

Choosing Your Kitten: Personality and Health

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Now that you have decided you can make the time and financial commitment involved in owning a kitten, you need to choose one. You will need to consider the personality of the kitten you want, as well as the age, health, and appearance.



Age

Kittens are not small puppies. Rules of thumb that apply to dogs do not necessarily apply to cats, and the optimal age for adoption is one of those rules. While the best age to adopt a puppy is 7 weeks, kittens should be at least 9 weeks of age, and some even suggest 12 weeks of age before adoption. Kittens need a longer period of time with their mother and siblings to help them learn normal and acceptable behaviors.

Parents and siblings

If possible, it is best to choose a kitten from a litter. Observing the interactions between the kittens and the personality of the mother (and father, if possible) may help you choose a kitten with the traits you desire. Though friendly parents may have timid or aggressive kittens if they are not socialized properly, your chance of having a friendly kitten will increase if the parents get along well with people. If the kittens sense fear of people in their mother, they are more apt to be fearful, too. Adopting kittens from a feral (running wild) cat can be very problematic, especially for people who do not have a lot of experience handling cats.

Early socialization

How and when the kitten was handled from birth has a tremendous impact on the development of the kitten. Kittens who are gently handled multiple times a day, and who are exposed to many different people and other animals while they are 2-9 weeks of age, are more likely to be friendly and well-adjusted, and generally get along better with people and other animals. Kittens who did not have a lot of human or other animal contact during this period, or who are mistreated or played with roughly, may be more timid or aggressive.

If possible, find a litter that has been in a home environment, and used to the many smells, sights, and sounds that are common in a home. If kittens are exposed to vacuum cleaners, kitchen appliances, and other items in the house that are noisy when they are 2-8 weeks of age, they will generally be less fearful of them than those who are not exposed until they are older.

Problems with hand-reared or orphan cats

Kittens who do not grow up with their mother or siblings are more likely to have behavior problems as they grow older. By living as a family, kittens are more subject to frustration and how to properly cope with it (e.g., the mother gets up when they want to nurse, or a sibling bothers them when they want to sleep). In a family, they learn guidelines as to what is acceptable behavior and what is not. They soon find out that biting and scratching is not tolerated. If hand-reared by people, kittens are less likely to develop inhibitions against these behaviors and are more prone to displaying them.

Assessing kitten personality

In selecting a specific kitten, watch how the kittens interact with each other. A kitten should be playful, but not too aggressive. Avoid kittens who hide in the corner or appear to bully their siblings.

Kittens should be confident, inquisitive, and not reluctant to come to you. Kittens who hiss or hide when approached by humans will be much more difficult to raise into friendly cats. The kitten should not cower or show fear when petted on his head. Kittens should readily accept playing with you. Take a string along and drag it on the floor. Well-adjusted and healthy kittens should eagerly pounce on it and want to play. Realize, however, if the kittens have just had a rousing game of tag or wrestling, they may be tired. Kittens are often either very active or sleeping, not much in between.

Assessing health

You want to be sure the kitten you select is healthy. There are some obvious things to check for, as listed below. However, always have your kitten checked by your veterinarian, preferably the day you get the kitten.

A healthy kitten should have:

- Clear eyes with no tearing or discharge. The eyes should be fully open, focus normally, and be able to follow your finger or a piece of string dragged across the floor.
- A clean nose with no nasal discharge, sneezing, or labored breathing.
- Clean ears with no odor, head shaking, or scratching. Black granular discharge could indicate ear mites.
- Gums that are pink, with no sores or ulcers in the mouth or on the tongue. The teeth should be white and properly aligned. There should be no odor to the breath.

- An anal area that is clean, with no discoloration, matted fur, or evidence of parasites (tapeworms may look like cucumber seeds).
- A clean, soft coat with no dandruff. There should be no evidence of parasites, e.g., lice or fleas (flea dirt may look like tiny black-red granules, which dissolve into red on a moistened paper towel. There should be no evidence of scratching or bald spots (ringworm). A kitten's coat will usually not appear as glossy as an adult's.
- A symmetrical body shape, and one that is neither too thin nor has a protruding belly, which could indicate a severe intestinal parasite problem.
- A good appetite and be fully weaned.
- No lumps or bumps - including at the umbilicus (belly button).
- Coordinated movement, with no head tremors. Some cats may have extra toes (polydactyly), but this usually does not cause a problem.

Be aware of the differences in breeds when judging the health of a cat. For instance, the ears of a Scottish fold cat are naturally folded forward and downward. Kittens of oriental breeds may appear thin because of the length of their bodies and limbs.