



Kingsbrook Animal Hospital

5322 New Design Road, Frederick, MD, 21703

Phone: (301) 631-6900

Website: KingsbrookVet.com

Cat Behavior and Training – Moving with Your Cat

Will my cat be upset by the move?



Some cats seem to take moving in their stride, but for others the loss of their familiar territory can be very traumatic, and settling in to the new home can pose problems for owners and cats alike. Cats are territorial creatures, and when your cat is the “new kid on the block,” it may find itself being less than welcomed by the local feline residents. Cats that are kept entirely indoors may adapt more easily to a new home, since their territory still contains familiar people, animals, objects, odors and pheromones, and integration into an existing feline population is not an issue. However, indoor cats can develop behavioral problems following a house move and whether your cat lives indoors or out, the way in which you prepare it for the move and deal with the first few days in the new home can be very important.

"Feline territory is divided into three main zones: the core, the home range, and the hunting range."

Preparing for the move

Feline territory is divided into three main zones: the core, the home range and the hunting range. The core territory is where the cat eats, sleeps, and plays, and in the wild this area is very stable and secure. For the domestic cat the house usually represents the core territory, although for some cats it may be smaller and may consist of only one or two rooms within the house. Disruption within this area can be very distressing. Minimizing changes and upheaval within the core territory is important, and when you are preparing for the house move it may be advisable to keep your cat out of sight and hearing of your packing whenever possible so that the home remains as constant as possible for your cat. Obviously, there comes a point where the packing cannot be hidden. At this point, if your cat seems overly anxious or if conflict induced behavior problems (such as excessive grooming or urine marking) begin to emerge then it might be best to put your cat in a kennel, rather than allow it to watch the dismantling of its territory. On the day of the move it pays to plan ahead. Prepare a secure room to keep the cat in that has food, water and a litter box until all the moving has been finished to prevent the cat from inadvertently escaping during the moving process. Once things are a bit calmer, place the cat in the carrier for the trip to the new home. Cats that are comfortable and familiar with their carrier may do better if placed in their carrier (perhaps with some Feliway® pheromone spray) (see Crate Training and Travel).

How should I introduce my cat to the new house?

Once you have moved into your new home it is advisable to wait until at least one room in the house is completely unpacked before bringing your cat into the house. This ensures that the environment that your cat comes into is as stable as possible. If this is not possible, find a room where disruption is the least likely and set this up as the cat's safe haven. Restricting the cat's access to the rooms where the unpacking has been finished is a sensible precaution, since the packing boxes and suitcases are likely to be a symbol of disruption and signal to your cat that this new environment is less than secure. In addition, climbing into boxes may present a convenient, yet possibly dangerous hiding place for your cat. Introducing your cat to one room at a time will also prevent problems of overwhelming it with too much new territory too quickly. Therefore, even if you are a very efficient unpacker and have all of your rooms up and running within days, it can still be beneficial to restrict access to one or two rooms for the first few days.



Could using scent or pheromone signals help?

"One of the most important coping strategies for cats when they face a new challenge is hiding."

One of the ways in which you can increase your cat's acceptance of its new territory is to make it as familiar as possible. The first room you place your cat into should be one that will have some furniture that is familiar to the cat from the previous home. Putting your cat's bedding and food bowls from the old house into the room should also help. In addition you may find it beneficial to apply Feliway®, a synthetic feline facial scent, to the room. This product, which is available from your veterinarian, acts to make the environment appear familiar to your cat and will help it to settle in. It would be sensible to apply the product to the room at least 30 minutes before your cat goes inside and to top up the scent profile by applying the product once a day for the first week. Alternatively, you can place a pheromone diffuser into the room a few hours (or even a few days if practical) before your cat is brought into the home. As you expand your cat's territory within the home by giving it access to more and more rooms, you should use the product in each new area (see Medication – Complementary).

How long will my cat take to settle in at the new house?

There is no easy answer to this question because every cat is an individual and will react differently to the challenge of a new home. Most cats start to relax within a few days of moving, but there are others that take weeks to adjust to their new environment.

One of the most important coping strategies for cats when they face a new challenge is hiding and it is important to resist the temptation to bring your cat out from his hiding places. It can be distressing for owners to see their cat huddled on the top of a dresser or peering out from under the table, but you need to give your cat the opportunity to observe its new home from a safe vantage point and to come to terms with the changes in its own time. Forcing cats to come out to meet the world (or to do anything for that matter) can seriously backfire and make the settling in process far more drawn out in the long run. Allowing the cat to explore and gain increasing access to the environment at its own rate, reduces anxiety by giving the cat control. Obviously if your cat shows no signs of adjusting, or if it refuses to eat for



more than a couple of days, you will need to take action and you should consult your veterinarian for advice in this situation. The aim is to encourage your cat to come down from his safe haven. Work to make the home more attractive in feline terms using tasty food treats and special play to fulfill the cat's need for affection or attention. However, it is important to remember that cats need to feel in control and the treats or games should not be forced on the pet. Instead they should be provided as soon as the cat voluntarily displays any small progress (baby steps).

When can I let my cat out into the yard?

For owners of cats that go outside one of the hardest decisions to make after moving is when, if ever, to open the door and let the cat out! There are a number of myths concerning this subject and various techniques have been suggested as ways of ensuring that the cat comes home again, such as putting butter on the cat's paws! Cats live in a scent-orientated world and they find their way from place to place by following scent gradients. This means that your cat will return home to where his scent signal is strongest provided there is no strong fear or anxiety associated with the new home. Therefore the practice of restricting your pet to the new home for a couple of weeks makes perfect sense. By staying inside the house for this period your cat will build up a strong scent presence and any fear or apprehension about the new household will have diminished or disappeared. After a few days of eating, playing and sleeping in the new home, the attraction to the new home should be further increased. Then when the cat eventually ventures outside, there will be a significant scent gradient to follow back to the house and no feelings of avoidance. A feline facial scent can also be used to assist in the forming of a stable scent profile and some sources suggest that it encourages cats to return to their new home, so that the amount of time your cat needs to be kept confined before letting it out for the first time can be decreased. It can help to give the first taste of freedom at a time when the cat is most likely to stay close at hand and waiting until just before mealtime can be a sensible approach. With the prospect of a meal looming your cat should be eager to stay near to the house and if you call it in for dinner just a few minutes after letting it out, you will be reinforcing the behavior of coming home.

What can I do to stop my cat from returning to my old house?

"When owners move relatively short distances, one of the most common problems that they face is their cat returning to the old house."

When owners move relatively short distances, one of the most common problems that they face is their cat returning to the old house. There are numerous tales of cats walking significant distances to get back to their old home and, while some go straight to the house and demand to be let in, others seem content to sit in their old garden or wander round their old hunting ground. The treatment for this problem involves two things. First, increase the attraction of the new home, in feline terms, and second, decrease the reward associated with the old home.

It is possible to increase the bond to the new house and yard by ensuring that positive associations are made in the form of provision of valuable resources. Working to ensure that food, shelter, affection, and privacy are available in abundant supply will help to maintain the cat's interest in its home. However, the way in which these resources are offered is important and owners need to guard against being too overpowering with their pets. Too much human intervention in the form of oppressive affection and high levels of owner-initiated contact may be too much for some cats and may increase the likelihood of avoidance. In that case adopting an off-hand attitude, that leaves the cat asking for more attention and affection, will be far more effective. Games with a fishing rod toy can be very helpful as they give you the opportunity to interact with your cat while still allowing it to engage in some independent play. Offering food treats without trying to make any direct interaction can be another way of rewarding your cat for staying home while allowing it to feel in control.

Decreasing the value associated with the old stomping ground can be a little more difficult, especially for a cat that is an efficient hunter! If the old patch had a good supply of prey, and the cat was frequently rewarded on its hunting expeditions, it can be very hard to convince the cat that returning “home” is not a good idea. However, if the reward appears to be strongly associated with the house, and with the warmth, comfort and security it offers, things can be a little more straightforward. Cooperation with the new occupants is essential, since they need to work to make the old home less appealing. This is usually much easier if they are not particularly fond of cats! Making sure that there is no food available when the cat returns and using hostile interactions with sounds and water or avoidance devices (see Behavior Management Products and Prevention and Punishment of Undesirable Behavior) can help to make the old place much less appealing. This may sound simple, but it is important that the hostility is consistent and is not simply connected with the new inhabitants, because cats can very quickly learn to only come by when the new people are out! Equally, any hostility must not be harmful and people need to be prepared to use their brains as well as their brawn when trying to outwit a cat.

Obviously, a combination of these two approaches will offer the very best chance of keeping the cat at the new house.

Will there be problems with other cats in the neighborhood?

One of the major concerns for owners of outdoor cats is the potential conflict from other cats in the new neighborhood. It is certainly true that newcomers are not made particularly welcome in the feline world, but one of the most significant effects of neutering on feline behavior is to decrease hostility to outsiders. In an urban area where most of the cat population is neutered this certainly helps. Integration into the local population is largely a feline matter and there is little that owners can do to smooth the process, but it can be helpful to talk to other cat owners in the area and work out a time share system for the first week or so. This enables the newcomer to explore the neighborhood without risk of attack and to leave some scent signals for the resident cats to read. Such indirect communication can smooth the way for the first face-to-face encounters since the incoming cat has a familiar scent.

*This client information sheet is based on material written by: Debra Horwitz, DVM, DACVB & Gary Landsberg, DVM, DACVB, DECAWBM
© Copyright 2012 LifeLearn Inc. Used and/or modified with permission under license.*