

Introducing a New Pet into Your Home

Congratulations! Bringing home a new pet is so exciting, and those first few days are an important time for creating a foundation that will foster a healthy and happy relationship with your new friend, especially if your household includes children or other pets!

We wanted to give you a few tips to help ensure that you start off on the right foot (or is that left paw?!)



- **Be Prepared**

New dishes, food, litter & litter box (for cats), toys, a crate and even a pre-scheduled vet appointment are all ways to be ready for welcoming your new pet home.

Depending on where they are coming from, they may or may not arrive with their current food in tow, and if they do, you will want to be sure you transition slowly from their old food to the food you plan on keeping them on (consider discussing the most appropriate food choice with your vet).

Plan on a “safe spot” for your new friend. For cats this might be a specific room or area in your house, for dogs this may be a crate or kennel.



- **Adjust based on History and Personality**

Where your new pet is coming from can play a major role in how you acclimate them to your home. If they are 8 weeks old, coming from a breeder who has been preparing them for this moment, while living in a stable and enriched environment, their ability to adapt is probably much better than an older pet. Often older animals are coming from a rescue or shelter – perhaps having lived on the streets, in a foreign country, neglected or abused - their fear of change or heightened awareness will affect how quickly they adapt and settle in. Of course, some pets are just great with change – happy go lucky and excited for every person they meet. Others are more timid and will require patience, a calm leader and routine in order to become comfortable in their new environment.

- **Arriving Home**

As excited as we are, it is important to remember that your new friend is leaving what is familiar to them, for something unfamiliar. It can actually be a little bit scary and we should be mindful of these big changes as we bring them home. It is not a good idea initially, to open the front door and let them roam freely.

Cats will hide, often overwhelmed, and may put you in a situation where you have to force them out of a corner you don't want them in – it's not a great first interaction to have. Introduce cats to their “safe spot” so that they can settle and get used to their surroundings; smells, sights and sounds. Have a water bowl, bed and litter box available right away and give them some space so

that they can choose to come to you. Your new cat may require several days in a confined space before you even consider introducing them to other areas of your house. Even then, slowly expand on what they have access to so that they can gradually appreciate and get used to their new home.

Dogs require structure and certainty – so what is best is a walk in your neighbourhood as soon as you get home. Allow them time to decompress, get used to the sights and sounds, not to mention...you! After burning off some energy, bring them, leashed, into your home. Give them a tour of the areas they are going to have access to and let them give everything a proper sniff test! If you do have other pets at home, now is not the time for introductions – the initial home evaluation should be done solo – there is no point overwhelming them right away.



- **Routines**

Have a plan for what your routine is going to be with your pet. This includes feeding times, wake up and bedtime, walks etc. Also have an idea as to what language/cues you want to start teaching your pet so that, from minute one, you can be consistent. Is your dog going to be allowed on the couch? If not, how will you teach them to get down? “Off?” “Down?” “No?” Try and do a little homework on what language or sound cues are best (ie. “no” is an overused word and can easily confuse pets if not managed carefully). If you are planning on allowing your dog on the couch, is it better to create a permission command for them to climb on so that, if you

have visitors or a need to keep them off, you can do so? These are things to consider so that you can develop a consistent routine and rhythm with them right away. Also, be aware of any words they may already know – imagine the confusion of knowing commands and now having a human saying a word you don’t understand while asking for something you know how to do. Patience will pay off here! Try to immediately incorporate the routines you want to abide by. Feeding times and walks/play times are important markers over the course of a day for pets.



- **(Human) Family Member Introductions**

There is a good chance that, before officially bringing your new pet home, your family has already met

them. While that would have been another exciting milestone, meeting on home turf and figuring out our new routine together is a little bit different. We want the interactions within the home to be positive as a framework for how we will all behave with each other.

Be wary of big, exaggerated or quick movements, loud voices or sounds and overbearing body language. Allow the pet some choice in the interactions, use open body language and use praise and rewards (treats are great but be careful not to overdo it for fear of tummy troubles) when

they do approach positively. Do not positively reinforce or encourage behaviours you do not, ultimately, want repeated (ie. jumping up). Small children can sometimes be scary for pets. Afterall, they are tiny humans who are able to literally make eye contact at eye-level and sometimes emit high-pitched, very loud sounds while moving erratically. It's a lot for a pet to process. Ensure children are respectful, calm and relatively quiet. Teach them general rules of animal interactions – quiet voices, gentle touch, averted eyes, no chasing, no disturbing (when they are sleeping, eating, chewing on a toy), no picking up. Ensuring children know what types of body language or signals a cat or dog may display if unhappy or frightened can also help.



- **(Pet) Family Member Introductions**

The saying is true – pets are like potato chips – you can't have just one! Of course, we want these new “siblings” to see this introduction as a positive. For existing pets, they may believe an intruder has entered their domain.

For the new pet, this other animal may be seen as a threat – or as prey. Their age, genders and whether or not they are spayed or neutered may play a factor in how pets interact; unneutered/unspayed animals are more likely to have territorial tendencies and dominant behaviours.

Other things to consider when introducing a new animal into your house are vaccination status and parasite screening. The last thing you want is for an unvaccinated, parasite-positive pet to pose a health risk to your pets (or people) at home. If, to your knowledge, your new pet has not received a clean bill of health from a veterinarian, consider this a priority before proceeding with any introductions.



For any pet who is fixated on another, the goal should be to desensitize their heightened focus. Through ongoing exposure and distraction techniques with praise for focusing on something else, it is possible to reduce their excitement or fixation, creating a calmer and safer environment for all.

Don't forget to pay close attention to your resident pets through the transition process as they will need to still have their routine and sense of normalcy – including maintaining their relationship with you. Creating opportunity for jealousy or a sense-of-loss will not support their ability to welcome a new friend.

The Rule of Three

While really an anecdotal rule, we have seen a lot of confirming evidence that there is something to be said for the Rule of Three when it comes to new pets!

3 Days – Over the first three days most new pets are overwhelmed by the change, and stress drives their behaviours. This may present as just being quieter than usual, but could also make them clingy if they fear being abandoned. It may also affect their appetite, toilet habits, interest in play or sleeping habits.

3 Weeks – They are finally settling into their new home having figured out their new routines and family. They begin to really open up and show off their personality. Every once in a while, this means negative traits will come to the surface but, more often than not, we see them blossom positively. If you do notice something negative, this is the time to seek help and address it in a positive way – do not wait.

3 Months – This is home! You're my people! This is my stuff! They have figured out their place and have confidence in their newfound relationships and routines. They can be themselves and see themselves as part of the family.



As always, please don't hesitate to reach out to your veterinary health care team with any questions or concerns you have with this very important introduction!