

What Should I Do When Bringing Home a New Cat?

CatChannel behavior expert Marilyn Krieger, CCBC, discusses steps to take for making a new cat feel at home.

By Marilyn Krieger

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Q: I'm bringing home a new cat. I don't have any other cats at this time. How do I make sure the transition to her new home is smooth?

A: Since relocating a cat to a new home is usually anxiety-filled for the cat, it's important to make the transition is as smooth and stress-free as possible. Your new cat will be coming from a known, secure situation into a completely foreign environment where there are strange, unfamiliar people. Your job will be to help her adjust and feel safe.

Preparations need to begin before she comes to live with you. Choose one room that will be your new cat's personal refuge. Depending on the cat and your situation, consider setting up a bedroom as her room, a room where you can also spend nights with her. This room will become her safety zone, a place where she will feel safe and secure. She should not be allowed in any other part of the house until she has adjusted, is feeling secure and is interacting with you.

Find out what kind of food and treats she is used to eating, as well as the brand of cat litter and type of cat box she's used to. Make sure that the litterboxes and fresh food and water are in place in her room when you bring her home. It would be great if her current human companion could pack a suitcase with her favorite toys, treats and the objects she likes. If that isn't possible, buy her toys that you know or think that she will enjoy playing with. Ideally, a tall cat tree with a covered area at the top should be added to the room along with soft and protected areas for sleep. Boxes laid on their side and tunnels will give her places to retreat when she's feeling scared.

The night before the transfer, ask the person who is the most connected with the cat to either sleep in an old shirt or to sleep on an old pillow case. The item should then be placed in the carrier with the cat when she is being transported to you.

When she is finally at your house, she will probably hide under the bed or in one of the boxes you've set up for her. There are some cats, though, who prefer to thoroughly check out their new room instead of hiding. Whether she is shy or brave, don't force your attentions on her by trying to pick her up or forcing her to be petted. Instead, greet her formally; extend your index finger toward her, at nose level. When she is ready, she will come up to your finger, sniff it and then turn her head so that your finger is on her cheek. At that point, you can start petting her under the chin, on the side of the face and back of her neck.

The next item on your agenda is to win her over and start building the bonds between you. You need to become the most important being in her world. Whenever you go into the room, bring treats with you. If she is hiding under the bed, toss the treats under the bed, and then with time, gradually decrease the distance between you by tossing the treats a little closer to you. Sitting and reading out loud to her will help acclimatize her to you. When you are not in the room with her, consider playing classical piano music recordings at a soft volume.

It's hard to judge how long she will need to be in her room before she is feeling secure enough to check out other parts of the house. It depends on the individual cat. Some cats are ready to explore the rest of the house within a couple of days, others take weeks. When she is ready for more adventures, open the door to her room, allowing her to venture forth when she's feeling brave. Make sure that the door remains open to her room so that she can run back to the safety of her refuge if she feels frightened.