

## Owning a Pet

Keeping a pet involves a lifetime commitment to provide and care for the pet. You should be certain that you can make this commitment for the lifetime of the pet. You should know that you may have to care for a rabbit or guinea pig for up to 8 years, a dog or cat for up to 20 years and a terrapin for longer than 20 years. You should never buy a pet on an impulse or give a pet as a present unless you are sure that the person to whom you are giving the pet can make a similar lifetime commitment.

Questions you should ask before getting a pet:

- Why am I getting a pet?
- Which pet?
- Is it legal?
- Does it have to be licensed?
- Do I have enough space in my house to accommodate it comfortably?
- Can I keep it in my apartment?
- Will I be able to take care of it its entire life?
- Will I be able to spend proper time with it?
- Will I be able to take care of it should it fall sick?
- Do my family members support my decision?
- Will I be able to ensure that it will not pose a nuisance to others?
- Where can I go to get a pet?

Many people will keep a pet for companionship and to give it a good home. However, you should know the lifespan, characteristics and needs of the pet that you intend to keep.

Currently, pet shops sell dogs, cats, rabbits, guinea pigs, hamsters and many types of birds and fish. Other places you can obtain a pet include breeders, animal shelters or you can also adopt a stray from the street.

A responsible pet owner will provide all of the pet's basic needs as well as love and attention.

Basic needs are food and water, shelter, exercise, grooming and healthcare. You can feed your pet good quality commercial pet food. Swill and spoilt leftover food should never be fed. Clean, fresh drinking water should be provided at all times. Your pet should have shelter from the rain, sun and other inclement weather and a living area that is clean, dry, safe, well-ventilated and sufficiently spacious. You should provide it with daily exercise and keep it clean and well-groomed. You should send it to your veterinarian for an annual check-up and vaccination, or if it is unwell.

Owners should never abandon their pets. To do so is not only irresponsible but also cruel. Most pet animals have become reliant on their owners to take care of them over the years and will not

be able to adapt, find food and look after themselves. Owners should surrender their unwanted pets to animal shelters. Owners who willfully abandon their pets can be prosecuted.

Checklist of potential problems to look out for in your pet.

If you answer "no" to any of the following questions, you should discuss the findings with your vet. As doctors say, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

- Is the coat shiny and free of parasites?
- Are there any lumps or bumps on your pet? Is the skin free of scabs or sores?
- Are the stools firm and passed without severe straining? Are they regular?
- Is your pet's breathing regular and free of wheezing or coughing?
- Can your pet walk and run without limping?
- Can you feel your pet's ribs through the coat and skin? Is his weight within regular limits for the size and breed?
- Is your pet drinking normal amounts of water and urinating regularly?
- Does your pet have a good appetite and keep food down without vomiting?
- Is your pet active and alert without being hyperactive or tiring easily?

### Choosing a pet

Here are some practical tips that one should consider before acquiring a pet:

- **Your Lifestyle**  
If you work all day, travel frequently, or keep irregular hours with nobody at home to look after your pet, then owning one should not be considered. This sounds very drastic, but it takes into consideration the welfare and emotional stress of a pet in isolation and boredom. Simply put; if you have no time for a pet...a pet has no time for you!
- **Your Home**  
Do your public or private estates allow pets to be kept? If noise and mess is a factor, then consider a cat, or a hamster as a pet. Some birds eg. finches and canaries are also good alternatives in this case.
- **Space available**  
This is an important consideration for dogs in general. Dogs love to run and smell out new areas as part of their territorial behaviour. Keeping a dog tied up to a pole is no excuse for bad behavior. Speak to your vet or a behavioral trainer on ways to solve these issues.
- **Housing**  
Each type of pet has its own basic requirements. For birds in general, it is always safer to get a bigger cage...(ie 1.5 times the wingspan). Reptiles do well in temperature controlled



aquariums. Cats enjoy a soft cushion igloo, while cages for dogs have to be an appropriate size, protected from rain and shine, and have soft padding to prevent pressure sores.

- Costs involved

Be aware that the cost of a pet never ends the moment you leave a pet shop. Instead it is usually where it begins. Food, veterinary healthcare, emergencies, deworming and vaccinations are all part and parcel of responsible pet ownership. You have to be prepared financially to keep pets...as their companionship is priceless!



- Commitment

This means giving 2-3 hrs every day for training exercise and play! The average lifespan for dogs and cats are 12 years. Some birds can live up to 60-70 years (eg. parrots). A hamster on the other hand may live for only 2-3 years!

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Young or adult?

This is entirely up to you. Adults may be fully trained, neutered and vaccinated. They are usually a lot easier to manage. However bad habits may have been already acquired. The young is like a baby. They need care, attention and patience.

- Pets and children

If you are getting an adult dog, please make sure that they are safe for children. Think carefully about a breed when choosing. Certain breeds are selectively bred for fighting and aggression. If you get a puppy, make sure that children are gentle with it - they need to be observed. Puppies need a lot of rest, so play sessions should be limited to 30 minute periods, 2-3 times a day. This is the best time to teach your children about the responsibilities of keeping pets. It is usually best to make it their responsibility too.

- Where should I get my pet?

It is advisable to get your pet from a REPUTABLE breeder. Always ask to see the mother and father..and essentially their documents. This is to avoid unscrupulous breeders who indiscriminately breed animals with poor genetics in poor hygiene conditions.

- Never get a puppy from a street hawker!
- Never get your puppy from a puppy farm! (without proper documents)
- If you're answering a newspaper advertisement always ask to see their puppies with their mothers at home!
- You may consider getting your dog from an animal shelter eg. SPCA or from a Vet. These organisations often have many abandoned pets looking for homes.
- Before accepting a pet always look for the following:

Some criteria for a healthy pet

1. Bright, Alert, Responsive
2. Confident, Relaxed and Friendly
3. Clear, bright eyes
4. Shiny, glossy full coat/feathers
5. Good body condition
6. No discharge, coughing, sneezing or diarrhoea

- It is good practice to take your newly acquired pet to the vet for a general health check. Your vet will discuss with you on diet, training, vaccinations, deworming, flea and tick control, heartworm prevention and neutering. Puppies that come from unscrupulous breeders usually have poor immunity and are susceptible to disease. Hence the stigma "Prevention is better than cure!"

### Grooming tips for your pet



- While the condition of a pet's hair or fur is an indication of its health, pets with ungroomed coats could also be the result of neglect.
- Unkempt, poorly groomed coats can invite external parasites, fleas, lice, ticks, bacteria and fungal problems. Normal grooming procedures should be emphasised as part of the health maintenance programme in young dogs and cats.

Owners need to spend some time grooming their pets on a regular basis. And most well-trained pets enjoy being groomed.

- Cat breeds that should be groomed daily are the long coated ones like persians and himalayans.
- Dogs like poodles, pekingese and maltese should be groomed weekly.
- Brushing your cat

Comb carefully in the direction of hair growth to smooth the coat and remove any minor knots or tangles. If the coat has a particularly stubborn knot or tangle, you may have to trim it off with scissors. For long-haired cats, brush with a wide tooth comb and follow up with a fine tooth comb. To avoid injury, if your cat's coat has severe matting, consult a veterinarian or professional groomer.

- After combing, use a shedding blade to remove any loose or dead hair in the coat. A chamois cloth would be ideal as a thorough brush for short-haired cats. A slicker brush is excellent for curly coated breeds like Devon and Cornish pets.
- How often your cat needs grooming depends upon several factors — type and length of coat and weather condition. Generally speaking, short-haired cats should be groomed once or twice a week, while long-haired cats should be groomed daily.
- You will soon find the grooming frequency that provides the best results for your cat. It is important to establish and adhere to a regular grooming schedule. These sessions should be scheduled at a time that is convenient for you. Make sure that you allow time to provide proper grooming and are not likely to be interrupted.
- Grooming will help remove dead hair from cats and you would not have to remove it from your furniture, rug and clothings. Before you start combing or brushing your cat, check to see if your cat's claws need clipping. You will have to check each claw and see if it is pointed. Check with your veterinarian and ask his advice if you are not sure.

- You will need some grooming tools for proper brushing to achieve a well-groomed look. They are:

- Brush for combing through coat (slicker brush);
- Chamois cloth;
- Face cloth for cleaning eyes, etc;
- Cotton wool for cleaning ears;
- Specially shaped clippers for trimming claws; and
- Fine toothed comb for short-haired cats to smoothen the coat and remove fleas and dirt.



- Why is regular grooming important?

Regular grooming is essential to your cat's health and well-being. Regular combing and brushing will keep the coat clean and healthy, stimulate the skin, and allow the natural oils to circulate to the coat. It will also help to prevent hairballs, which are the result of loose hair being picked up by the cat's tongue and then swallowed. These hairs sometime accumulate in the cat's stomach forming hairballs which can be harmful to the cat.

- For dogs, the amount of grooming you do depends a lot on the type of dog you own. Long-haired dogs such as golden retrievers need to be brushed frequently. Poodles require professional grooming while dachshunds require very little grooming. Nails too need to be trimmed and kept short while long-eared dogs need their ears to be cleaned more often.
- For your puppy, bathe only as needed with a good puppy shampoo since too many baths can strip his coat of essential oils. Grooming sessions should be kept short and preferably start when the dog is a puppy so that it gets used to being handled and this will also prepare him for some home health check-ups. At the same time it helps a great deal during the visits to the veterinarian since your dog needs to stand quietly.
- Always talk to your dog gently — if he struggles during the grooming sessions, sternly say "No." If he's still, praise him. Grooming will also allow you to check for potentially serious problems. Check for areas of hair loss, inflammation, unusual tenderness or lumps under the skin. Good grooming habits also prevent fleas and ticks on your pet and thus helps keep them under control. Constant scratching in a particular area may also be an indication of a problem. Check with your veterinarian about any unusual problems you may find.
- The eyes and ears (long or lop-eared, eg. cocker spaniel) should not be forgotten and must be kept clean with tear stain removers and ear cleaners which are also available in the market at reasonable prices. Tear stain removers keep the eye area clean and dirt-free. Ear cleaners help to prevent against fungal infections and help remove water from the ear canal, keeping it dry at all times (suitable especially after baths, playing and splashing in water, or maybe even a paddle in the pool!).
- The tip to a happy kitten or puppy lies in good hygiene from the very beginning. Check out the different ranges of grooming aids at pet shops. Now you can also find colognes for cats and dogs which come in affordable prices, so that your pets smell good all day long or simply because you have guests around the house.

- Recently, scientists have even come up with a scent specially made for dogs to attract a mate!
- Well, this will be fantastic for breeders' profitability as far as good breeding techniques are concerned. On the other hand, some people may opt for something more reasonable to suit their tastes.

## Pet Care Tips

- Spaying can be done between 6-10 months. Spaying reduces aggressiveness, tendency to mark territory and risk of developing mammary and ovarian cancers.
  - When taking your pet outdoors, it is necessary to have it on a leash. Practice letting your puppy wear a leash at a young age so it gets used to it.
  - When taking your dog out for a walk, prevent it from picking up grass or rubbish as these may contain parasites, insect larvae or pesticide.
  - Do not feed or allow your dog to eat raw meat which may contain parasites. Have available clean fresh water for it to drink.
  - Practise preventive healthcare, visit your vet for check up and deworming.
  - To help relieve pain and irritation in gums during teething, provide your pets things for them to chew on in the form of plastic toys, jerky or bone treats.
  - You can check your dog's pulse by pressing the vein under the thighs. A normal puppy's pulse is between 90-120 counts per minute (adult's pulse is between 60-90 counts per minute). A dog's normal temperature is 38-39°C.
  - Older dogs with geriatric signs like arthritis, cataract, dental problem or poor hearing need a highly digestible, low sodium and phosphorus diet to reduce organ workload.
  - Provide opportunity for your dog to socialise with other pets and people. Take them out for walks or enrol them for puppy classes that will include some basic training.
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- When taking your dog out for a walk, always have it on a leash. If you let your puppy practice wearing a leash at a young age it will get used to it.
  - Do not give puppies old shoes, to chew on. This will make him think all shoes are acceptable for chewing.
  - Do not feed your dog raw meat which may contain parasites.
  - A balanced diet is necessary to ensure your pet's health. Fats, for example, are essential to protect against cold, provide protection for organs and for a healthy coat.
  - Dogs can be trained to obey simple commands. Also provide opportunity for it to socialise with other pets and people.
  - Always ensure that household chemicals and other harmful substances are safely out of your puppy's reach.

## Caring for your Pet

Some tips on pet care for children:

## Dogs:

- Dogs need exercise once or twice a day eg. by chasing a ball or going for a walk or a run.
- They need regular baths and grooming, with short-haired dogs being easiest to groom.
- Most dogs enjoy having company and like to play with people and other dogs, even when they are older.
- All dogs can be trained and some can also be trained to do work for us.

## Cats:

- Cats get enough exercise when they play and do not need to be taken for walks.
- They keep themselves clean and tidy but long-haired cats will need more frequent grooming than short-haired ones.
- Cats spend most of their time sleeping, especially during the day.
- They are friendly and enjoy company but still like to be independent.

## Important safety aspects:

- Check thoroughly your pet's living area for poisons / chemicals or sharp objects that can be swallowed.
- Don't leave cigarette butts where a pet can reach them because if eaten can lead to toxicity.
- Ensure electrical cords are not accessible. If your puppy chews a cord, severe electrical burns or even death may result.
- Keep lit candles out of reach. Pets are attracted to them and may get burned.
- Ensure all medicines are kept safely away.
- Keep toilet lid down if you use toilet bowl cleaners. The strong alkaline content in these chemicals can make a pet sick.
- Install grills for windows or keep them closed especially when you are going out.
- Don't expose young puppies to other dogs or other people since they can carry virus with them, until your puppy is fully protected by vaccinations.
- Don't give your pet natural bones these can be fatal.
- Don't leave needles or pins around, which can be swallowed, sometimes with tragic results.
- Be careful when using insecticides - try to limit to moderate use.
- Never give your dog any human medicines. You will need to consult your vet first.

## On children and pets:

- Teach young children to be gentle and not pull the puppy's / kitten's ear or tail. Never let your child carry your dog by the scruff of the neck.



- Teach children to notice when they are holding a pet too tightly or handling too roughly.
- Don't leave children alone with a puppy/kitten until they are well acquainted and know how to handle and care for the pet properly.
- Ensure children under 5 or 6 years old only play with a puppy/kitten with adult supervision.