Getting Started With Your New Cat or Kitten

**Checklist of necessary supplies:**
- Dry Food
- Canned Food
- Food/Water bowls
- Litter Box
- Cat Litter (Use NON-CLUMPING for kittens under 16 weeks)
- Litter Scoop
- Scratching post or scratching board
- Nail Trimmers
- Grooming brush or comb
- Toys (variety pack to learn their favorites)
- Treats (Crunchy, soft, and lickable are all options)
- Carrier/Crate
- Patience & Love

**Additional recommended supplies:**
- Cat Tree or cat condo
- Pet bed
- Calming Diffuser/Spray
- Catnip (for adult cats)
- Collar/ID Tag (highly recommended even for indoor-only cats), remove collar bell if desired
- Pet Stroller or harness if you will be taking your cat outdoors

**Starting out:**
Create a safe room for your new cat to adjust. Be patient as they adapt to their new home.

When bringing your new cat/kitten home, start them out in a single room. Prepare the space with their supplies before letting the cat out of their carrier. Provide safe hiding places, such as a cat carrier and cardboard box draped with a towel. Be aware of hidden dangers in your home and keep them away from areas that your cat can access. Essential oils and many household plants are poisonous to cats. Other items that can harm cats include strings, electrical cords, and reclining chairs or other fold-out furniture.

Keeping the cat in an enclosed space will help the cat to get used to sounds and smells of their new home, and allow you to monitor their eating/drinking and elimination habits. A stressed cat who is loose in the home may hide and become trapped. They may decide it is not safe to come out of hiding, and may not want to eat. The smaller space will also help the cat bond with you. Visit your cat for short periods several times a day, feed and play with them, so that they will learn to trust you more quickly.

When the cat is comfortable and confident in their room, you can allow them access to start exploring the home. This may be days, weeks, or even a few months depending on the cat. It is still a good idea to put them back in their room when you are not able to supervise. During this initial exploration time, keep all other pets in areas where they cannot access the new cat. More information is available on how to do safe and low-stress introductions between your new cat and an existing cat or dog.

**Feeding:**
Follow feeding instructions on package and adjust to find what your cat likes!

Many people will choose to offer both dry and wet food to their cat. This can provide the cat with variety and interest, as well as support their nutrition. Cats may have texture or flavor preferences, so experiment with different options until you find something the cat likes. Pate-style wet foods tend to be the most nutritionally dense.

Water can be added to the food to provide extra moisture to their diet. Some cats may lick the sauce from foods in “gravy” and leave behind the nutritious food pieces.

When feeding dry food, look for a food that does not contain any dyes or added colors.
Your cat doesn’t care what color their food is, and the dyes may upset their stomach. Do not mix dry and canned food in the same bowl, as it can spoil the food.

As a starting point, follow the feeding instructions on the food packaging then adjust the amount you are feeding up or down to keep your cat at a healthy weight. A healthy cat should have a slight tummy tuck, and you should be able to feel/count their individual ribs, but not see them. Growing kittens should be fed at least 3 times a day, and can be free-fed dry food.

The most important thing to remember with feeding time, is that you CANNOT starve out a cat. They will not always start eating “when they are hungry enough.” Going for more than a couple days without food can cause them serious harm. A cat that is not eating needs to go to the vet for medication and supportive care. If you are offering a higher end food, try a lower grade grocery store brand or vice versa to see if that will get the cat eating.

Puzzle feeders help keep the cat engaged in feeding time, and encourage natural instincts of hunting and working for their food. They can also help prevent boredom and obesity and can slow down cats that tend to eat too quickly.

Cats do not have a naturally high thirst drive. Getting enough moisture in their diet decreases risk of hydration and helps to flush the cat’s system and may decrease the risk of urinary issues. To encourage drinking water, make sure you provide fresh, clean water every day, wiping/washing the bowl regularly. You can also provide your cat with a fountain or bubbler. The moving water encourages the cat to drink more. Clean your fountain pump regularly to prevent buildup of hair and bacteria.

Sometimes a cat is frightened by the movement/sound of the water, so you may need to get them used to the fountain by leaving it turned off for a while. Provide them with an additional bowl of water when you first turn on the fountain so that they have an option if they aren’t comfortable.

**Litter Box and Bathroom Habits:**

**Cats are particular – try using unscented litter and provide multiple litterboxes**

Cats have a preference for uncovered litter boxes and unscented litter. Their noses and lungs are very sensitive to dust and scents, and a confined/covered box holds both in much more than an open litter box. An uncovered litter box allows the cat using it to have a good view of their surroundings when they are in a vulnerable position. If a cat is uncomfortable with their litter box, they may choose other surfaces to use as a restroom instead.

Cat litters all have different amounts of odor control and absorbencies, and there are many options to choose from. The best way to keep your litter box odor free is to use an unscented litter and scoop the box daily. Completely empty the box periodically, and clean with an unscented dish soap or basic white vinegar. This will kill odors and bacteria without repelling the cat with strong scents.

Kittens under the age of 16 weeks should only have NON-clumping litter. A clumping or scoopable litter can cause problems if the kitten accidentally or intentionally eats it, because it can clump inside their body and cause digestive problems.

For cat health, it’s recommended to have one litter box per every 2 cats. However, cat behaviorists actually recommend having one box per cat, plus one extra. This is because some cats may prefer to urinate in one box and defecate in another, or because some cats may be bullied by other cats in the home. It may be subtle, but a cat may choose to block access to a litter box, or actually ambush the victim cat when they are exiting the litter area.

Litter boxes should be placed in a quiet area that the cat can easily access. Sudden, startling noises such as a furnace/water heater kicking on, or a washer/dryer can frighten the cat and cause them to not use the box.
If a cat is consistently not using the litter box, they may have a preference for different texture of litter or litter box location. Not using the litter box may also be caused by pain. A cat with arthritis, declawed cat, or a cat with a urinary tract infection may choose a different surface to eliminate on, because they associate the litter box as a source of pain.

Any cat with a sudden change in litter box habits – visiting it more frequently, squatting with nothing/very little coming out, crying in the litter box, or not using the box at all – should be taken to the vet for an exam to rule out a medical cause. Often, urinary tract infections are the cause and can be treated with simple antibiotics. If a cat is trying to urinate with no production, they may have a urinary blockage, which is a life-threatening emergency issue.

**Playtime:**
Give your new cat lots of toy choices and interactive playtime

Toys come in a variety of styles, such as independent play (jingle balls, stuffed mice, etc) and interactive play (such as feather wands, motion-sensor toys, and puzzle toys). Certain toys require supervision to keep cats safe.

Remove any damaged toys immediately to avoid the cat ingesting any loose pieces, such as stuffing or string. Some cats will fetch small objects, just like a dog. Rowdy cats that like to play rough, may enjoy larger stuffed toys that they can grab, bite and kick. Chew toys and sticks are also a lesser-known option.

You can roll feeding and playtime all into one by using a puzzle feeder. Depending on the style, kibble, treats, or canned food can be placed inside, and the cat has to use their mind to work through how to get the food out of the feeder. There are options for all skill levels of cats.

Cats can be trained to do tricks and perform other behaviors, as well. Engaging playtime and training will help build the bond with your cat and provide them with mental stimulation they need to stay happy and healthy.

**Scratching:**
Give your new cat appropriate scratching surfaces to discourage inappropriate scratching

Scratching on surfaces is one of the most important natural behaviors for a cat. It helps them to keep their claws in good shape, allows them to stretch out, and feels good for them. It also allows them to spread their scent through pheromones. Cats have more confidence when they feel ownership of a space, which is done through scent marking. Some cats prefer vertical scratching surfaces (like posts), and others prefer horizontal surfaces (like mats or boards).

Cats also have an individual preference for what materials they scratch on. Usually, preferred surfaces are slightly coarse, such as cardboard, sisal, or carpet materials. Scratching surfaces should be placed in areas that you and the cat spend a lot of time, because those are the places the cat will want their scent to be the strongest.

Providing lots of options for appropriate scratching decreases the chance that the cat will scratch and cause damage to items that you find valuable. It is important to get the cat comfortable having their nails trimmed on a regular basis.

This can be done at home with inexpensive cat nail clippers. The "scissor" shaped clippers are the easiest to use. Reward your cat with treats during nail trims and they will soon look forward to their paw-dicures. If you have additional concerns with damage caused by your cat’s claws, claw caps or scratching deterrents may be an option.
Grooming:
Regular brushing helps keep your cat’s coat healthy and minimizes mats and hairballs

All cats can benefit from regular brushing. There are many styles of brushes for cats. Some cats will prefer certain type of brush, and some brushes should only be used occasionally to avoid irritating a cat’s sensitive skin.

Although most cats enjoy basic grooming, some cats may become upset, overstimulated, or fearful of the brush. Start with short sessions, and take time to desensitize the cat to the brush as your cat becomes more comfortable and tolerant.

If your cat has skin-tight mats, contact a professional cat groomer or veterinarian. Cats have very thin skin and pulling at mats to cut them away may cause serious pain or injury to the cat if not done correctly.

Most cats do not ever need to be bathed, but always make sure you use a cat-specific shampoo. Ingredients in other shampoos may be harmful for the cat. Hair dryers may get too hot and burn the cat’s skin, so use care while drying the cat.

Monthly flea/tick medications may not be necessary for an indoor-only cat, unless they are exposed to other animals that go outside and may expose the cat. Before applying a topical treatment or flea collar, check the safety information and safety history of the product, and NEVER give a product that isn’t specifically approved for cats, as this may be deadly.

Medical Care:
Schedule your cat for annual vet checkups. Take your cat to the vet if you see any behavioral changes.

Many cats will live for years without a need for major medical care, but this is something you always need to keep in mind. It’s recommended to take the cat to the vet annually so that they can monitor for subtle changes that are often missed when you see your cat every day. The most common issue in aging cats is dental disease.

Just like in people, teeth age and without regular cleaning, build up plaque and tartar, and may need to be extracted. Dental problems can also lead to other internal diseases as the bad bacteria spread from the mouth to other parts of the body.

Senior cats are also susceptible to additional age-related diseases such as arthritis, kidney disease, diabetes, cancer, and hyperthyroidism.

The most common disease symptoms are: vomiting, diarrhea, constipation, sudden or unexplained weight loss, eating less, eating more while losing weight, excessive drinking/urination, and changes in litter box habits.

A social cat that suddenly becomes aggressive or starts hiding all the time, a quiet cat that is more vocal, or any cat exhibiting sudden change in behavior is also cause for concern.

If your cat is experiencing any of the above, you need to schedule a visit with your vet. If your cat stops eating or does not urinate, it can become dangerous or even deadly in as little as 24 hours. In these cases, the cat should be taken to an emergency vet clinic immediately.

Final Considerations:
There is a lot involved in adopting a new cat, but with some basic information, you will be successful. Cats enjoy routine, and are happiest when they can predict what is going to happen in their lives. Get to know your cat, what is normal for them, their likes and dislikes, and you can share a long, happy life together.