

Introducing Your New Cat to Existing Household Cats

The first step in creating harmony between your new cat and the existing cat(s) in your household is to pick the best possible new cat for your home and lifestyle. All cats are individuals, and some may merge into your household better than others. Cats that were previously living with another cat are more likely to get along with other cats than a cat that was an 'only child'. Therefore, cats that are comfortably sharing space with other cats are probably a better choice than cats that are housed individually. Think about the things that your current cat likes to do. If your cat likes to play, getting another playful cat is probably a good idea. If your cat prefers to lie in the sun all day, you're probably better off adopting a cat that has similar habits. A young kitten or adolescent is probably NOT a good idea for a household with an older cat. Even if the cat you are adopting is 'good with other cats', there is always the possibility of problems when introducing strangers to each other. There are several steps that you should take to reduce the likelihood of problems. Use these guidelines to set your kitties up for success:

- Before bringing your new cat home, create two completely separate areas of the house. Both areas should be equipped with food, water, scratching posts, litter boxes, access to natural sunlight, and comfortable resting places. Make certain that each area contains multiple hiding places which the cat(s) can easily retreat to and escape from if necessary. Large cardboard boxes with holes cut in two sides, make great hiding places. The second hole allows the cat to escape, if cornered by another cat. Cats like to hide in high places; block access to or remove fragile items from shelves in order to prevent them from being broken.
- Place each cat in one of the areas/rooms, and spend a minimum of one hour with each cat per day. Play with them regularly and watch them closely for signs of stress or anxiety. These signs can include: hiding, aggressive behavior, decreased appetite, and/or excessive vocalization. If you see any of these signs your cat could be ill or could be suffering from stress, either way, if they persist for more than several days and/or if your cat stops eating, consult with your veterinarian immediately. A very serious and potentially fatal liver disease has been associated with cats that stop eating- a cat that has not eaten in three days should be seen by a veterinarian immediately. If either cat is showing mild signs of stress, give them time to acclimate to their living space. If both cats appear comfortable in their spaces, trade living areas after two days. This will allow each cat to become accustomed to each other's scent in a non-threatening way. Allow the cats to acclimate to their new room for one day.

- Cats have glands in their cheeks which produce pheromones. When your cat rubs his/her cheeks against a wall, chair, or your leg, he/she produces pheromones, which are chemical substances that can help to relieve anxiety, and provide information about the cat who is producing those pheromones. Exposing each cat to towels that are gently rubbed on the other cat's cheeks may be a good way to introduce them to each other's scent. Some cats respond very well to Feliway® which is a synthetic pheromone spray/diffuser which can be bought online or in pet stores.
- Next, you can start allowing the cats closer access to each other by placing them on either side of a closed door so that they can smell each other directly. The next step is to allow them to see each other through a door that is propped open two inches. If the cats are interested in each other and comfortable, it is time to allow them to meet. Open the door to the rooms between the cats and observe them closely. If either cat shows signs of significant stress or aggression, separate them again and introduce them more slowly, as described below.
- Cats that are showing significant signs of stress/anxiety need to be introduced to each other more slowly. An anxious cat is much more likely to behave aggressively than a cat who is comfortable and relaxed. Patience in the initial stages of the introduction process can be very beneficial to their future. Once the cats have acclimated to being allowed to sniff each other through a door, bring each cat into a large room, on opposite sides. If you have a willing helper, one person should play with each cat, and/or pet him/her and feed her special treats, such as a small portion of canned food. If you do not have an helper, place the more comfortable cat in a cat carrier with a bowl of canned cat food, to occupy his/her attention. Over multiple sessions, gradually bring the cats closer to each other. You are teaching them that they get special rewards in each other's presence, and that nothing 'bad' is happening. With time, the cats will learn that they are not a serious threat to each other.

Note: *The above recommendations are guidelines to increase the likelihood that your new cat will get along with the existing cat(s) in your household. If you have tried these techniques and your cats are still not getting along, please seek the help of your shelter or a behaviorist.*