

How to Introduce a New Environment to your Cat - or a New Cat to your Environment!

A New Cat or a New Environment: What's the Difference?

Remember your first day at school? Or how it felt to start a new job? Remember how overwhelming it was: not knowing where everything was or quite where and how you fit in? This is how a cat feels whenever his or her environment changes significantly. Cats are highly intelligent creatures who seem to possess something akin to an “imagination” - they imagine terrors to exist when in reality nothing is there (this is why cats will sometimes climb trees, but then appear unable to get down again - they imagine whatever chased them up there is still lurking about below!).

Cats are creatures of habit and any change to their lifestyle can be very difficult for them to adjust to. It doesn't matter if you are introducing a new cat to your household or a new household to your cat. Improperly handled, you may run the risk of your cat running away, or developing unwanted behaviours.

There are many myths about how to stop a cat running away when you move them into a new environment, but the majority of such stories are just that: myths. Besides providing your cat with a tasty treat that may make it feel content for a few minutes, putting butter on your cat's paws will not make it any more inclined to stay at home than giving it a bowl of food.

So what *can* you do to minimise the stress on your feline friend and help them adjust to their new home?



Little by Little

The first thing you can do is set up your home before the cat arrives. It doesn't matter if you're moving house, or plan on acquiring a new cat. You need to make sure that everything is in place *before* kitty arrives.



To help your cat grow accustomed to a new environment, it is best to confine them for a period of time before letting them out to explore their greater world.

Start with just one room. Set this room up with food, water, at least one litter tray (but preferably two). Make sure there is somewhere high for the cat to perch by placing some sort of bedding on top of a cupboard or cat pole etc. You will also need to provide somewhere for the cat to hide: under a bed works well, or inside a box or cupboard. Rule number one: if your cat is hiding, NEVER drag him or her out of it. Pretend you don't know they are in there. This will help your cat feel secure.

Your cat may need to stay in the room for a week or more, until they are confidently approaching you and feeling safe enough to risk exploring the rest of their new home. You will know your cat is ready when it comes to greet you as you enter the room, and seems to be hiding less frequently. Some cats may need to be in their safe room for a longer period until they adjust to being in their new home.

When your cat has indicated he or she is ready, put any other animals somewhere separate (in a closed off room or outside if appropriate e.g. for dogs) and just open the door of the safety room. Let your cat emerge and explore in his or her own time. You may find they move very slowly about the rooms, their belly low to the ground as they take long, slow steps and slink along the walls. This is normal.

If you are introducing a new cat into a home where there is an existing cat, this is the moment to begin the process. Please see our fact sheet on how to introduce a new cat for more information.



While it is natural for humans to encourage one another by calling encouraging words and reaching out to demonstrate there is nothing to be afraid of, this is unfortunately the very worst thing you can do for a cat! It is important that you don't rush them; let the cat adjust in their own time. They will come to you when they are ready. Instead, pretend you can't even see them.

What to Watch For

Depending on the lifestyle the cat led previously, it may have a few reactions to the change in environment that you may not have expected. It helps to be prepared for these. They may range from "door-barging" and clawing at doors and windows, to prolonged hiding, or inappropriate toileting. All of these problems should pass in time, but if problems persist, please consult our Behaviour Helpline: 07 3426 9928.

"Door-barging" is when an animal pushes past you as you are trying to get in or out of a doorway. This and clawing at doors and windows are frequently symptoms of a cat that has been allowed outdoors much of the time. They don't understand why suddenly they have been confined but be warned! If they get out, these are the most likely to run away. It is important that these guys stay in their "launch room" for at least two weeks. Alternately, the problem may be resolved simply by providing the cat with a secure outlet to the outside world, such as a secure cat enclosure. Either way, you should attach a bell to your cat's collar and whenever you are passing through a doorway to the outside world, make a quick visual check to see where the cat is before you pass through it to ensure they don't get by you. Some cats vent their frustration by becoming quite destructive, particularly to doors and flyscreens. Try to channel the cat's behaviour into less destructive paths by engaging the cat in active playtime everyday. Provide them with a scratch pole but make sure it has a surface and a direction suited to their preferences. (Some cats prefer to scratch horizontally, others vertically, and some prefer an angle). Scratching also help spread a cat's pheromones and helps them feel at home. These activities will help a cat's confidence and therefore help them adjust faster.

Some cats take a very long time before they feel confident. Don't rush them - that will only set them back and make the process even longer than it was before. Let them stay in their "launch room" as long as it takes for them to feel more confident and when they are ready, let them exit

the room in their own time and explore alone - while you are at work is often a good time to try this. Make sure there are plenty of cosy hiding places in case things get scary. Remember that you should never approach, touch, talk to or even look directly at a cat while it is in a hide. They will feel safer if they think no one can see them in there. It becomes a safe cubby-hole where the scary things outside can't find them.

If the cat begins toileting inappropriately ensure first of all there is no medical reason for this behaviour. If the cat is cleared by a vet for a medical reason, then it is most likely a sign of extreme stress. Please see our fact sheet on Inappropriate Toileting for assistance in how to approach this problem.

All of the above problems can be assisted with the use of a Feliway diffuser (available from your local vet) which approximates a cat's pheromones and has a calming effect. You may also try collecting your cat's own pheromones by getting a soft dry cloth and wiping it over the cat's chin, cheeks and forehead. Then rub the cloth on sofas, carpets and around doors and windows. This will help spread your cat's scent about the house (undetectable to you) and help them feel more at home.

So How Long Does it Take?

Unfortunately, the answer is that it will vary for each cat so there can be no set timeframe. Some cats are quite confident and will adjust rapidly to a new environment. Other cats may take months. The RSPCA recommends that you keep your cat indoors for at least two weeks before letting them explore outside (if they are indoor/outdoor cats). A new cat or kitten should be confined indoors until he or she has been *fully* vaccinated.

Follow these steps and you will soon have a contented cat who is well adjusted to their new home with minimal stress to both you and your feline friend!

