

Practical Advice and Considerations

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Pets are truly members of the American family. About 60% of U.S. households have at least one dog, cat, bird, or other companion animal. Many have more than one.

Pets are popular because they provide companionship, joy, unconditional love, a sense of safety, and often a service. These are probably some of the reasons why you're thinking about getting a pet. Animals are fun to be with every day. They make us feel good!

Your pet-owning experience will be most enjoyable if you take the time to consider which animal best suits your family. You can start by answering some easy questions and gathering sound information and advice. This process won't take long and it will be educational and fun, particularly for children.

Select your pet the best way--the way recommended by veterinarians. A pet will become your daily responsibility, so make an informed pet selection. Don't let the playful antics of the first puppy, kitten, or bird you see or the latest status-symbol pet charm you into accepting a responsibility for which you and your family are not prepared.

You've read articles about the millions of unwanted pets that have to be put to death each year. Pets selected on impulse, "for the children," or as a gift during the holidays sometimes end up this way. These pets once belonged to people who fell in love--and then changed their minds.

Selecting a pet should be a family project with everyone's needs, concerns, fears, and medical history (including allergies) considered. Family members should decide together what kind of animal they want, the amount of time they anticipate spending with it, and the amount of responsibility each person is willing to assume. Be realistic. Promises from some family members, particularly children, may not be fulfilled.

Your goal is to identify the best animal(s) for your living space, lifestyle, and budget. Take time, involve the family, and answer the following questions.

Do You Have Room for a Pet?

Active dogs need more space and more daily exercise than older or more sedentary dogs. Some pets may get enough exercise within the confines of a house or apartment. For their own safety, dogs and cats should not be allowed to run uncontrolled, but should be walked on a leash or exercised in an enclosed area. Most animals are better kept indoors or in a suitable kennel while you're gone.

Cats, birds, and small mammals can adapt to any size living quarters.

What Activities Do You Enjoy?

You and your family should discuss the reasons you want a companion animal and what you expect an animal to do with and for you. Most people keep pets as companions, whereas others enjoy animals for showing, breeding, hunting, or other reasons. Will the animal you're considering have the temperament and physical attributes to participate in your outdoor activities (hiking, hunting, or camping) or in quiet pastimes at home? If your leisure activities take you away from home, who will care for your pet during your absences? Read about the temperaments and needs of species and breeds, and identify those that best match your lifestyle.

How Do You Spend Your Day?

Pets depend on people for daily affection and attention. Young puppies and kittens require time for housebreaking, training, and feeding. Are you gone all day? Do you frequently work late? What will you do with your pet during long absences? Feeding, exercise, grooming, and play are daily time commitments that must be considered in caring for a healthy, happy pet.

Do You Have a No-Pets Clause?

Most rental agreement no-pets clauses apply only to dogs and cats; birds or small mammals may be acceptable. If you want a dog or cat but your lease or condominium association rules prohibit them, ask that the no-pets clause be waived or negotiated. Outline your plan to care for your pet, to adapt to your living environment, and to meet your landlord's expectations. Assure your association leaders that you are a responsible pet owner who is aware of the importance of a well-behaved animal and a clean environment. Furnish references from previous landlords or neighbors. Agree in writing to pay a refundable deposit or a small monthly surcharge.

How Much Will Your Pet Cost?

The purchase price of an animal varies greatly. All pets need food and shelter, and most should have regular visits to a veterinarian for health checkups and vaccinations. Depending on the type of animal you choose, other cost considerations include emergency medical treatment, grooming, boarding, licensing, obedience training, and accessories. Pet health insurance for unexpected illnesses or injuries is available in many states.

What If a Pet Doesn't Fit Your Lifestyle?

After discussing the role a pet will play in your life and talking with knowledgeable people, you may conclude that your first choice for a pet is not appropriate, so be flexible. Your veterinarian may suggest other companion animals whose needs more closely match your own.

You can still enjoy the animals around you if a pet does not fit into your present lifestyle. Try putting a bird feeder outside your window or becoming an active member of a local zoologic

society. Volunteer at a humane society or animal shelter. Consider a pet when your circumstances change.

Veterinarians and Other Community Resources

When your family decides it's time to actually look for a pet, each person should participate in the selection process. A good place to start is a family consultation with a veterinarian to determine the compatibility of your needs with those of the animal(s) being considered. Veterinarians can offer expert advice on the physical needs, health, and behavioral characteristics of particular animals, and can direct you to other resources.

Other good sources of guidance and literature on pets include public libraries, humane societies, animal shelters, animal control agencies, breeders, pet stores, obedience classes, and local kennel, cat, and bird clubs. Dog and cat shows offer the advantage of comparing many breeds at one time.

A Check-up for Your New Companion

The neighbor, breeder, shelter, or pet store where you obtain your pet should allow you to have the animal examined by a veterinarian and to return it within an agreed-upon time if the animal is unhealthy. Do this as soon as possible, before you become emotionally attached to the animal.

Your veterinarian is best qualified to assure you that your new friend is healthy and to administer the necessary vaccinations. At the same time, you can discuss proper nutrition and feeding, surgical sterilization, other preventive health measures, and grooming needs.

Prepare Your Home for Your Pet's Arrival

Before bringing a pet into your home, prepare a special place for it to eat and sleep. At first, try to maintain the animal's daily schedule for play, eating, and elimination. Decide where you will exercise your pet. Obtain any necessary accessories (such as collar and ID tag, leash, scratching post, litter box, crate, bird cage, etc.) before you bring your pet home. You should pet-proof your home just as you would child-proof your home to avoid accidents. Harmful cleansers, plants, electrical cords, and breakable objects should be removed from potential contact with your pet. What will you do with your pet during long absences? Feeding, exercise, grooming, and play are daily time commitments that must be considered in caring for a healthy, happy pet.