

Choosing the Right Pet for You

Sharing your life with an animal has great benefits and can bring you great joy. If you are thinking about adding a pet to your family, it's best to learn about the needs of different types of pets to find one that will best suit your lifestyle. Each type of pet is different in terms of care, feeding, behavior, cost, housing and demands on your time. If you know what you're getting into, you'll be more likely to have a happy animal, a good relationship with your pet, and an easier time dealing with any challenges that might arise.

Here are some questions to ask yourself as you consider what type of pet to get:

- What type of animal is the best fit for your home? Will you be able to live with pet hair, a litter box or the occasional wear-and-tear caused by pets?
- If you have children, how will having a pet affect them? Will everyone in your home welcome an animal?
- If you rent, do you have permission from the property owner?
- How much space do you have inside and outside your home? Will you need a fenced yard? If you get a cat, will you want an outdoor enclosure (a cattery) so your kitty can spend time safely outdoors?
- How much time do you have to spend with a pet?
- What is your activity level? Are you sedentary or physically active?
- Do you have the financial resources if your pet has a medical crisis and has high veterinary bills?
- Do you have someone who can be a secondary caregiver if you are away from home? If not, how will you provide care for your pet when you travel?

One key question is where to get your new pet. Please consider adopting – there are many wonderful dogs, cats, rabbits and other animals at most local animal shelters. There are also rescue groups for many specific dogs breeds and other types of pets. What's more, the staff at your local animal shelter can help you find just the right pet for you. They know the animals in their care and can help you make a good match for your personality and lifestyle.

Some of the more common types of pets are considered on the following pages.

Puppies or Dogs

Dogs are very social creatures; they aren't happy left outside or chained up in the yard alone all the time. If you are thinking about getting a dog, make sure you're going to be able to spend several hours a day with him or her.



Also, consider carefully what kind of dog to get. Adopting a puppy is a huge commitment, since you cannot leave a puppy home alone all day. Most puppies need to eliminate every two hours or so. Also, in order to co-exist happily with humans, puppies must be taught house-training skills and basic commands.

If puppies are not handled often and socialized when young, they will become shy and fearful.

If you're thinking about getting a particular breed of dog, you might want to read up on various breeds before deciding what type of dog to get. Different breeds of dogs have different characteristics. You can still adopt from your local shelter even if you want a purebred dog, since a quarter of the dogs at shelters are purebreds.

You'll also want to consider where you live, how much space you have, and what your lifestyle is. For example, very active dogs may not do well confined to a small apartment or living in a big city, unless you are thoroughly committed to providing your dog with plenty of exercise. All dogs should have at least one walk a day outside their home turf, but some dogs need much more. If you are a fairly sedentary person, you probably want to find a dog (perhaps an older dog) who doesn't require that much activity. Keep in mind that not all small dogs are less active and not all large dogs need a great deal of exercise. You'll want to learn more about the traits of the dog you're thinking about getting, even if he or she is a mixed breed, to see if you are compatible.

Dogs need quite a bit of interaction with their humans in order to be happy. If you're very busy and spend little time at home, a dog might not be a suitable pet for you, unless you can bring your dog along when you're away from home. You'll also need to spend some time training your dog to do basic commands like sit, stay and come.

Make sure you have enough money to have a dog. Costs associated with dog care include food, toys, leashes, a crate, training, grooming, spay/neuter surgery, routine vet care and, sometimes, emergency vet care.

Whatever dog you choose, keep in mind that you are making a long-term commitment, since dogs live 10 years or more. Your dog will need attention, love and respect from you: food and water are not enough. Consider your dog to be part of your family – to your dog, you and he (and your other family members) are a pack.

For more information, see our other resources on dog care, such as "House-Training Your Dog" and "What Dogs Need to Be Happy."

Kittens or Cats

Contrary to popular opinion, many cats are social animals and love attention. Though most cats don't require as much attention as dogs, they still need play time and petting on a daily basis. Spending time every day with your kitty can be the difference between a happy cat and a bored cat.



Make sure you have enough money to have a cat. The costs of caring for a cat include food, toys, litter and a litter box, spay/neuter surgery, and vet care.

Here are some other things that you need to know before adopting a cat:

- Cats are very fastidious about their litter box habits, so it's important to keep the litter box clean and fresh.
- Cats can live up to 15 years or more, so you should be prepared to make a long-term commitment if you adopt a kitten.
- Cats need to scratch, so a sturdy scratching post is necessary. Declawing a cat to protect your furniture is cruel and unnecessary (and illegal in some parts of the country). Declawing, which involves the removal of the first knuckle of each toe, is extremely painful for the cat. You can learn to trim your cat's nails to prevent damage to furniture; besides scratching posts, there are many other products, available at pet supply stores, that deter cats from damaging furniture.
- Kittens are not suitable if you have children less than three years of age in your home. An adult kitty would be a better choice.
- Cats have different personalities. Some like to be held and snuggled; others are more aloof and don't like to be picked up. So, be prepared to adapt to your new cat's individual personality traits. If you go to a shelter or contact a local rescue group to adopt a cat, they will be able to advise you on the personalities of the cats in their care and help you choose just the right cat for you.

You'll have to make a decision about whether to have an indoor or outdoor cat. Many organizations (including Best Friends) will not adopt cats out as outdoor pets because of the risk of disease or injury. In most locations, indoors is a much safer place for cats. Indoor kitties live longer and are generally healthier. You'll want to provide your indoor kitty with plenty of toys and regular play time. You might also think about adding a cattery or cat enclosure to your home so your cat can enjoy the outdoors safely. (For more information, see our resource called "A Cattery for Your Kitty.")

Cats can be wonderful companions, but before you get a cat, make sure you are willing to make the commitment to provide your cat with the necessities, and you will not mind adapting your life a little bit to accommodate your new feline family member.

For more information, see our other resources on cat care, such as "What Cats Need to Be Happy."

Birds

Birds are fascinating and beautiful creatures, but they are not easy-care pets. They are intelligent, social animals and need plenty of attention. Before you add a bird to your family, make sure you're willing to spend time with your feathered friend each day. Also, in the wild, birds are flock animals, so if you're thinking about getting a bird, you might think about getting two. Life alone in a cage is not much of a life for a bird.



In nature, birds cover a large amount of territory, so they are ill-suited to life in a small cage. At minimum, a bird's cage should be large enough so that he can spread his wings fully and "fly" from one side to the other (a width of at least four wing spans). If there's a room in your house where your birds can safely be let out during the day, a smaller cage to sleep in is okay.

Some birds are also a lifetime commitment – many types of parrots can live 50 years or more. If you're thinking about getting a parrot, there are some details you should know about their care:

- You'll need to spend at least two to three hours a day interacting with your parrot outside his cage, and you'll need to provide some entertainment for your bird for the rest of the day, such as safe toys, radio or television, and contact with other family members or other parrots.
- Most people don't realize that parrots are messy. You'll be spending time cleaning his cage, around his cage, his play area, and any other areas of the house where he may play.
- A parrot requires a very complex and varied diet of pellets, fruits, vegetables, nuts and seeds, which you'll need to prepare every day.

To learn more about bird care and adoption, see our resource called "Before Adopting a Parrot." You can also visit the Avian Welfare Coalition website at www.avianwelfare.org.

Rabbits

Rabbits are intelligent, social animals who need affection. They can become wonderful companion animals if given a chance to interact with their human families.

Here are some things you should know about rabbits:

- Rabbits may live seven to ten years, so make sure you are ready for that kind of commitment.
- Rabbits need daily care. If they are not handled gently and often, they may not be comfortable with being picked up and cuddled.



- Rabbits have a fairly delicate digestive system; to obtain necessary nutrients, they must be fed a varied diet.
- Rabbits prefer gentle, quiet environments, so they may not fit in well with a hectic family life and rowdy pet dogs or cats.
- As with any family pet, your bunny will need to see the veterinarian for regular checkups. Rabbits should also be spayed or neutered to make them happier, healthier pets.
- To control the temperature of their environment and to keep them safe from predators, rabbits should be kept inside. Bunnies can be taught to use a litter box, especially if they are spayed or neutered.

For more information, see our resource called “Before Adopting a Rabbit.” You can also visit the House Rabbit Society website at www.rabbit.org.

Ferrets

Ferrets, who belong to the weasel family, have distinctive, engaging personalities and a playful, active nature. They are very social, often affectionate creatures who bond closely with their caretakers.



But, they are not low-maintenance pets. They require a particular diet and constant cage cleaning. They shouldn't be left in a cage long-term; they require play time outside their cages every day and they must be supervised, since their inquisitive nature can lead to mischievousness.

Ferrets' high metabolism, fairly long lifespan (eight to ten years), and strong personalities mean they are not the perfect pet for everyone. If you aren't home much, have young children, or have a busy lifestyle that would prevent a ferret from roaming freely, then a ferret is probably not a good choice for you.

For more information, see our resource called “Before Adopting a Ferret.” You can also visit www.ferretcentral.org, www.ferretwise.org (Ferret Wise Rescue and Rehabilitation Center) or www.ferrets.org (Ferret Information Rescue Shelter and Trust Society).

Horses

Horses fulfill many roles and are a source of enjoyment for many people. However, horses require a serious commitment of time, money and care. A horse will require grooming and other care that require a minimum of a half an hour a day, often more. They are a long-term commitment, since a horse can live up to 30 years.

You should also give some thought to whether you are willing and able to care for a horse who is no longer sound enough to ride, due to age or injury. Almost every horse will need such care, and no horse should ever be abandoned or sold for slaughter because he or she is no longer “useful.”

Horses can also be expensive. Depending upon the services provided (feed, bedding, training and care) and where you live, the cost of boarding a horse ranges from \$50 to \$2,000 a month. Other costs include tack, stable tools and supplies, and veterinary care.

If you are thinking about getting a horse for your child, make sure that your child's other activities will fit in with a horse. Does someone in your family have the experience to care for a horse? If not, are you willing to learn? If you have any doubts about your child's level of interest, you might want to try leasing or sharing a horse before committing to owning a horse.



For more information on horse care, visit the Hooved Animal Rescue and Protection Society website at www.harponline.org. Their resource library has information on humane care of horses.

Fish

If you're considering starting a fish aquarium, the American Humane Association has an information sheet on setting up an aquarium and caring for fish: www.americanhumane.org/kids/aquarium.htm

Other Types of Pets

For information on other types of pets, check out these websites:

Rats: www.ratfanclub.org

Mice: www.horns.freeserve.co.uk/mouse.htm

Hamsters: www.hilltopanimalhospital.com/hamsters.htm

Gerbils: www.animalhospitals-usa.com/small_pets/gerbil_care.html

Guinea Pigs: <http://cavyspirit.com/>

Chinchillas: http://www.essortment.com/caringforchinc_rqpa.htm

Pot-Bellied Pigs: www.pigs.org

Reptiles (Snakes, Lizards, Turtles): www.neherp.com/ (click on "Animal Care" link)