

Bringing Your New Cat Home: The Adjustment Period

by Cheryl Weiner
Vice President, Arizona Animal Welfare League

Introduction into a new home is an extremely stressful time for most cats. Cats are territorial and they become strongly attached to their familiar living area, no matter where that may be. The cat will take a while to adapt to its new home.

If the cat is allowed to adapt at its own pace, everything should work out in time. Some cats will take days while others may take weeks or even longer. On average, the adjustment period should take approximately one week to 10 days. The length of time depends upon a number of factors: the cat's temperament, past experiences, whether other cats are already present in the new home and the presence of dogs and their reaction to the new cat.

Bringing the Cat Home

A cat's basic reaction to stress is to retreat and take refuge. You can help by providing a safe haven. Upon arriving home, keep the cat in its traveling cage for an hour or so. Place the cage in a quiet room and allow the cat some time to adapt to the new sounds and smells. Put some fresh water and food near the cage and place a litter box nearby. After an hour or so, open the cat's cage and quietly leave the room. If the cat wants affection, it will come and ask for it. Some cats crave affection after being confined while others want to be left alone. Do not force your attention on the cat. Allow the cat to explore the room and be sure it finds the litter box. Allow the cat to explore the rest of the house in its own time. Some cats will begin to explore without hesitation and others will take days to emerge from the room.

Introducing an Additional Cat

If you are introducing an additional cat, follow the same guidelines. It may be necessary to actively confine the new cat to the room for several days before leaving the door open and allowing the cats to meet. The cats need to adjust to each other's scents. The room now bears the scent of the newcomer so the resident cats will be less likely to harass it there.

Problems are not uncommon when introducing an additional cat. They are most always temporary problems. Resident cats may develop house-soiling problems and there may be occasional squabbles. Do not try to intervene in the squabbles, as the cats need to work things out for themselves.

Introducing the New Cat to Your Dog

It is absolutely essential that the cat not be traumatized by the dog. Allow the cat to acclimate to the scent of the dog in its safe room before actually introducing the two. After a period of time, put the dog on a leash and open the door to the cat's room. Allow the cat to approach the dog. If the cat does not show any reservations at all, you may allow the dog to approach the cat. After they have an opportunity to sniff each other, take the dog out of the room and close the door. Depending on the success of the first introduction, you may allow the cat and dog to interact on a supervised basis. Otherwise, repeat the leashed introduction several times, increasing the length of time that the cat and dog interact. Remember: Do not leave the dog and cat unsupervised until both animals have acclimated to each other and their interactions are friendly and docile.

Human Interactions with the New Cat

Regardless of the temperament of your cat, it is important that he or she initiate all contact with you during the adjustment period. Allow the cat to retreat if that is what it wants to do. Do not console the cat for fearful behavior as this will serve to reinforce the fear. Do not punish the cat if it acts agitated - simply leave it alone. After a period of time, the cat will adjust to its new home and new family, and everyone will live happily ever after.

Maine Coon Adoptions