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MULTI-CAT HOUSEHOLDS - THE PROS AND CONS

I want to get a cat but someone told me I should get two together – is this true?

Cats were once considered to be solitary creatures but, while there are some solitary aspects to their behavioural patterns, we now know that, although there may be individual differences, they are in fact social animals who benefit from interaction with their own and other species. As a result of this knowledge there has been a move to promote ownership of more than one cat, and in particular to encourage owners to take on two cats at the same time. This can be beneficial as the cats play together and provide each other with both physical and mental stimulation.



However, it is important to have an understanding of feline society if you are to take on two or more cats successfully.

If I am going to adopt two kittens at the same time, should I get them from the same litter?

Basically cats are family-oriented creatures that commonly live with their relatives. They are not very tolerant of outsiders and are less likely to cohabit harmoniously with a cat that they are not related to. For this reason the best combination of cats is actually littermates and if you are taking on more than one kitten it is certainly better to consider taking on two from the same litter. If you are not able to locate two littermates you can raise young kittens from different litters, provided that you take them on at a very early age, preferably before they are seven weeks old. Adopting two slightly older kittens may work out, but the general rule is that the younger the kittens are when brought together, the more easily they will accept each other as part of their social group.

If I already have a single cat, should I consider getting another cat to keep it company?

If your cat is an adult and is established within your home as the only cat, then you should think carefully about introducing another feline. The majority of cats are hostile to other felines, if they are not related, and there is certainly no guarantee that your cat will thank you for its new playmate. However, some cats, if they have been sufficiently socialized to other cats or are particularly sociable (genetically) do benefit enormously from feline company. Therefore, the decision has to be made on a case-by-case basis. If your cat has been seen in the company of other cats without excessive fear or aggression, it may be possible to integrate a new cat into the household. However, in cases where your cat shows hostility to other cats, or hisses, growls, or marks territory if they enter your yard or garden, then obtaining another cat would not be advisable!

Keep in mind that relationships in cats are usually between pairs of cats. Just because your cat liked one cat, it may not mean that he will accept another. Some cats are naturally easy-going and friendly; others are timid and shy; still others are very assertive and active. Those differences in personality can have a profound effect on how two cats may get along. An easy-going cat may accept most other cats, while a timid and shy cat may be reluctant to accept another cat, depending on the new cat's personality. An active and assertive cat may overwhelm quieter and more timid cats, making introductions difficult. Although, at first the existing housecat(s) may be more likely to have a problem with the new addition to the household, you might later find that it is the new cat that cannot adapt to the new home or the other cats in the home. Attempting to match personality types may be useful when seeking out another companion for your cat.

If my cat was raised with its littermate from an early age but has now been left on its own, due to the death of its brother or sister, should I go and get another cat as a replacement companion?

The bond between feline littermates is very special and when one of a pair dies before the other it is not uncommon for the remaining individual to show classic signs of feline grief. These include behaviors such as vocalization and searching for the missing sibling, as well as changes in basic behaviours such as feeding and seeking social interaction with owners. This grieving process is very variable in its duration, but it is not uncommon for it to last for months. While it is in progress, it is generally not advisable to take on another cat. Indeed, hostility toward another cat that is introduced when the resident cat is fearful, anxious, depressed or in ill health can be very intense and the likelihood of ultimate integration between the cats is very slim. Once the grieving process has passed and the cat has come to terms with the loss of its sibling, it may be possible to integrate a new housemate. But, you need to realise that any bond that is established between your cat and a newcomer will never be as strong as the one that existed between the original littermates. In fact, even if your cat has had a very



close relationship to a previous cat, a new cat may not be welcomed into the household.

I have decided to take on another cat. I would like to know what age and what sex might be most acceptable to my resident adult cat?

Although it is generally accepted that related cats make the most compatible housemates, there is a distinct lack of information about the relative compatibility of unrelated cats. Therefore, it is difficult to give guidance. One piece of research carried out in Switzerland did show that adult cats are more likely to accept the introduction of a younger individual than one of the same age or older, so it would probably be sensible to think about a kitten or a young adult for the new addition to your family. If you do need to take on an adult cat, the same research suggested that an adult of the opposite sex was more likely to be accepted and that, in cases of same-sex pairs, two males were slightly more likely to be compatible than two females.

I have just taken on a second cat and I want to maximise the chance of successful integration. What should I do?

Cats are territorial animals and when you are introducing a second feline you need to remember that they need to establish their own space within the home. It might be best therefore to provide the new cat with a separate housing area and slowly integrate the cats during times when they are likely to be occupied, distracted or enjoying themselves (such as feeding, play or treat times). Key resources such as food, shelter and social interaction need to be available in sufficient amounts to ensure that there is no unnecessary conflict. It is sensible to space these resources around the home to minimise the need to share them directly. Increasing the amount of available space within the home can be achieved by making use of three dimensional features of the house by adding furniture, shelving and aerobic centres which allow the cats to make use of vertical as well as horizontal space. If problems arise, an extended period of separation followed by a very gradual re-introduction, perhaps accompanied by the use of pheromones and/or drugs, might need to be considered. Further advice is contained in the handout entitled "Introducing a New Cat to the Household"

Is it cruel to keep a cat as a single pet?

Although cats are social creatures, they are ultimately solitary survivors. As a result, we assume they have no fundamental need for social company. This means that cats can live alone perfectly happily, and, provided that they have sufficient supply of safe territory, food, shelter and affection from their owners, they will survive very well. This does not mean that they would not benefit from the presence of another cat, especially a littermate or other relative, but it does mean that cats who are used to living alone are not likely to be suffering as a result.

This client information sheet is based on material written by Debra Horwitz, DVM, Diplomate ACVB & Gary Landsberg, DVM, Diplomate ACVB

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