

When the Parents are away ... Where Do the Kitties Stay?

Going on vacation? Cats are creatures of routine, so as much as you can keep your cat's lifestyle stable, the less traumatic your absence will be. Here are some tips on keeping your kitty happy even when you have to go away.

Ideally, keep your cat at home - cats are territorial and feel safest and most comfortable in their familiar environment.

Do not leave your cat alone for more than 24 hours without someone to check on them. This is to ensure attention to medical emergencies, make sure your cat is eating, and provide him or her with much needed affection and mental stimulation.

Ask friends or hire a petsitter to check in - to feed and provide fresh water, clean the litterbox, and groom your cat at least once a day. Ask them to engage in some interactive playtime with your cat. It will provide exercise and mental stimulation, and the exercise can reduce stress. Someone who is familiar with your cat is ideal.

If you are going away for more than 2 weeks, it is best to have someone who can spend the night at least a few times a week while you are away.

When hiring a cat-sitter:

- Get references from friends, your vet, or local animal rescue.
- You may prefer to use a pet-sitter who is bonded and insured, and they should offer you references if requested.
- Ideally, have the pet-sitter meet your cat before you hire them, to see how they interact with your cat.
- Make reservations early, as pet-sitters can get booked up quickly, especially during holidays.
- Leave carefully written instructions for the sitter about where food, litter and medications are located. Also note your cat's preferences for grooming, treats, affection and interactive play.
- Buy extra supplies in case your travel plans change.
- Make sure your cat has an ID tag and microchip. Have current photos available in case she gets lost while you are gone.
- Make arrangements to contact your sitter when you return to let them know you are back from your trip.
- Have a friend who has a back up set of keys and is willing to be an emergency contact.
- Make sure the pet sitter has your contact information for the duration of your travels.

- Have a written letter authorizing the pet sitter to approve emergency veterinary care in your absence. Call your veterinarian ahead of time to let them know you will be gone.
- Give your petsitter your veterinarian's contact information, as well as the phone number and address for the nearest emergency vet services.
- A written contract outlining fees, method of payment, and the terms of the services offered (amount of time spent with pet, time of day they will visit, other services they will provide such as checking mail or watering plants) is recommended.

You can contact the National Association of Professional Pet Sitters (800-296-PETS) or Pet Sitters International (336-983-9222) for more advice or references.

Boarding

Sometimes there is no choice but to board your cat. Boarding can be stressful, as your cat will be out of their familiar territory, surrounded by strange people, noises, and smells. If you must board your cat:

- Call ahead of time; kennels book up quickly during holidays.
- Many vet offices and animal hospitals also do boarding.
- Visit the kennel before committing.
- Many kennels require proof of up-to-date vaccinations, so inquire ahead of time about what shots your cat might need.
- It's best to bring along familiar items for your cat - bedding, something with your scent, toys and whatever food they currently eat. Also bring along any medications your cat needs.
- Give the kennel detailed information about your cat's preferences and needs, as well as your contact information.

If your cat is staying at someone else's house...

Although not ideal, sometimes you have to take kitty to another home to stay. A "safe room" should be provided for your cat - away from noise and other animals. Some cats will need to stay in one room for the duration of the visit, depending on how outgoing (or shy) your cat is and how comfortable they are with strangers, other animals, and new environments. Security is a big issue, so make sure there is no chance for your cat to escape (through open windows, cat doors or other doors left open) - if she does she will be lost and far from home.

Finally, have a great trip! You can relax knowing that you have left your cat home in safe hands, where she will be comfortable until you return.

If you have further questions, please phone the SF/SPCA Cat Behavior Helpline at (415) 554-3075 or email catbehavior@sfpca.org