one litterbox per cat in your household plus one extra box, so if your new kitten is the only cat in your household, we recommend purchasing two litterboxes to place in your house prior to bringing your new kitten home. Boxes can be clustered in a multicat household, but it's a good idea to have two separate areas of the house where cats can access a box. We also recommend that you place litterboxes in an area with enough privacy that your cat doesn't feel vulnerable while doing their business. A cat who is afraid to go in the box will find somewhere else to go, so ensuring that you have an adequate number of accessible litterboxes goes a long way in preventing accidents around the house!
- **Litter:** Cats will have different preferences about cat litter, but in general, most cats aren't picky about the type of litter they use as long as their box is cleaned regularly and their litter doesn't irritate their paws or lungs. Try to avoid very dusty or heavily scented litters in enclosed spaces or covered boxes. These litters may smell better to you, but they can eventually lead to respiratory problems in your cat. Be sure to clean your cat's box several times per week, or provide enough boxes that they always have a clean box with a dry bottom to use. It is ideal to have around 2 inches of cat litter in the box, and it's very important to scoop daily and replenish the cat litter as needed.
- **Food:** Kittens can have sensitive stomachs, especially when adjusting to a new home. Initially, we recommend that you feed your kitten whatever food they were eating at the shelter or breeder, as a sudden transition onto a new food can cause unpleasant digestive upset. After about two weeks, your kitten will be well adjusted to your home and a transition to a new brand of food should be easily tolerated. Most cats do best on a mix of canned food, which aids kidney and bladder function and is higher in protein, and dry food, which may have some dental benefits and stays fresh longer. There are a wide variety of foods available

on the market, and an ever wider variety of opinions about them, but the bottom line is that all AAFCO approved foods labeled for kittens have been determined to be nutritionally appropriate for a cat's development. Once you've selected a food to feed your cat long-term, we recommend that you transition to this new food slowly over the course of a week or two. You can begin this process by adding a tablespoon of your kitten's new food to his regular food and then gradually working up to feeding more and more of the new food and less and less of the old until your kitten has fully transitioned onto his new food. It is a good idea to get your cats used to "meal times" from the start, so they are not begging you for food (especially at 3am when cats seem to get a burst of energy!). Offering a measured amount of canned and dry food in the morning and evening teaches your cat that there are certain times for food, and also helps keep their body weight in check.

- **Feeding Stations:** Once you have selected a type of food, you'll need to decide how to feed it! This seems simple, but there are a few tricks that will help you and your cat have a healthier relationship with food. If you have multiple cats, it is a good idea to feed them in separate bowls at mealtime. This allows each cat to get the right amount of food and will be helpful in the future if one of your cats needs a special diet or medication. Placing bowls on the ground is not a problem for most cats, although some cats do like to eat their food on a higher perch so they don't feel vulnerable while eating. This is not inherently problematic, but you may want to think twice before feeding your cat on the counter unless you want a lifelong kitchen "helper" and food thief! If your cat (and your back) prefers an elevated bowl, consider feeding your cat on a cat tree or small table away from the human eating area.
- **Toys:** It is important to provide a small variety of toys to provide entertainment for your new kitten. Because cats are natural predators, they love to chase toy mice or even rolled up aluminum foil, which makes them relatively easy to entertain. In the beginning, we recommend that you purchase a small variety of interactive toys to see what your kitten likes best. Look for toys like food puzzles, laser pointers, or "magic wand" style toys with a handle for you to hold while feathers or soft fabric hang for your cat to play with. Kittens enjoy playing on their own with toys, but they also love it when their humans throw their toys for them, so don't hesitate to join in the fun!

**Socializing your kitten:**

It's a good idea to get your kitten used to being handled as soon as they come home. Playing with them, picking them up regularly, and cuddling them are the most obvious ways to begin socializing your kitten, but it is also important to get them used to having their ears, feet, and mouths touched. All of this will help down the road if your kitten ever develops a medical condition such as an ear infection, because he'll be more accustomed to having his face and ears touched. Don't hesitate to use treats or canned food as positive reinforcement or as a distraction as you begin to socialize your cat. You can even practice feeding your kitten a small amount of watered down canned food through a syringe, which can be helpful down the road if he ever needs to take oral medication. Small steps like this when your kitten is young can make a huge impact later on in life as he becomes a confident adult cat!

### **Kitten proofing your home:**

Kittens are notorious for being very inquisitive animals and will play with almost any inanimate object. They will explore every nook and cranny in your house, whether it is on the floor, or up on top of your furniture or even your refrigerator. They also have a tendency to get behind any large objects they find high up on your furniture and push them off, so do your best to keep any valuable or fragile objects away from high places. In addition, it's not uncommon for kittens to put things in their mouths as they explore their new terrain. Because of this, it is best to keep any type of string or thread away from your new kitten, and to make sure that he has limited access to cords and dangling objects, including cords that hang from your blinds or power cords dangling freely behind your furniture.

In addition to doing some kitten proofing to reduce the risk that your kitten will break or chew on everyday household items, it's a good idea to ensure that your kitten doesn't have access to any household plants, foods, or cleaning products that could harm her. Some common substances that can be toxic to kittens include:

- Plants such as lilies, chinese evergreens and aloe vera.
- Food such as chocolate, garlic, onions, chives, coffee, some nuts, and xylitol (found in many chewing gums).
- Household cleaners
- Human medications

For more information and a list of plants, foods, and substances to avoid, visit the [ASPCA Poison Control website](#), which contains a comprehensive guide

to determine whether your everyday household plants, foods, cosmetics, and more are safe for your kitten.

### **Ok, I've got my supplies and I'm fully kitten proofed. What do I need to know about entertaining my crazy kitten?**

Cats are devoted hunters, even if they have lived inside their whole lives. This will be very evident as you watch your new kitten chase anything and everything that moves around in your home! For their safety (and your sanity) directing their hunting instincts toward appropriate toys is a good idea. Toys such as food puzzles that require your kitten to hunt out food, or toys such as ball tracks that allow them to chase a moving object, are great entertainment. Kittens also love to pretend to “stalk and hunt,” so they also tend to enjoy a “magic wand” or “cat dancers,” which have a handle for the human to hold with feathers or soft material which can be dragged to entice cats to stalk and pounce. It is important not to leave stringy cat toys unattended because cats will sometimes get carried away and eat the string, causing a life threatening condition which can require surgery to correct. In addition to their playtime with their humans, cats will get hours of pleasure simply watching a bird feeder hung near a window or enjoying the view outside from their favorite window perch. Don't forget that a cat's sense of smell is just as keen as their eyesight, so providing olfactory stimulation is a great source of fun. Try sprinkling catnip on a scratching post or spraying Feliway on a cat tree for added fun!

Kittens can be incredibly energetic, and playtime with your kitten is one of the fun perks of cat ownership, but it's important to never “play rough” with a kitten (for example, using oven mitts and allowing the kitten to bite the mittens). This behavior may seem cute when your kitten is small, but becomes significantly less cute when your cat becomes an adult who is confused about whether or not biting is acceptable behavior! Similarly, many kittens find it amusing to pounce on your feet underneath the sheets when you sleep, but we recommend that you discourage this behavior as it becomes significantly less cute when your cat wants to continue the game as a full grown adult!

In addition to regular playtime, keep in mind that even a well exercised cat can have a natural urge to scratch, so it is important to provide an acceptable outlet for scratching to prevent furniture damage. There are a variety of options available in different materials, but cat scratching posts made of sisal (rope) are often popular. There are also cardboard or even carpeted scratching posts, so you have many options available to try if your cat does not like the first scratching post you bring home. If your cat doesn't immediately welcome the addition of a new scratching post to his home, it is often helpful to sprinkle some catnip on your cat's new post to encourage its use. This little bit of extra effort in getting the right supplies and spending the time to teach your

kitten to make use of them goes a long way toward making sure your energetic kitten grows up into a responsible adult rather than a destructive one!

## **Visiting the Vet**

### **What to expect at your first veterinary visit**

Whether you get your kitten from a breeder or from a shelter, it's a good idea to bring your kitten to the veterinarian within 1-2 weeks of adoption. Some kittens will be partially vaccinated already, but it is wise to meet with your veterinarian soon after adoption to discuss any questions you might have and to check for any early signs of disease or infection. Health concerns aside, your veterinarian's primary goal at your first visit to the vet is to get to know you and your kitten, and to set you both off on the path to a successful and healthy relationship. At this visit, your vet will complete a thorough exam and review your new kitten's health records. After reviewing your kitten's records and talking with you, your vet will set a vaccine schedule that is appropriate for your kitten based on his or her health history and future lifestyle, and determine if any dewormers or other medications are needed. Depending how old your kitten is and what vaccines she's already been given, the number of kitten visits that you make to the vet will vary. Typically, a healthy kitten will need a visit to the see the vet once every four weeks until he or she is 16 weeks old. These kitten visits to the vet will ensure that your new kitten is developing properly and address any questions you have so you can be sure that your kitten gets off to a happy and healthy start with your family!

### **Vaccines for your Kitten**

There are a relatively small number of vaccines available for cats, so designing a vaccine schedule that offers sensible protection against disease without overexposure to vaccines is fairly easy for your veterinarian to do. Below is a little bit of information about the most common vaccines we recommend at our hospital:

- FVRCP (Feline Viral Rhinotracheitis, Calicivirus, and Panleukopenia), also known as Distemper
  - This is a combination vaccine given to prevent multiple diseases affecting the respiratory, gastrointestinal, and immune systems. It is administered to kittens as a series of vaccines, and is boosted once every 3-4 weeks until they are 16 weeks of age. It is boosted one year later, and every three years thereafter.

- Rabies
  - Rabies is a life threatening virus that can infect most mammals. Massachusetts state law requires that all cats receive a rabies vaccine before they are six months old. This vaccine is usually boosted once a year for your cat's entire life to protect against accidental exposure to this deadly illness.
- Feline Leukemia
  - Feline leukemia is a cancer that can be spread from cat to cat via blood or saliva, or even during pregnancy. Unfortunately, there is no effective treatment for those cats that are infected, so it is important to ensure that your kitten is protected from this illness. Most kittens are tested for this disease at some point in the early stages of their life to ensure that they have not contracted the disease from their mothers and don't need to undergo the vaccine series unless they will be going outside where their risk of being exposed to other unvaccinated or infected cats is high.

### **Protecting your Kitten from Parasites**

When you bring your kitten to the vet for the first time, your veterinarian will review his records to see if your kitten's breeder or shelter administered any dewormers prior to adoption. Depending on what (if any) dewormers your kitten has already been given, your vet might recommend an additional dewormer, as there are a number of intestinal parasites that can be passed down from mother to kitten and can be easily passed around a litter of kittens living together. We also recommend bringing a fecal sample to your first visit to rule out the presence of any intestinal parasites. This is because even when a broad spectrum dewormer is used, intestinal parasites can linger as not all dewormers are able to treat all of the varieties of parasites that your kitten might have been exposed to. The good news is that once your new kitten is officially parasite free, additional deworming and regular parasite prevention is not typically necessary unless your kitten goes outside. There are a number of monthly preventative medications available to keep your cat flea, tick, and heartworm free, and your vet can help you evaluate whether your kitten needs to use any of these products or not. In general, indoor kittens have minimal exposure to the environment where fleas, ticks, and mosquitos live and don't need to be on regular monthly preventatives. For kittens who will be spending time both indoors and outdoors, though, use of a monthly flea and tick preventative is highly recommended, along with yearly deworming for intestinal parasite control.

## **Spay and Neuter: When to do it and why**

The idea of having your kitten spayed (for females) or neutered (for males) might sound intimidating, but when done properly and responsibly, these surgeries can have tremendous health benefits for your cat. If your kitten is female, we recommend that you have her spayed before her first heat cycle, which usually happens around six months of age. This protects her from developing breast cancer, uterine infections, and ovarian cancer later in life. If your kitten is male, we recommend that you have him neutered at about six months of age. This protects him from developing testicular cancer later in life, and helps guard against unwanted behaviors that can develop as your unneutered male cat ages. Among other things, unneutered male cats tend to “spray” their urine in order to mark their territory, and are more prone to roam in search of a mate, making them more likely to escape the house. As a result, neutering your kitten ultimately helps the two of you live a happier life together.

## **Microchipping: What it is and when to consider it**

A microchip is a rice sized implant that is placed under your cat’s skin. Because it is implanted under the skin and can’t fall off like a collar or a tag, a microchip is the only form of permanent identification for your pet. This implant has a unique ID number that can be detected with a microchip scanner, and this ID number is linked to your contact information so once your cat’s microchip has been scanned, the hospital or shelter that scanned it can contact you to let you know your cat has been found. Scanners are carried by most veterinary hospitals, animal control officers, and shelters, so having a microchip implanted in your kitten gives her the best chance of finding her way home should she ever go missing. Even if you don’t plan on letting your kitten go outside, we recommend having a microchip implanted as a precaution in case your cat ever sneaks out of the house and goes missing. Every year thousands of pets are returned to their owners because of microchip technology, so we recommend that all pets receive a microchip at the time of their spay or neuter.

## **Maintaining your kitten: Grooming, Nail Trims, and Brushing Teeth**

### **Grooming:**

Most short and medium haired cats are very good at keeping their coats neat and tidy, but many longhaired cats do require regular brushing to remove dead hair from their undercoat and prevent tangles that can turn into uncomfortable matts. Even if your



kitty is good at tending to his own hair coat, it's not a bad idea to brush your kitten periodically just to socialize him to the concept of being brushed in case it's needed in the future. To get the most out of your time spent brushing, we recommend using a product that is efficient at removing dead hair from your cat's undercoat, such as a Furminator. In addition to those cats that require maintenance brushing because of their long fur, there are a limited number of situations in which even shorthaired cats may stop grooming themselves, including weight gain or illness. In these situations, it is a good idea to visit your veterinarian to rule out the possibility that a medical condition is causing your cat's poor hygiene, and visit a professional groomer if needed to help your cat with his grooming needs.

### **Nail Trims:**

Nail trimming can be a stressful process for some cats, and it is ultimately up to you to decide if you wish to leave your kitten's nails long or cut them short. Indoor cats are notorious for scratching up furniture and window curtains, so most owners elect to keep their indoor cat's nails short, either by trimming them at home or having it done at their vet or groomer. If you plan to allow your kitten to go outside, we recommend leaving her nails long so she can defend herself if needed. Whether your cat is indoor only or goes outside, if you do choose to leave your cat's nails long, we recommend that you take a look at them periodically to make sure the nails haven't grown long enough that they've curled around toward your your cat's paw pads. If this happens, call your vet or groomer to schedule a nail trim as soon as possible.

### **Brushing Teeth:**

There are several issues that can impact a cat's oral health and make it difficult or painful to eat, including inflammation of the gums and what are called "feline oral resorptive lesions," which occur when the tooth begins to disintegrate on its own, causing the dentin of the tooth to become painfully exposed. Close to 75% of all cats will have oral health issues as a result of periodontal disease at some point in their life, and recent research suggests that brushing your cat's teeth at least every other day is the best way to keep your cat's mouth as healthy as possible. That said, many cats will not let their owners look in their mouths, let alone brush their teeth, so there is often little that can be done on a daily basis to prevent the progression of periodontal disease. If you choose to try brushing your kitten's teeth, it is best to start slowly and when your kitten is very young to give yourself the best chance of success. Start by putting just a little bit of cat friendly toothpaste on your fingertip and allowing your kitten to lick it off of your finger. Over time, move on to using your finger to gently rub toothpaste onto your

kitten's teeth, and then graduate to using a small brush or fingerbrush if you are successful. There are also special foods and water additives that can be introduced into your cat's routine as an adult if he or she does not tolerate tooth brushing. In addition, periodontal disease can also be controlled by having your adult cat's teeth professionally cleaned, so don't stress if tooth brushing does not go over well with your kitten! Your veterinarian will evaluate your cat's teeth each year at her annual exam and let you know if any treatment is needed to keep your cat's mouth in top shape!

## **In Case of Emergency**

### **What do I do if my kitten is having an emergency?**

When you visit your vet for the first time, it's a good idea to ask them if they are able to accommodate emergency visits during office hours, and ask where the nearest veterinary emergency hospital is located in case of after hours emergency.

### **How do I know if my kitten is having an emergency?**

Cats are masters of disguise when it comes to illness, so prompt medical attention is especially important if you think your cat may be sick. Symptoms that require immediate care include:

- Rapid breathing for more than 2-3 minutes
- Inability to use any of their 4 legs
- Straining to urinate or defecate in the litterbox
- Sudden weakness

Symptoms indicating that your cat should be seen by a veterinarian within a day or two include:

- Skipping more than 2 meals in a row
- Vomiting more than 3 times per month
- Unintentional weight loss
- Diarrhea more than once weekly
- Increased thirst and urination

If your pet is having one of these problems, it is best to call your veterinarian or local veterinary emergency hospital to determine if your kitten needs to be seen right away. If your kitten gets into a toxin or medication, there are also two pet poison services

available that can assist you by phone. They will help you initiate emergency treatment at home if possible, and let you know how quickly your cat needs veterinary care. These poison control services are the Pet Poison Helpline, which can be reached at 855-764-7661, and the ASPCA Poison Control Helpline, which can be reached at 888-426-4435. There is always a fee associated with poison control services, but in the event that your kitten has ingested a toxic substance, it is worth every penny to get the advice of a boarded toxicologist who can develop a treatment plan for your veterinary hospital to follow in the event that your kitten requires treatment.

## **What about Pet Insurance for my Kitten?**

Your first visit to the vet is a great time to talk about the pros and cons of pet insurance, as many veterinary offices work with one or two insurance companies to waive the traditional waiting period so your pet's coverage begins immediately after you activate your policy. Pet insurance has become a big business in the past decade, so there are many different companies and plans to consider. Most people who choose to have pet insurance do so to help pay for large or unexpected veterinary bills that would be difficult to pay out-of-pocket. Advancements in veterinary medicine have improved the lifespan and quality of life of pets by years, but this care comes at higher cost than we might be able to anticipate when our pets are young and healthy. By getting medical insurance for your pet, you reduce the financial barriers to giving your pet the very best care available.

Unlike with human health insurance, veterinary pet insurance requires you to pay your full veterinary bill at the time of service. Once the bill is paid, you submit your paid invoice along with your claim form to request reimbursement from your insurance company. The downside of this system is obvious: you're stuck paying out of pocket even though you have pet insurance! However, the upside of this system for pet insurance claims is significant, in that this system allows *all* veterinarians to work with *all* insurance companies. This means that you can take your pet to any veterinarian at any time without having to worry about whether or not they accept your pet insurance. Need help submitting a claim? Just ask! Your vet's office should be happy to help guide you through the process, fill out forms with you, and even submit claims for you.

All pet insurance companies are different, so it's important to do your research and ask questions to determine which company, if any, is the right fit for your needs. Most pet insurance companies now have fairly comprehensive websites, including helpful answers to frequently asked questions, which can help spare you a few phone calls as you begin your search. We recommend narrowing your search down to two or three companies, and then calling each to ask more questions and get an idea of their

customer service. Below are some questions to ask your prospective insurance provider as you begin your search.

- What are my choices of deductible, and will my deductible be per issue or per year? (For example: If my cat sees the vet regularly for a chronic condition like lower urinary tract disease, but also gets ear infections from time to time, will I pay a deductible for each condition once, and then never again, or will I pay into a single deductible for all of my cat's medical conditions once a year?)
- What will my monthly premium be?
- Will my monthly premium increase as my cat ages, or increase if I make a claim?
- Are hereditary and congenital conditions covered? (For example: Heart disease in Maine Coon cats)
- What do you consider to be a preexisting condition? (For example: If my cat had an eye infection two years ago but has been healthy ever since, would you deny my claim if he got an eye infection today?)
- Is there a limit to how much money you'll reimburse me for veterinary care each year, or a limit to how much you'll reimburse over the lifetime of my cat?
- Do you reimburse me for care based on the actual amount of money I paid my veterinarian, or based on a benefit schedule?
- Can I have a procedure or treatment pre-approved so I know how much you will pay before I agree to the procedure? How long does it take to receive an answer once I've submitted a request for preapproval?
- How quickly will I receive reimbursement once I've submitted a claim?
- Do you cover the cost of dental care for my cat?
- Do you cover routine/wellness care (such as wellness exams, vaccines, or spay/neuter surgery)? If so, how much will my monthly premium go up if I add wellness coverage to my policy?
- Do you cover nutritional supplements and prescription drugs? Is this optional coverage, or included in my standard policy?
- When will my coverage begin? Are there waiting periods for accidents or illnesses? (For example: If my kitten develops an ear infection 10 days after I enroll her in your policy, would her treatment be covered?)

There's a lot to consider when it comes to choosing a pet insurance company, and pet insurance is not for everyone. Many people would rather save money in a rainy-day fund than pay a monthly premium for pet insurance, and there's nothing wrong with that. However, if you do choose to get pet insurance, we recommend doing so when your kitten is still very young in order to take advantage of this time when your kitten is too young to have accumulated any "pre-existing conditions." Most insurers will

allow you to sign your kitten up for insurance once he is seven or eight weeks of age, and some plans will allow you to start immediate coverage within 24 hours of a healthy kitten visit, so it's a good idea to talk to your vet about insurance at your first visit!

### **Last but not least, have fun!**

Raising a growing kitten can be hectic at times, but don't forget to have fun with your new furry little friend, and don't forget to enlist the help of your vet's office if you have any trouble along the way! They have a wide variety of experience with kittens of all shapes, sizes, and personalities, and should be happy to help!