

A Guide to Adopting a Stray Cat

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Part 1

Taos, like many communities, has stray cats wandering its alleys, backyards and vacant lots. Some of these animals are truly feral. You may see them from a distance, but approach them and they'll dart away. Others will be cautiously friendly, particularly if you regularly put out food. These friendly strays are usually cats that were recently owned by someone. They may have been abandoned by their owners or just gotten lost accidentally.

If you call to a stray cat and it comes to you or if the cat lets you touch it, it's one of these former pets. Unlike feral cats, they value human companionship and can once again become pets. Actually, many people that I know have gotten their pets by adopting the random strays from around their homes.

This is an exceptionally kind act: to give it a stray cat a home and the love that it once knew. But there are some important things to consider before you open your door to that stray.

First, consider the other animals you have. If you have large, active dogs, do they chase cats? Normally cats and dogs peacefully coexist, but aggressive dogs can be a real threat. What about birds or chickens? Cats can't be expected to behave contrary to their nature so unless your feathered folks are completely secure, you don't want a cat.

If you already have a cat or two, the question is will they accept a new cat? If the new cat is a kitten, it will usually be accepted by the others, but if the new cat is fully grown, there's no way of knowing how the situation will resolve. I recommend keeping the new cat isolated in a separate room (with its own food, water, and litter box) away from the other cats for at least a week and only allow the new cat to interact when you are present to monitor the group behavior. The new cat should be returned to its room at night and whenever you're unavailable to supervise.

Don't allow fights between your cats! Fights are usually preceded by growling or hissing so you have time to intervene before a serious fight begins. Also, give equal amounts of loving attention to all your cats both new and old as reassurance that they are all welcome.

The new cat should visit the veterinarian before it interacts with your other animals. Through our Pays To Help Strays program, Taos Feral Feline Friends will pay veterinary expenses for new owners taking in strays.

Part 2

This article will focus on what is the possibly the number one human health issue arising from bringing a new cat into your home: allergies.

According to WebMD, about 10% of the U.S. population has pet allergies. Allergies to cats are twice as common as allergies to dogs so even if you are a dog owner without allergies, you might still be allergic to your new feline friend. Here's a quick test to determine whether or not you're allergic. Simply rub your hands through the cat's fur for a minute and then rub your eyes with your hands. If you're allergic, you should know within a few minutes because you'll have red itchy eyes, possibly a runny nose or sneezing or coughing. The test, although very good, isn't perfect because a cat may have another allergen such as pollen in its fur. To eliminate this, you would need to bathe the cat and retry the test.

If you already own a cat, you probably know if you or another family member is allergic. But can someone with a cat allergy live with a cat? The answer is yes – unless the allergy is so severe or the allergic person has other health problems like asthma that might be exacerbated by the allergy. Consult with a doctor in these situations.

You may be surprised to learn that I am allergic to cats. I'm around dozens of cats every day, but I keep my allergy under control by following a few commonsense rules. I can't avoid handling cats in my work, but all allergic people should minimize their exposure. If possible, let a non-allergic person be responsible for cat care such as litter box cleaning and grooming. If you touch a cat, wash your hand afterwards and definitely do not rub your face or eyes until you've washed. Make the room where you sleep a 'clean room' – keep it cat-free and don't wear the clothing you sleep in anywhere except the clean room. Keep the rest of your home as clean as possible by vacuuming floors, rugs, drapes and furniture. A vacuum with a HEPA filter works the best. Air cleaners can also reduce exposure to allergens.

Furniture with fabric upholstery may still contain allergens even after cleaning so I recommend covering the place where the allergic person sits with a clean sheet. The sheet should be folded and put away when not in use and changed every few days. In between changes, make sure the same side of the sheet faces up and the same side touches the upholstery.

I don't recommend bathing cats to reduce dander. Most cats really hate the process and it has not been proven to reduce the amount of cat dander. By the way, it's the dander (skin flakes) not the fur that is the primary culprit for allergies. Cat saliva and urine can also generate an allergic response, but the real battle is against the dander.

Finally, although reducing exposure to cat dander is essential, there are effective, inexpensive drugs to control allergy symptoms. There are over-the-counter, generic versions of the popular antihistamines, Benadryl, Zyrtec, Claritin, and Allegra. You'll have to experiment to see which works best, but I recommend trying generic Zyrtec (cetirizine) or Claritin (loratadine) first because a single dose lasts for 24 hours and can be bought for merely ten cents each. From a cost standpoint, many people with cat allergies have pollen or other allergies, so they may already be buying the proper medicine to control their symptoms.

Part 3

Taking in a stray cat is a true act of kindness. I'm sure that anyone considering this is looking forward to a long, happy and healthy relationship with their new friend. However, stray cats can carry diseases that, although harmless to people, will shorten their lives and potentially infect other cats.

Feline leukemia (FELV) is a viral disease that resides in a cat's bone marrow. Like human leukemia, it causes severe anemia and suppresses the cat's immune system making it more vulnerable to other diseases. Most cats obtain FELV from their infected mothers, but it can also be transmitted through saliva by grooming, sharing food dishes and fighting. A cat can look healthy but have FELV so it is important that the cat be tested before adoption. If you adopt a stray through Taos Feral Feline Friends *Pays To Help Strays* program, we automatically test for FELV and pay the cost for you. There is a vaccination that protects cats from getting FELV and we also provide that at no cost. Fortunately, FELV is fairly uncommon – nationally, about 1 out of 43 cats tested will have it.

Feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV) is another serious viral disease that's sometimes called "kitty AIDS". Like human AIDS, FIV-infected cats will suffer from progressively weaker immune systems making them subject to any number of other diseases. It is primarily transmitted through fighting, not by casual contact among cats. For this reason, FIV is most often seen among unneutered male stray cats prone to territorial fighting. Like FELV, you can't tell if a cat is infected unless it's tested so our *Pays To Help Strays* program always tests cats for FIV at no cost to the adopter. Unlike FELV, there is no reliable vaccination for FIV. Nationally, FIV is seen in about 1 in 40 cats. We tend to see about twice as many FIV cases as FELV cases in the stray cats around Taos.

Please remember that neither disease can be transmitted to humans or dogs. And both are fairly uncommon. However, if you already have cats, it's essential for their health that you test any new cat

coming in your home for FELV and FIV. Even if you don't have a cat, we recommend testing any new cat so that your new lifelong relationship isn't disappointingly cut short.

Finally, rabies and plague are two diseases that can infect both cats and humans. These infections in cats are exceedingly rare – in fact, in more than two thousand cats that we've helped at Taos Feral Feline Friends over the last nine years, we have never seen a case of either. It's just not something you need to worry about.

Part 4

This article will deal with some less serious health conditions in outdoor cats.

If a stray cat seems to be scratching a lot, the cause could be fleas or ticks. However, it can also be a skin allergy, so you need to give the cat's fur a close inspection – the bugs are small, but not invisible. Look closely around the ears and eyes. The semi-arid climate of Taos suppresses the flea and tick population which need moisture to survive. Because of this, stray cats with fleas or ticks are uncommon in Taos. I only see about one or two cats a year with this problem, usually during summer.

Ringworm is caused by a skin fungus and can infect cats, dogs, and people. Cats will exhibit patchy hair loss in the infected area and this is not hard to spot. Like fleas and ticks, ringworm is inhibited by the arid conditions of Taos, Because it is easily transmitted from cat to cat, ringworm is much more likely in cats at shelters than cats in the wild. Unless you see red patches on a cat's skin with corresponding hair loss, you need not be concerned about it.

If you do encounter fleas or ringworm in a stray cat, there are highly effective treatments that your vet can provide that will solve the problem. If you adopt a stray cat through our Pays To Help Strays adoption service, the vet exam will catch these problems.

The last condition I want to mention is feline coronavirus, or FECV. This is a common virus estimated to be present in about 5% to 30% of outdoor cats. It is easily transmitted from cat to cat so cats who have resided at shelters are more likely to have FECV than outdoor cats. FECV itself is harmless, but in a few cases the virus can mutate into a form known as feline infectious peritonitis virus which causes FIP, a fatal disease in cats. Although there is a blood test for FECV, we don't use it because only 1% to 5% of cats with FECV will ever develop FIP. Because FECV, like ringworm, is more commonly found in shelter residents, this is actually an advantage of adopting a stray directly from the wild.

Part 5

Stray cats are all around us, roaming the streets, alleys, and backyards of Taos. Although there are two shelters (us and Stray Hearts) that can house cats, there are far more strays than there are places to house them unless the people of Taos, the ones that love cats, open their doors and provide homes. It's a great idea to visit us or Stray Hearts if you're searching for a cat to adopt, but don't overlook a cat that may be just waiting patiently for you in your garden or on your porch.

With any adoption, there are various important considerations. Here's a quick review:

- 1) If you have other animals, make sure that a new cat will not be a source of conflict. Well-behaved dogs will not be a problem, but large aggressive dogs could be. Birds and chickens are not really compatible with cats unless they're always kept isolated from each other. Other cats may pose conflicts, particularly if the new cat is a mature adult.
- 2) Consider whether or not any person in your household is allergic to cats. It's possible to be allergic to cats and co-exist with them, but maybe a new dog, gerbil, or rabbit is a better fit.
- 3) Be sure to take your new cat for a veterinary exam before allowing it inside. Have it tested for Felv and FIV and vaccinated for rabies and other diseases as recommended by the vet. Make sure the cat is fixed unless it's too young – usually cats three months or older can be fixed.

Here's a great opportunity to save some money! If you use our Pays To Help Strays adoption service, Taos Feral Feline Friends will pay most of your vet costs, including the charges for spay/neuter surgeries, Felv/FIV testing and all vaccinations. Not covered is the vet exam fee and any special treatments such as micro-chipping, a good idea if the cat will be going outdoors. Currently Pays To Help Strays is limited to residents with zip codes of 87571(Taos), 87529(El Prado) or 87557(Ranchos De Taos), but even if you live outside of that area, call us at 737-9208 and we may be able to help.

Finally, if a stray cat is not something you want around, if it's on your property and being a nuisance, please don't harm it or trap it and dump it somewhere. If you need a cat removed, call Animal Control and let them take it to the shelter where it might be reclaimed by its owner or be adopted. Let's not blame the homeless cat... it is the victim of our neglect. If you can't open your door to a stray, maybe you can at least open your heart.