

How to Introduce Cats



A carefully planned 2-week cat introduction is crucial. Most of the time, after a slow, appropriate introduction, cats will form a healthy bond. Cats may not always become the best of friends, but they can usually learn to coexist in harmony. Proper introductions of new cats to resident cats can prevent future conflicts and set the stage for years of friendship.

Please note that a proper cat-to-cat introduction takes time!

Keep the cats separated at first. A cat from a shelter should be physically isolated from your resident cats for 10-14 days, not only to ensure a proper introduction, but also to make sure they are not incubating a contagious illness. The isolation area chosen for your new cat should be a room with a door, so that there is no contact between the newcomer and resident cat. If space is limited, a large kennel cage with a blanket over it will suffice. Upon arrival, the new cat should be brought directly into the isolation room with food, water, toys, litter box and hiding box (i.e. cubby bed or cat carrier).

Make sure the original resident cat is being spoiled. You should start spoiling your resident cat(s) the moment the new cat enters the house! Do whatever makes your cat happy, and do it often. If your cat loves a certain food, now is the time to give them that food. If your cat has a favorite toy or game, keep them occupied and happy with that. Don't worry that you're not giving as much attention to the new cat right now. Now is the time to focus enrichment and love on the resident cat. This way, the resident cat will think, "This new cat entered my life and brought me so much happiness! I'm getting all of my favorite things! Maybe this new cat isn't so scary! Maybe I like them."

Begin your introduction by feeding them on opposite sides of a door. You can start doing this the second day. Allowing the cats to smell each other while they eat their favorite food will create positive associations for both cats.

- Place wet food bowls 6 feet from each side of the closed door where your new cat is isolated.
- If both cats eat, move the food closer each day. If one doesn't eat at some point, move the bowls further away. Eating or not eating at each distance from the door indicates the cats' stress levels.
- Once both cats can eat with the bowls touching the door, move on to the next step.

Next try scent swapping. Cats live scent-based lives. Most of their memories, good or bad, are of smells. Cats need to get comfortable with each other's scent before they meet. Place one blanket or towel in the new cat's room, and another in your resident cat's favorite spot.

After they have spent time sleeping on these linens, swap them. This way, the cats can smell each other without the stress of a face-to-face introduction. If they don't have certain blankets that they sleep on, try rubbing a clean towel on your resident cat and another on your new cat.

After doing so, rub each cat with the opposite towel so they are covered in each other's scent. The towels can then be left with each cat to continue the scent exchange.

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Then try a space switch. After 2 days of scent-swapping, allow the new cat to explore the other rooms of the house while allowing the resident to explore the new cat's isolation area. This switch provides a way for the cats to experience each other's scent without a face to face meeting, and allows the newcomer to become familiar with their surroundings. This should be done for an hour a day for 3 or 4 days.

Now it's time for the cats to see each other. This next step allows the cats to glimpse each other through the door. Crack the door just enough for them to be able to see each other. Immediately close the door if either cat becomes fearful or threatening. Do not allow any physical encounters until the cats are fully relaxed while looking at each other. For additional safety, if needed, the visual introduction can be conducted with the new cat placed inside a cat carrier. Repeat until you can leave the door propped open with no problems.

Don't worry if the cats hiss! Hissing simply translates to "I'm not feeling comfortable right now." And that's normal. Cats may hiss for weeks, or even months, as they become comfortable with this new situation. The hissing will eventually subside.

This whole process can take anywhere from two weeks to several months, so please be patient. If the cats are inflicting injury upon each other, the introduction process will need to be started again from the beginning. If cats no longer appear stressed and do not wish to cause physical harm to each other, the separation period may cease, and your hard work will be rewarded by nicely coexisting cats.