

Hey Doctor....I Have a Question!

In this column, I will attempt to answer some of the most commonly asked questions we get in the exam room. This issue's topic:

Introducing a new pet

Q: Before I bring our new puppy home to our other dog, how can I make sure he's not going to transmit something to our other dog?

A: I recommend a visit to the veterinarian as soon as possible, especially before you put them together. Fleas, ear mites and intestinal parasites can be transmitted between pets. Coughing and eye or nasal discharge may also indicate a contagious illness that can make your resident pet ill. We may recommend that you isolate the new pet for awhile before introducing them.

Q: Does the same go for cats too?

A: Yes. In addition to the above problems, new cats or kittens must be tested for feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV) and feline leukemia virus (FeLV) before introducing them to your resident cat.

Q: How long will it take for my new pet and my resident pet to get along?

A: There are many factors to consider when introducing pets. The breed, size, gender, age, individual temperament and health status of each pet all contribute to their initial encounter and eventual coexistence. That's why it is impossible to predict how one pet will respond to another. Sometimes, the new pet is accepted almost immediately without fanfare. Other times, the introduction process may take weeks and even then, the two may never become "best friends". For example, cats that live in the same household but don't associate and keep their distance.

Q: What is the best way to make the introduction?

A: Gradual introductions are the best. Here's some tips for introductions between dogs, between cats, and between a cat and a dog.

Introducing a new dog to a resident dog:

This may go pretty quickly if your resident dog is good-natured and you are bringing home a puppy. Problems are more likely to occur between two adult dogs, especially if you are unaware of the new dog's history around other pets. Restrain both dogs on a leash and make the first introduction on neutral territory if possible (for example, in your neighborhood at a distance from your house). At home, keep them separate when you are not there. Allow the resident dog to eat and sleep where it always has while the new dog should stay in a room of its own that has everything it needs. They should be able to sniff under the door. Gradually allow both dogs to be in the same room with you for longer and longer periods of time. Reward good behavior with treats and petting. Teach them that good things happen when they are together and calm. At any sign of aggression, separate them and try again later. If you are gone during the day and use crates, gradually move their crates closer and closer until they are side by side. Remember to provide each pet with some individual attention during the introduction process to prevent jealousy.

Introducing a new cat to a resident cat:

Once again, a gradual approach is best. Keep the new cat confined to one room that has its food, water, litter box and toys. Allow both cats to sniff under the door and expect a lot of hissing at first. Occasionally switch rooms. Allow the new cat to roam the normal living quarters and let the resident cat sniff out the new cat's room. When the hissing behavior gets less and less, it is time for face to face introductions. Allow them to mingle with supervision and be generous with your attention and treats. Make these first activities together enjoyable ones. Separate and try again later if aggressive behavior occurs. If you already have more than one cat, use the "alpha cat" for the preliminary introductions. Once he/she accepts the newcomer, the others will follow.

Introducing a cat to a dog:

Before introducing a cat to a dog, determine if the dog will harm the cat. Some dogs have strong predatory instincts toward cats and you must be extremely cautious. Always leash the dog and allow the cat to be able to escape at first. Never leave them alone in the early stages. On the other hand, young puppies are unlikely to harm an adult cat, but still keep them separate when unsupervised.

Q: Are there any medications to make the process easier?

A: We first recommend trying the above protocols. If one pet is really having a tough time and being overly aggressive, we can prescribe certain medications to relax and change the pet's mood. These are usually used just for a short time. There are also scent diffusers for dogs (DAP, dog appeasing pheromone) and cats (Feliway) that release pheromones to help relieve stress.

Take your time, do it gradually and your pets should be able to live harmoniously together!

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