

PREVENTATIVE CARE FOR PETS: How do I choose what's best for my kitten?

The possibilities are endless. So many vaccinations, pet foods and other products and services exist for cats, and so many people are willing to give you advice about which to choose. One of the best ways to start planning a health care program for your pet is to do an analysis of his or her risk factors. This will help you narrow your choices and select those that make the most sense. You should also work with your pet's veterinarian to decide what's right in your situation. Well-meaning but misguided advice from feed mill or pet store employees, friends and neighbors, even internet sites like this one, can never replace the expertise of a trained professional doctor who knows you and your cat.

Most of us are familiar with risk factors when it comes to human health. They can be environmental or lifestyle factors, such as smoking, obesity, poor diet or living next to a toxic waste dump. These factors make it more likely that a person will be affected by a particular disease, such as heart disease or lung cancer. Other risk factors may be genetic. If breast cancer runs in your family, your own doctor may want to perform mammograms early and often. If heart disease affects the health of your parents, stress testing and a low cholesterol diet will be important things to discuss with your physician.

Pet owners are 40% less likely to need doctors than those without pets. Owning pets can also reduce your cholesterol level, ease anxiety and lower blood pressure. Heart attack patients who own pets are more likely to survive than non-pet owners.

Pets have risk factors, too. They also can have environmental or lifestyle factors which increase their risks for certain diseases. For example, poor diet and obesity in pets lead to medical problems just as they do in people. Many diseases of pets are inherited or have genetic factors as well. For instance, 40% of Persian cats inherit polycystic kidney disease, in which the kidneys are gradually destroyed by expanding fluid-filled cysts. This disease is responsible for the greatly decreased life expectancy of this breed compared to other cats. Because Persians are at such high risk for this disease, screening for it should be done at least annually from the time the pet is a year or so old, with a urinalysis, blood tests or an ultrasound scan. If these tests reveal abnormalities, further diagnostic tests can be done to confirm or rule out polycystic kidney disease, and a special diet can be started which can prolong life expectancy for a year or even 2 or 3 years. If the disease is not detected until the cat shows signs of being ill, life expectancy is only a few months.

95% of puppies and kittens are born with intestinal parasites already present in their body.

In addition to things like obesity or poor diet, lifestyle factors that cause increased risk of illness in pets include exposure to contagious diseases and parasites. Cats that go outdoors are at greatly increased risk for many potentially fatal diseases and accidents. These pets

may need to be protected with extra vaccinations for infectious diseases. Parasite exposure varies from region to region and also depends on whether the cat goes outdoors or hunts mice or other critters which can carry parasites. Cats that live with dogs have greater risk for fleas and other diseases as well. All these factors need to be taken into consideration.

It is important to realize that being an indoor cat does not mean your cat cannot pick up parasites or contagious diseases. Many indoor cats contract infections that their owners bring in on their shoes or clothes or that blow in through open doors or windows. The only way to keep your pet totally safe is to enclose it in a sterile bubble with no contact with unsterilized air, food

**Your Pet's
Approximate Age
In Human Years**

6 months = 12 years
 1 year = 15 years
 2 years = 24 years
 3 years = 28 years
 4 years = 32 years
 5 years = 36 years
 6 years = 40 years
 7 years = 44 years
 8 years = 48 years
 9 years = 52 years
 10 years = 56 years
 11 years = 60 years
 12 years = 64 years
 13 years = 68 years
 14 years = 72 years
 15 years = 76 years
 16 years = 80 years
 17 years = 84 years
 18 years = 88 years
 19 years = 92 years
 20 years = 96 years
 21 years = 100 years
(Larger dogs age more quickly than small ones)

or other living things! This is, of course, impossible. 95% of kittens are born with intestinal parasites and many continue to harbor them and may show up with an active parasite infection years later. 85% of cats have a serum titer, and thus have been exposed, to herpes viruses, which cause respiratory infection. These viruses are also harbored in a cat's system for years, like herpes cold sores in people, and can re-occur years later. 1/3 of the cats that develop heartworm disease live strictly indoors. The bottom line is that all cats need regular preventative care to stay healthy, even in an indoor environment.

Because each cat's situation and heredity is different, you will need to visit your veterinarian at least once a year to establish and maintain a health care program that addresses all the risk factors present for your pet. It is part of your veterinarian's job to help guide you as to what care needs your pet may have and to advise you on what products and services might help your pet live a longer, healthier life. Because medicine is constantly changing and new advancements are developed every year, your pet's health care program will probably change with time. Since advancing age is also a risk factor for many diseases, his or her care needs will change with age as well.

It's also your veterinarian's role to help you prioritize, so you can budget for the most important risks first. Some diseases are much more likely or dangerous than others, so you'll need to plan accordingly. It's important to remember, too, that although

some diseases are just as common in pets as people, such as allergies or diabetes, others are rare or have different symptoms. The more you know about the signs and symptoms of disease in pets, and the diseases prevalent in your area or your cat's breed, the more you can assist your pet's doctor to come up with the right plan for your situation. Since preventing diseases is usually cheaper, easier and a lot safer for your pet than waiting for illness to appear, knowing what to do to avoid illness is the smart way to go! So ask your veterinarian for advice and remember, your pet's health is truly in your hands.

This table is an example of some of the many risk factors for cats, and what care may be recommended accordingly.

Risk factor	Diseases for which your pet may be at risk	Recommendation
Persian cats	Polycystic kidney disease	Annual urinalysis/ Ultrasound/blood tests
	Dental disease, cervical neck lesions	Frequent dental cleanings
Obesity	Hepatic lipidosis, diabetes, heart disease	Diet and exercise program
Goes outdoors	Feline Leukemia, FIV, FIP	Vaccination for FeLV and FIP

	Fleas, increased risk of intestinal parasites	Parasite control program
	Abscesses, fight wounds, injuries	Don't let cats out unsupervised
Heartworm infestation occurs in your area in dogs	Heartworm disease	monthly heartworm preventative
Dental tarter build-up	Periodontal disease, tooth loss; heart, liver, kidney disease	Dental cleaning under anesthesia

The basic care needs that follow are the starting place for any pet health care program. These suggestions will enable you to provide the best health care, allowing your cat to live as long as possible.

CARE RECOMMENDATIONS FOR KITTENS

• Initial physical examination

Your pet's doctor will do a thorough exam of all your pet's major body functions, paying special attention to genetic or inherited disorders such as heart murmurs, hernias or misaligned teeth. The first kitten visit is also the ideal time to discuss the risk factors your kitten will have and to set up a health care program for the upcoming months and years. Most veterinarians or their technicians can also help you with litter box training, biting or clawing and other common kitten problems.

It is very important to schedule this first visit right away, even if the breeder or shelter has recently vaccinated or de-wormed your kitten. 8-12 weeks of age is a critical period in a kitten's development. Missing a problem or opportunity to socialize a kitten at this age can have long-term consequences for his health and behavior.

The time of your pet's first physical is also the ideal time to do some laboratory testing. Lab tests are like a window into your pet's body. They allow us to see problems that aren't visible from the outside. Testing in kittens usually includes a stool sample test for intestinal parasites. Sometimes ear mites, ringworm or other diseases will be suspected and additional testing will be required.

The critical age for bonding with people is 3-7 weeks. The more handling it gets and the more people it is exposed to the friendlier a kitten will be. Adult cats who had lots of handling as kittens are more affectionate with their owners and more likely to be "lap cats."

Nutrition, behavior, dentistry and most of the other topics listed below are appropriate for discussion with your kitten's first visit to the hospital.

• Vaccinations and boosters

Unfortunately there is no safe, effective drug available to combat any of the major viral diseases of cats. Vaccination is the only effective form of protection. Vaccination enables your kitten to fight infection by stimulating the immune system so it makes antibodies against the viruses

Many common diseases, including distemper, are deadly to kittens. During the initial day of nursing kittens receive antibodies against certain diseases from their mother's milk. These protective antibodies are gradually lost between 6 and 16 weeks of age. Your kitten should be vaccinated several times during this period.

Some diseases may be carried into your house on your hands, shoes or clothing. Others are airborne and can blow in open windows or doors. Even if your kitten is not in contact with other cats, he or she is still at risk! Regular booster vaccinations will be needed throughout a cat's life to maintain good protection against infectious diseases.

Feline Panleukopenia (Distemper) is a killer disease of cats. It is highly contagious and easily transmitted from cat to cat. Nine of ten cats that contact distemper will usually die. This virus is extremely hardy, surviving for years in the environment, waiting to be contacted by another cat. It is easily carried into a house on shoes, hands or clothes if a sick cat, or objects that came in contact with a sick cat, are handled.

Cat distemper is a much harder virus than dog distemper. It can survive for years in the environment, waiting for the next unlucky cat to come along, or to be carried inside by the owner.

Feline Respiratory Diseases affect cats of all ages and cause great suffering. They are very contagious, like the cold and flu viruses of people. Chances are high (about 85% or more) that your cat will be exposed. The common respiratory viruses included in the "distemper" vaccination are Feline Viral Rhinotracheitis (caused by a herpes virus), Calicivirus and Chlamydia. These infections are airborne and spread via coughing, sneezing, mutual grooming, or even hissing and spitting at another cat through a window screen! The symptoms these types of infections cause include conjunctivitis (inflammation of the inner eyelids), rhinitis (infection in the nose), pharyngitis (infection in the back of the throat), or ulcers on the eyes, tongue or lips.

Feline Leukemia (FeLV) is incurable, contagious from cat to cat, and usually fatal. FeLV destroys the cat's ability to fight off infections of any sort. FeLV is the leading killer of cats in the U.S.,

More cats die of Feline Leukemia than any other infectious disease, more than 1 million annually in the U.S. alone. FIP accounts for the deaths of 2-3% of cats. About 10% of cats in the U.S. are carrying either FeLV or FIV.

claiming over 1 million cats per year. Another similar virus we worry about in cats is FIV, the equivalent of the human HIV virus that causes AIDS in people. [Click here to learn more about these fatal infections.](#)

Feline Infectious Peritonitis (FIP) is a viral disease that is also incurable and always fatal. Shed primarily in the stool of infected cats, it can remain infective in the environment for as long as 4 months. Many cats are inapparent carriers of this disease, able to pass it on to other cats. Your cat is at risk in households with more than 1 cat, if it goes outdoors, or if stray cats can be found near your home. [Click here to learn more about FIP.](#)

Rabies is a fatal infection of the nervous system that attacks all warm-blooded animals including humans. There is no cure.

Rabies has been on the rise in cats for the past several years.

Veterinarians see many, many cats who live to be 18 or more years old. Regular veterinary care and booster vaccinations are the reason why! Although many people think that indoor cats don't need vaccinations, this could not be farther from the truth. Not only can indoor cats get sick from contagious diseases, but your pet's annual physical exam is also very important to his or her continued good health. Keep in mind that cats age much more quickly than people and a lot can change in the year between your pet's annual vaccinations or exams.

Vaccine protocols have changed in recent years, as new diseases have appeared and spread, and new vaccinations have been developed. There was no vaccine for feline leukemia before 1985, and over 10 million cats died annually from the disease. FIP used to be a rare disease but in many parts of the country it is becoming more common and more deadly. Your veterinarian's vaccination recommendations have probably changed over the years. Chances are good that they will change again over the next ten years. As your cat comes in for annual physical exams your veterinarian should be talking to you about new vaccines and vaccination schedules.

Another disease that is currently changing the way veterinarians vaccinate cats against contagious disease is a type of cancer called post-vaccination fibrosarcoma. This aggressive type of cancer appears after a vaccination in about 1 in 1000 to 10,000 cats. It is thought to be more common after some vaccines than others and research into this problem is ongoing. Although the risk from contagious diseases is usually higher than the risk from this cancer (for instance, Feline Leukemia affects up to 10% of cats, so the risk is 1 in 10 that a cat that goes outdoors will contract this fatal disease, as versus 1 in 1000 or 1 in 10,000 risk for fibrosarcoma.) Many veterinarians are changing their vaccination protocols because of this problem. You'll want to have a discussion with your veterinarian that takes your pet's risk for disease into account when planning a vaccine schedule for your situation.

- **Nutrition**

Feed the highest quality food you can afford. Premium pet foods are much more digestible and result in a healthier pet with less stool volume. **DO NOT** feed table scraps and snacks. Be careful in choosing brands of food and treats for your cat as well. One of the most important factors in living a long, healthy life is nutrition.

Nutrition is critical for a growing kitten. Young cats need frequent meals and a high quality food for proper growth and nutrition. Most owners leave a dry kitten food out all the time. Tiny kittens do better on canned food until they are 7 or 8 weeks old. Then the canned food can gradually be removed from the diet and the dry food substituted for it. If you have adult cats as well it is important to feed the kitten separately. Adult cat food is not adequate nutrition for kittens and kitten food is too high in fat to be healthy for most adult cats.

Be careful in choosing brands of food and treats for your kitten as well. One of the most important factors in living a long, healthy life is nutrition. Some pet food manufacturers are better than others. Many diets and treats contain high levels of sodium, fat or artificial colors and flavors. Another important concern for cat owners is urinary tract health. Cats are much more likely to develop urinary problems on store brand or economy foods. Labels and advertising claims can be deceiving. Be sure to ask your veterinarian what food is best for your pet, what treats are most healthy and how much food should be fed each day. [Click here for more information on nutrition.](#)

Internal parasites are diagnosed by having a fresh stool sample examined under a microscope by someone at the veterinary hospital. This should be done as part of a health exam when you obtain a new kitten or cat. It should also be done on a yearly basis as part of your cat's annual health exam and vaccinations.

- **Internal parasites . . .**

threaten your cat's health. In large numbers they can cause intestinal blockage, bloody diarrhea and even death. Certain types can also affect you and your family. Microscopic examination of your pet's stool needs to be done regularly. [Click here for more information on internal parasites.](#)

Over 10,000 people, most of them children, become infected with roundworms every year in the U.S. Over 700 of them suffer blindness or permanent visual impairment.

- **Provide a constant supply of fresh, clean water**

Cats don't need milk. In fact many cats will develop diarrhea from cow's milk. If a kitten is too young for dry or canned kitten food it needs a milk replacer made especially for kittens. Cows milk is much too low in fat and protein for kittens.

Neutering a tom cat has a 90% chance of stopping a urine spraying problem.

- Spay or Neuter your cat

The average life expectancy of a spayed or neutered cat is 40% longer than an unaltered one. 75% of unspayed female cats will develop breast cancer and 75% will develop pyometra, a serious infection of the uterus. Her

chances of avoiding both problems are slim. Unneutered males fight with other cats, stray much farther from home and spray foul-smelling urine to mark their territory. Altered pets are less likely to roam, spray or attract unwanted stray cats to your home. [Click here for more information on elective surgeries in cats, including neutering and declawing.](#)

- Dental care . . .

is just as important for your pet as it is for you. The average lifespan of a cat that receives timely dental care is 15-20% longer than one that doesn't. Infected teeth and gums are very painful to your cat, and also spread infection to the kidneys, heart, liver and elsewhere. Dental cleanings are a necessary component of a long, happy life for your pet.

Another common dental problem of cats are cervical neck lesions, also called cervical line lesions and resorptive neck lesions. This is a painful type of cavity which affects as many as half of all cats, eventually destroying affected teeth. [Click here for more information on cervical neck lesions, routine dental care and to learn how to brush your pet's teeth.](#)

Dental care has saved the lives of more pets than any other advance in veterinary medicine in the past 15 years. The life expectancy of dogs and cats that receive dental care is 10-20% longer than those that don't. For some pets, this may mean as much as five years!

- Prevent obesity

Extra pounds burden the heart, kidneys, joints and muscles, decreasing life expectancy 30-50%. [Click here for more information on obesity and weight control.](#)

- Brush your cat regularly . . .

to prevent mats and tangles. After brushing, wipe off loose hair with a damp towel. This is especially helpful if members of your household are allergic to cats. It also helps to prevent hairballs in your cat. Keep an eye out for fleas, dandruff, sores or bald spots. Report any skin problems to your veterinarian.

Preventing fleas with regular use of effective flea products is much less costly than treating a full blown infestation in your home. DO NOT waste your money on over-the-counter flea products. Most do not work and some can even be harmful to your pet. Some of the flea products available over-the-counter at pet stores or supermarkets can be fatal to cats who were merely in the same house as a dog on which one of these products was used! Your veterinarian has products that provide good control safely, and they will take the time to individualize a flea program to suit your requirements and budget. [Click here for more information on fleas and flea control.](#)

Brush your pet regularly to prevent mats and tangles. Start when your kitten is young with short sessions and a soft brush. Reward your kitten with a treat when he sits still. Try to pick a time when he is quiet and sleepy, not when he's wanting to play!

- Litter box

Scoop out your cat's litter pan daily and empty it completely at least once a week. Plastic garbage bags make economical box liners. Avoid heavily scented litter as many cats don't like it. If your cat is urinating outside the box in inappropriate places, call your veterinarian right away. This is usually due to bladder problems. [Click here for more information on feline urinary tract disease.](#) [Click here for more information on urinary behavior problems in cats.](#)

- Accustom your kitten to handling

Anyone who has had to medicate a cat that doesn't want to be medicated knows how difficult it can be to get pills down an uncooperative patient. Make your life easier later on! Handle your kitten's mouth, ears and feet often while it is young. Squeeze the lips and tip the head back to open the mouth, pretend you are putting something on the tongue, and then reward with praise or a treat. Do this several times a day. (While the kitten is sleepy and not trying to attack any moving object!) Wipe the ears out with a damp cotton ball daily. Play with the feet and toes. All this handling will get your new pet used to the feel of medical procedures such as giving pills, trimming toenails or treating ear infections. [Click here for more information on avoiding behavior problems.](#)

- Keep your pet under control.

Don't let it run loose, especially at night. Roaming cats hunt native songbirds, get into territorial disputes with other cats, annoy the neighbors, and are at much higher risk for accidents and disease. If you must let your cat outdoors, purchase an I.D. tag to place on your pet's collar and keep it on at all times. It is your pet's "ticket home" if lost. Consider a microchip or tattoo for permanent identification.

[Click here for more information on microchipping.](#)

- Heartworm Disease . . . is serious and deadly. It is carried by mosquitoes. There is no effective drug to treat this parasite in cats once they are infected and many cats die from it.

Luckily, prevention of the disease is a snap. Monthly easy to administer medication can be given to prevent the disease, and blood tests are also available. As previously stated, 1/3 of the cats who die from this disease are strictly indoor pets. [Click here for more information on heartworm disease and prevention.](#)

- Prevent Obesity.

Extra pounds burden the heart, kidneys, joints & muscles, decreasing life expectancy 30-50%. [Click here for more information on weight control and exercise.](#)

- Exercise.

Most cats don't get nearly enough exercise. Poor health, obesity and boredom-related behavior problems often result.

Research shows that in kittens, 3-7 weeks is the socialization period. The greater the number of people the kitten interacts with at this stage, the more social it will be with strangers. It will also seek more attention from the owners and will be much more likely to become a "lap" cat.

TOP TEN REASONS TO KEEP YOUR CAT INDOORS

- 1) Their owners will never have to bail them out of the local shelter.
- 2) It will be much more difficult for people to steal them.
- 3) Crotchety neighbors will like them better.
- 4) Birds will like them better.
- 5) When it's ten o'clock at night, their owners will always know where they are.
- 6) There is less chance of getting a leg caught in a steel-jawed trap.
- 7) It's unlikely their owner will transmit to them the Feline Leukemia Virus, Feline Immunodeficiency Virus and other contagious diseases. Cats contract these viruses through contact with other cats.
- 8) They are not as liable to have fleas, fungus or worms as are free-roaming animals.
- 9) They are less likely to be hit by a car when crossing the living room than they are when crossing the street.
- 10) The lifespan of an average indoor cat is twelve to fifteen years and that of an average outdoor cat is two to three years.

- Avoid Behavior Problems

Millions of cats are surrendered to humane societies or are neglected, abused or kicked out of their homes every year because their

natural, instinctive behaviors were annoying to their owners. Litter box avoidance or house soiling, furniture scratching and biting are examples of behavioral problems in cats. Fortunately, help for these problems is readily available. You don't have to part with your cat. [Click here for more information on behavior, training and socialization.](#)

- Never give human medications to your cat without checking with your veterinarian. Aspirin and acetaminophen (Tylenol) are particularly dangerous.

- Report any changes or problems . . .

in your cat's health or behavior to your veterinarian as soon as possible. Diseases or behavior problems usually are more successfully treated the earlier they are addressed. [Click here for more information on signs of disease in pets.](#)

- As your cat ages

Geriatric Workups help detect many of the problems caused by aging (kidney, liver, heart, arthritis, dental etc.). Early detection can lengthen your pet's life. Proper treatment will improve your pet's quality of life. [Click here for more information on geriatric screening.](#)

Cats are exposed to lots of other diseases, so you need to decide on a total health care package for any cat, especially one that goes outside. This will usually include vaccination for Distemper, the upper respiratory diseases and Rabies for all cats, indoors or out. Feline Leukemia vaccination or FIP may also be recommended. Cats going outdoors should also be protected against fleas, if you live in an area where they are a problem, and intestinal parasites, as part of a regular health care program

Cat's Age	Human Age
9 YEARS	OVER 40 YEARS
11 YEARS	OVER 50 YEARS
13 YEARS	OVER 60 YEARS

Preventative health care is much more than just vaccinations! Your veterinarian is there to help you assist your pet in living a long, healthy life at the lowest cost to you.

Please use this checklist on a regular basis. You can discover many problems before they become serious and cause undue pain and expense.

HOME CHECKLIST FOR PET HEALTH

My Pet . . .

- . . . is acting normal - active and in good spirits.
- . . . has a normal appetite with no chewing or swallowing difficulty.
- . . . breathes normally, without straining or coughing.
- . . . urinates in the usual amounts and frequency.
- . . . has normal appearing bowel movements.
- . . . walks without stiffness, pain, or difficulty.
- . . . has healthy looking feet and short nails.
- . . . has a full, glossy coat in good condition.
- . . . has skin that is free from dry flakes and not greasy.
- . . . is free from fleas, ticks, lice or mites.
- . . . has eyes that are bright, clear and free of matter.
- . . . has ears that are clean and free of debris and odor.
- . . . has a moist nose, free from discharge.
- . . . has clean, white teeth free of plaque and calculus.
- . . . has gums that are pink with no redness and non-offensive breath odor.
- . . . has a body that is free from lumps/bumps as I run my hand over its entire body.

Call your veterinarian if you answer no to any question.

NORMAL CAT BEHAVIOR

Cats are amazing and interesting creatures. Their behavior has fascinated mankind for thousands of years. As kittens, they are especially amusing and can keep us entertained for hours. Unfortunately, some cat behaviors, such as scratching, biting or scent marking, can be aggravating to their human companions. The following are some suggestions for keeping your relationship with your cat enjoyable for both of you.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAY: MORE THAN FUN AND GAMES

Playtime is more than just fun for your dog or cat. Dogs that play frequently with their owners learn to bond better with them and obey commands more readily. Cats who play have lower rates of aggression and obesity. In fact, a lifetime of play is crucial to a cat or dog's development and well-being.

A puppy or kitten's mother starts the playful learning process right after birth. Her tussling, tickling and licking activate a young pet's mind and provide needed exercise and stimulation. A gentle bite or warning noise tells a puppy or kitten to stop when play gets too rough. After a few weeks most of a young animal's playtime involves wrestling with littermates, sometimes for hours. By competing with each other, young ones learn their place in the litter's pecking order, and how to inhibit play so that no one gets hurt. Puppies and kittens that are orphaned early or have no littermates suffer from slower brain development, abnormal behavior patterns and are more likely to show aggression or fearfulness.

Puppies and kittens need to learn their place in your home's pecking order too. Games of fetch or chase help teach these new family members their place in their new social hierarchy. Learning games forces pets to pay attention to your commands and to recognize praise. It also helps channel a young animal's boundless energy into constructive behavior, and decreases chewing and biting on less appropriate objects, such as shoes or hands. Use lots of praise when playing with pets and try to make it enjoyable for both parties.

On the other hand, playing with your pet in the wrong way can foster bad behaviors. Roughhousing, teasing and horseplay can turn a cat into a neighborhood menace that's prone to bite, or cause a pet to be fearful or aggressive toward children. Letting your kitten bite your hands or fingers, even in play, teaches them it's OK to bite humans. Think carefully about what messages you send pets with the way you play, and make sure your kids play safely with pets as well.

Also remember that play toys can be dangerous. Pets can choke on or swallow toys just as babies can, requiring emergency surgery in some cases and causing death in others. Kittens love to chase string and ribbon, the most common items we surgically remove from their intestinal tracts. Choose toys carefully and put them away when you are done playing.

Dogs and cats crave routine. Try to set aside a little time each day for playtime with your pet. You'll enjoy the interaction and the bond between you, as well as stimulating healthy exercise for both the mind and body of your cat or dog.

Cats are inquisitive and adventuresome, which frequently gets them into trouble. You will need to cat proof your home just as you would for a toddler, to prevent accidents and illness.

To prevent problems:

Keep a squirt gun or bottle handy. A squirt of water in the face deters most kittens from

doing things they shouldn't do, especially jumping up on counters or playing too aggressively, and it doesn't hurt them.

Spend lots of time playing with your cat so his energy is used up more constructively. Drag a string around the house or tie an object to a string on a pole and wave it around while watching TV. DO NOT play with your cat by wiggling your fingers or toes – this encourages biting. Keep a toy in your pocket and encourage your kitten to play with and focus on the toy, not on your hands or fingers.

Do not hit or strike your cat for being naughty. This will only frighten or anger him and frequently leads to biting and clawing behavior. Punishment is the least effective training method for cats. Never force a cat to stay in your lap if he or she wants to get down. Do not grab at your cat or scare him, or he may learn to bite. Rough and tumble play also encourages aggression, so play gently, using a toy and not your fingers.

You may need to confine your cat to one room when you aren't home, one that has no plants or dangerous objects. Swallowing or choking on small objects is very common in cats and kittens. Beware of things such as rubber bands, pencil erasers, needles and thread, small toys, metal objects such as paper clips, scraps of fabric, earrings etc. Anything smaller than 1" diameter can probably be swallowed and needs to be kept out of a kitten's reach. Don't give your kitten or cat string or yarn to play with! These are among the most common and deadly of intestinal obstructions.

Provide at least one scratching post for your cat to use. Even declawed cats like to stretch and knead their paws. Rubbing catnip on the post will encourage its use, as will keeping it in a handy place where you and the kitten spend a lot of time. Cats usually prefer a larger post that they can climb up and down. Some cats like wood or rope-wrapped posts instead of carpet. The more your kitten likes his post and the more he is encouraged to use it, the less he will scratch at the furniture or rugs. Use your squirt bottle if you see him scratching where he's not supposed to.

To prevent chewing on cords or shoes, use unscented, roll-on antiperspirant on these items once or twice a week. Cats don't like the drying, bitter taste and will soon shy away. Try putting aluminum foil around your plant pots or lay sheets of it on counter tops or tables, especially when you can't be home to use your squirt bottle! Cats don't like the shiny, noisy foil and will generally avoid it. Many types of plants are poisonous to your pet, so it's best to keep them all out of reach. Double sided sticky tape works well to discourage a cat from clawing on couches and chairs - cats don't like the sticky feel on their feet. Just peel the tape off when it's no longer needed.

Be especially vigilant in the laundry and kitchen areas. Laundry soap and bleach are toxic when licked off a cat's paws when they've walked through it. Many cats die each year after exploring the washing machine, taking a nap in the dryer, or jumping on or in a hot stove or oven. Cats are also good at learning how to open cabinet doors!

A collar and ID tag are a good idea, especially if your cat tries to escape outdoors. Use break-away collars to prevent choking. Microchips are also available now to safely and permanently identify your cat if he or she becomes lost.

To prevent litter pan avoidance be sure the pan is easily accessible and in a quiet place where your cat will feel comfortable. If your house is large it is best to have more than one box. We also recommend multiple litter pans with more than one cat in the household. Scoop the boxes daily and empty them completely once a week - many cats won't use a dirty litter pan. Avoid heavily scented litters - cats don't like perfume.

Never physically punish a cat for going outside the litter box - they quickly learn to sneak and hide their accidents. Many times litter box avoidance is caused by a physical problem such as intestinal parasites, colitis or bladder infection. **Any time a cat stops using its pan he or she should have a physical examination by a doctor.**

If at any time you are having problems with the behavior of your cat, call your vet or a behavioral specialist right away. Most behavior problems are easily treated if caught in time.