

Choosing a new Pet

Almost everyone has room in their lives for a pet. The companionship provided by a furry friend is hard to equal. One of the sad truths about pet ownership is that, when it doesn't work out as hoped, unwanted animals often end up being abandoned in rescue centres.

You and your new pet are going to spend a lot of time together over the next few years, and it is important that you are able to make the right choice about the best pet for you.

What do you want from the pet?

- Companionship?
- Exercise?
- Guarding?

Different types of pet are more suitable for different types of people

What will the pet need from you ?

- Companionship.
- Exercise.
- Space.
- Health care – vaccinations, vet care for illness.
- Feeding – correct diet.
- Grooming

What will you have to give?

- Time and money.

What will fit best with your lifestyle?

Cats are now most numerous pet in UK, reflecting the change in our busy lifestyles. Many people work all day and are not able to provide the amount of companionship and exercise a dog needs. A dog is for life --- not just for weekends! Dogs will normally sleep for up to 4 hours at a time and need to be quite active in between, so it is unfair to get a dog if you will regularly be out for much more than 4 hours.

How much time can you spend grooming your pet?

Even short coated dogs and cats need a few minutes every day to groom them, clean their teeth & perform a health check. Some long coated breeds require hours of grooming every day. An Afghan Hound in show condition looks beautiful, without regular grooming it looks a mess and is unhappy.

Many books will help you to choose a breed of dog or cat based on how it looks. Of course it is important that you like the appearance of your pet, but there are a lot more factors which are important. We all agree that tigers LOOK beautiful but not many of us could cope with a tiger as a pet.

Some breeds need more exercise than others

e.g. Collies are working dogs with active minds. They need at least two hours aerobic exercise every day and lots of activity in between. As a breed, they make an excellent choice for people interested in agility or obedience but they do take a lot of work. Toy & small utility breeds often have a more sedentary lifestyle; some of the Tibetan breeds were bred to sit on monks' laps and keep them warm – the modern version can make ideal companions for older people. Birman cats are relatively sedentary but Abyssinians are very active and will need to be played with. Dogs are great inspiration for us to exercise BUT don't be fooled into assuming that when you have a dog you WILL do more. Be realistic about the time you have available & your capabilities.

What size of pet can you cope with?

As size gets bigger everything else increases too. Bigger dogs need more space and cost more to feed than small dogs and cats. Vet's bills are made up largely from drug prices – the bigger the dog the more antibiotic etc it will need. Insurance companies know this and many charge higher premium for giant breeds.

Who is the pet for?

Consider EVERYONE in the house, including frequent visitors (grandchildren etc.) The dog or cat will be with you for at least ten years so consider any major changes which might take place in the family during that time.

Older people can benefit enormously from pet ownership. Before rushing out to buy a pet for a pensioner, however consider whether they will still cope as well with the that animal in ten years time. Many larger breed are prone to arthritis and can develop mobility problems. You may very well be able to cope with a young Golden Retriever now, but will you be able to lift it into the car when you are both a decade older?

Perhaps a small breed, many of which are every bit as active as the larger dogs or and older pet would make a better choice than a large breed, or a puppy or kitten. Cats and house rabbits make excellent companions for less active people.

Children love pets but not all types of pet love children! How much will the child want to play with the pet? If they are very boisterous, a quiet shy pup may have difficulty coping. Some very small breeds are too fragile for wild games. However, a big pushy dog may try to control the children and could succeed.

Children grow up too – will they be leaving home during the pet's lifetime?

Who will care for the pet then?

Is Mum likely to return to work when the children head off to school?

Is the child likely to become bored?

Shorter lived animals may be more suitable for the ever changing needs of young people. Rats, mice and guinea pigs animals are active and interesting to watch and are easy and inexpensive to keep. The child can be allowed to feel responsible for the care of a small pet, always under careful adult supervision.

Some children are fascinated by the 'slime factor' of more exotic pets. Before embarking on a new venture with a child's pet make sure there is an adult in the house who is interested and able to supervise. Exotic pets require specialist care. Mice and hamsters all too often end up being neglected in or on top of wardrobes!

Other pets – are you looking for a companion for an existing pet?

Many people cannot bear to be without a pet and like to get a puppy before their old pet passes on. This can work well and the change of routine often seems to give new life to a middle aged pet, but do consider the personality of your current pet. Will an old cat or dog cope with a boisterous puppy? Does your cat like other cats? Is it terrified of dogs? Should you really get a kitten if you already have a dog which is a dreadful cat chaser?

Having considered all the factors which are relevant to you, you will have a fair idea of the type of pet which you should be looking for. How should you refine your search to find the perfect animal for you?

At the end of the day, this really comes down to personal preference. The guidelines below should help you to find the best place to look for your new pet.

Should you get a pedigree pet or a crossbreed?

Some advantages of opting for a pedigree dog or cat include:

- Predictability -You know roughly what to expect your pet to be like
- Appearance typical of the breed – you know how big it will get and what the coat will be like.
- Breed typical behaviour – you can select a breed with the temperament to suit your lifestyle.
- Can select specific blood lines - many breeds are tested for hereditary problems, allowing you to select for the minimum risk of breed specific problems.
- Backup and advice offered by breed societies, allowing you to meet people who share your interest in the breed.
- If you are interested in showing, you will need a pedigree animal.
- There is a certain status symbol in having a pedigree animal.

Some possible disadvantages of opting for a pedigree pet include:

- They can be expensive to buy.
- Some breeds are prone to breed specific health problems.
- Most breeders also show and there is a risk that selection has been for appearance, not temperament.

The alternative to a pedigree pet would be a crossbreed (a moggy or a mongrel) These, too have their pros and cons:

Crossbreeds - advantages:

- Inexpensive to buy.
- Fewer hereditary health problems.
- Individuality.
- Any selection there has been is for temperament over appearance.

Crossbreeds - disadvantages:

- Appearance not so predictable, how big will the puppy grow?
- Behaviour not always predictable, often a lot of collie or guarding breed in ancestry.
- Not immune to health problems – it is a fallacy that mongrels are necessarily healthier than pedigree animals
- Should you get a puppy/ kitten or an adult dog/cat?
- You do not necessarily have to get a puppy or a kitten. There are always adult dogs and cats, both pedigree and crossbred looking for homes.

Puppies and kittens - advantages:

- Fun and cute!
- Socialisation phase' of development at 8 – 20weeks.
- YOU have a chance to form a bond with your pet and influence its development at the earliest stage.
- Training and 'shaping' is easier.
- Can choose the breeder and meet the parents.
- A clean slate – no bad habits to un-teach.

Young animals can have their disadvantages too:

- Need a lot of time and energy.
- House training.
- Expensive – in the first year will need primary vaccinations & neutering. May grow out of collar & lead, beds, toys etc.
- Remember the puppy will grow and change.

Some advantages of getting an adult pet include:

- May be quieter / more sedate.
- May already be house trained.
- Appearance and behaviour unlikely to change much.
- 'Feel good' - it is nice to provide a home for a needy animal.
- Relatively inexpensive – may be already vaccinated & neutered, only needs one set of equipment

But they can bring their own unique problems:

- You may be taking on a problem pet! The commonest reason given by people taking animals to shelters is behaviour problems of varying sorts.
- An adult may take a while to settle into a new routine.
- You will have missed out on early changes to train & shape the pet's behaviour. You can teach an old dog new tricks, but it takes longer!

Making your mind up:

There are lots of points to think about and these pages may seem to have opened up a can of worms rather than helping – so how do you make your decision ?

Get advice & speak to people:

- Vets and Nurses, contact the surgery. We would far rather chat to you now and help you to find the right pet for you than try to help you correct problems later (although we can do that too!). We can chat to you on the phone or arrange a free 'select-a-pet' consultation.
- Friends & family – learn from their experiences. Lots of families all own the same breed because they have learned from experience what suits them. Children leave home and get their own pet, of the same breed as they grew up with.
- Pet shows e.g. Discover Dogs at Earls Court, Pets Pets Pets at Tatton this year, Scruffs, Crufts, Cat Shows. Go to events, meet people with different breeds of dogs and cats. Breed enthusiasts are only too happy to talk to you about their chosen breed, and extol its virtues!
- Read – books & magazines. Dogs Today magazine runs a helpful service which puts prospective owners in touch with breed clubs and rescue societies.

If you decide on pedigree animal – The Kennel Club or General Council of the Cat Fancy can put you in touch with breed clubs. Most breeds have their own welfare organisations, if you think you would prefer to offer a home to a rescue dog of your chosen breed.

If decide on a crossbred – The National Canine Defence League and Cats Protection League are national charities which are involved in homing animals of all ages. You could also contact local animal charities such as SRDA at Windyways, Stiles Meadow or Manchester Dog's Home.

Be prepared to be thoroughly grilled – a good rescue society or breeder will not foster out an animal until they are certain it is going to a good home.

What to look for:

You've decided what sort of pet would suit you – how do you find this perfect pet?

If you are buying a puppy:

If you are choosing a pedigree puppy, the breed club secretary will be able to put you in touch with breeders who have litters at the right time for you. Be prepared to travel some distance or wait a while for unusual breeds.

Vets may know of litters of crossbred pups which are looking for homes, or there may be pups at rescue centres.

There is nothing wrong with responding to adverts in papers or pet shop notice boards, but BEWARE PUPPY FARMERS. Anyone frequently advertising pups of more than one breed or from more than one litter at a time should be regarded with some caution.

Choosing a pup:

Puppies are like little sponges ! They start learning about the world as soon as they open their eyes and begin moving around.

The breeder can help you by socialising your pup from the very beginning. A puppy which has been reared in a busy home environment and exposed to the sounds of washing machines, clattering pots and pans, vacuum cleaners etc will fit into a family home far better than one which has spent its first six weeks outside in a dark kennel. Ask to meet the whole litter and their Mum as young as possible. It is a bonus if you can also meet the father but most breeders do not own both parents.

Select YOUR puppy with care – even within a litter all puppies will show their individual temperaments.

The most confident pup is also likely to be the most bossy and may need careful handling. He is used to being in charge and may want to control you.

A very shy puppy which hides in the corner may have trouble fitting in with a noisy family home.

Picking a Rescue Dog:

If you are looking for a particular breed, contact the breed rescue society.

If you are looking for a crossbred, decide BEFORE you go to the animal sanctuary on what type of dog or cat you want.

Make several visits to the sanctuary – agree with the family that you will not collect a pet on your first visit. A good rescue society will appreciate the thought you are putting into acquiring your new pet and will be happy to let you look round.

Find out as much as you can about your chosen pet's history – why is it needing to be rehomed? Have any problems been identified that you need to know about ? If the animal has been a stray, there may be very little information available.

Ask to spend some time alone with the animal getting to know each other before you make your final decision.

Be strong. Don't be swayed from your original plan by horror stories. An animal which has had a terrible start will not be served by going into an unsuitable home environment, however sorry you feel for it

Welcoming your new pet:

Be Prepared !! – BEFORE collecting your new pet.

Decide on a name for the pet before it comes, take time to teach your new pet its name.

Have an appropriate food , dish & bed ready. Find out what your puppy or kitten was being fed before and don't make any sudden changes.

Let the new pet explore your house in its own time. Speak softly and play with the pup if he comes out to explore, but don't force your attention on them while they get their bearings.

Bring your pet to the vet for a health check within 5 days, preferably on the day you collect it, before you become too emotionally attached. We can point out any health problems which must be addressed and advise on feeding, vaccination, worming, flea control etc.