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How to Help a Stray Cat: 7 Q&As

by Marie O. September 08, 2016

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So, a cat shows up on your doorstep. The furry little guy selected you out of all the people in the world to befriend, maybe instinctually sensing that you were a cat lover and would return the favor with a smelly can of tuna—or even

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a home. Sound familiar?

It's not that uncommon. Often people feel that their cats found *them*, rather than the other way around. This stray-on-the-doorstep phenomenon has happened to me a number of times, and I often felt I didn't know the best way to respond.

So, what's a person to do when a cat shows up? Here are seven questions to ask yourself before helping a stray feline, and seven answers that'll hopefully help you make the best decision for you and Mr. Kitty.



1) Is the cat a stray?

Ask your neighbors. The cat may not be a stray, but instead might have simply strayed off. Cats are notorious wanderers, and there may be a cat owner in your hood who lets his or her cat outside regularly.

As a teen, I took in a 3-month-old, gray tuxedo kitten that had shown up on my doorstep. In retrospect, after getting to know the cat and his socialization patterns, I thought it may have been a roaming tom that simply wanted more affection, and I regretted possibly taking the cat from its rightful owner.

If you do take in a seemingly stray cat, immediately ask your neighbors, put out signs, get the word out and inquire—before you fall in love.



2) Is it friendly or feral?

If the cat sits afar and watches you and does not approach, it may well be feral. Feral cats will show up around your house for food but will probably never cozy up with you on the couch. And may never even allow you to touch them.

For feral cats to become people friendly and, truthfully, not be freaked out by you, they should be socialized to human touch and voice as kittens. About 6 weeks is the optimal age to socialize what would otherwise become a feral cat—and there is a cut-off point.

According to Tree House Humane Society in Chicago, one of the country's most innovative programs to help stray

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and feral cats, "If you plan on socializing a kitten 16 weeks old or older, or an adult cat, you should probably plan on keeping the cat, and be prepared for the possibility that he may never be fully socialized to people."

If you believe a cat is feral, yet it warms up to you rather quickly, the cat was more likely a stray that had a human friend or family at one time.



3) To feed or not to feed?

If you don't want to take in the cat, or it's feral, you need to decide whether or not to feed it. Many ferals and strays do have caretakers, yet live outdoors as community cats being good neighbors by catching the local mice population.

But some cats may need additional food if they are smaller or not adept being mousers. Cats are predators by nature, but not all of them are good at hunting and then eating their prey. Many cat behavior experts believe these survival skills are learned from mother cats. So, if mama wasn't a hunter and prey eater, baby may not be either.

Cats will return to a feeding spot over and over, often at the same time of day. So, ask yourself, "If I start feeding this cat, and it becomes dependent on me, am I willing to be responsible for showing up every day with vittles?"

In addition to food, you should also think about providing water and shelter from the elements, if the cat is to make a home on your property.

4) What should I feed a stray cat?

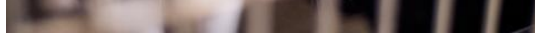
Do not, nope, never ever feed a cat or a kitten cow's milk or cream. It's a myth that this is the feline food of choice. In reality, milk can make a cat sick due to the indigestibility of the lactose.

In a pinch, with a surprise cat on your doorstep, a can of tuna is much appreciated—water and all.

For the long term, canned food is far preferred over dry kibble, since cats get most of their water from the food they eat. And, if you're feeding the cat outside, remove the dish after the cat has eaten so as not to attract other animals. Even my outdoor cat's water bowl has attracted raccoon visitors.

Also, don't leave out kibble unless you want to begin feeding a cat colony, which some cat lovers do choose to do. In that case, kibble will not spoil quickly like canned food and can be left out all day.





5) Should I take the cat to a shelter?

If the cat is friendly, and you cannot care for it or find it a home yourself, consider a no-kill shelter in your area. If a shelter does not declare that it's "no-kill," the cat will only have a few days to a week before the shelter will need to make room for another cat. And the cat you brought in will be killed.

Note that I do not call it "euthanasia," which is mercy-killing when a pet is terminally ill and suffering.

Alley Cat Allies, a national organization that champions the humane treatment of all cats, offers up a shocking statistic: "The number one documented cause of death for cats in America is being killed in shelters. Over 70% of cats entering shelters are killed—a figure that rises to nearly 100% for feral cats, who cannot be adopted."

If the cat seems feral, it's better to let it live outdoors in your community, particularly if it has a colony of cats that it lives with or has a partner cat. Many cats survive well outdoors and have done so for thousands of years; some will live short lives.

6) What's TNR?

Trap-Neuter-Return is a compassionate, humane way to care for stray and feral cats that live outdoors. This reform movement is becoming standard practice for cat organizations around the country, spurred by the futile, decades-old policy of killing cats in shelters to reduce their numbers.

The TNR process goes like this: the cats (usually a group of them) are trapped by a local volunteer, program or organization, then spayed or neutered by a veterinarian, given medical care, and returned to their colonies to live out their lives without reproducing.

If not fixed, a fertile female will have an average of three litters per year.

Is there more than one cat hanging around your home? If so, then you might want to seek out a local organization that has a TNR program. It's a loving, effective, responsible way to prevent future generations of cats from living their lives on the streets.

After the cats are returned, you'll notice their left ears have been "tipped." During a TNR surgery, vets cut about 1/4 to 3/8 of an inch off the cat's ear to inform future trappers that this animal has already been neutered.

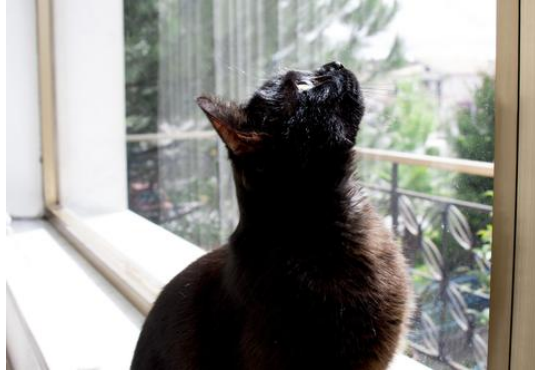
Notice the tipped ear on [Amber Cairo](#), one of the feral cats I currently care for.



7) **Should I take the cat in?**

If the cat is a friendly stray and you two have a love connection, then, yes, give it a home! Keep in mind these few things, though:

One. Consider what kind of lifestyle your cat would actually like. A cat that has lived outdoors may want to go outside again—and often. To adopt a stray cat, you'd either have to get the cat accustomed to a litter box or continue to let it out.



I care for a 14-year-old long-haired tuxedo cat who was a stray until I started caring for her at age 11, and she mostly prefers to live outdoors in the multi-room, cat condo I've set up for her under my back porch. She does come in to feed, when it's cold or storming, when she's rattled by something outside or just wants some love. By nature, though, she'll always be an alley cat.

Two. You may need to train a stray cat to not bite or scratch you. Think about it, biting and clawing is how this little being has survived so far. If your cat acts aggressively toward you, simply withdraw affection immediately. You cannot punish a cat into learning, and you'll probably need to be extra patient with a stray.

Three. Do you have other pets? If so, that stray cat may be too territorial to live in your home.

Four. Are you a lifer? Cats can live to be 20 years old. Anyone adopting any animal should be committed to the end. Shelters are filled with pets from owners who've changed their minds.

If you do take in this feline, how fortunate that you've found each other. I'm always honored to be loved by a cat. My heart opens from the experience, and it gets me wondering who has helped whom?



Sources:

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Cat Lover is a Heartbroken Foster Mom

by Marie O. November 20, 2016

About nine months ago, I fostered two unweaned kittens, taken from their feral mother cat at five weeks and two days. How they were taken is a gruesome tale, better off told in another blog. And, on first glance at my shaky hands, I may need therapy before I tell that story. You see, I've never had children. I blame my "failure" as a foster mom on that, or maybe my attachment issues, or



Black Cats Halloween
Helping Cats Marie Mila
Stray

Black Cats and Halloween

by Marie O. October 02, 2016

So, I'm sitting in the chair of a new hairdresser yesterday, October 1st, and, as hairdressers always make polite conversation, she asks me, "So, do you have any fur babies?" I chuckle and said, "Yes, in fact, I do. I care for a number of strays and



Cat Charities Donations Marie
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Cat Lovers Website Donates to Cat Charities

by Marie O. September 22, 2016

Welcome to Quote Kitty, a new website that donates 9% of the retail price of every product purchased to save cats. That's 9% for each of cat's 9 lives. It's the website for cat lovers because every item sold is cat themed and helps support community cats across the United

maybe just my love of cats since childhood. Some of you chill-hearted cat-lovers may excel at fostering. Me? The process almost killed me.

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ferals, and have kind of become the crazy cat lady in my neighborhood."

She responded that she'd be taking in her sister's black cat for the two weeks around Halloween because they were afraid for the safety of the cat in the Denver neighborhood where the cat lives and likes to roam at night.

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States. At Quote Kitty, we sell cat apparel and accessories for people, as well as products for your feline friends. The Quote Kitty motto is "Curiosity Saves the Cat."

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