

How to Help a Fearful Cat in a New Home

How can I tell if my cat is fearful?

A cat's behavior can tell you a lot about their emotions. In general, a cat who feels happy and safe will spend time out in the open. They will walk with their tail up and ears forward or slightly to the side. They will explore and interact with their environment in a confident manner. When in a new place, even a confident cat may hide. In contrast, a cat who is feeling fearful may exhibit any of the following behaviors:

- cowering or walking with their body low to the ground
- fleeing in response to noises or when approached
- hissing, swatting, or trying to bite if handled
- decreased appetite*
- urinating or defecating outside of the litterbox*
- appearing "shut down" or pretending to be asleep*

**Lack of appetite, inappropriate elimination, lethargy, or any sudden change in a cat's behavior could also be an indication of an underlying medical condition. If you notice any of these, contact your veterinarian right away.*

Why is my cat fearful?

From an evolutionary standpoint, fear is very helpful for avoiding danger. All animals experience fear at various points throughout their life. For cats, fear is often caused by new environments, traveling in a carrier, loud or unfamiliar noises, or unfamiliar sights, smells, or animals.

Most cats will experience some level of fear when first arriving in a new home. Think about when you move to a new home – it takes some time to get used to a novel space and a new routine. Cats similarly take time to get used to a new place and many become confident with time.

Some cats have more sensitive or fearful personalities, either due to negative experiences in the past, genetic traits, lack of exposure to new experiences as a kitten, or a combination of these factors. They tend to take a little longer (weeks vs days) to settle into a new home. These cats may always be a bit timid in certain situations, but, given time, they often blossom in a stable home environment with familiar people.

How can I help my cat feel less fearful?

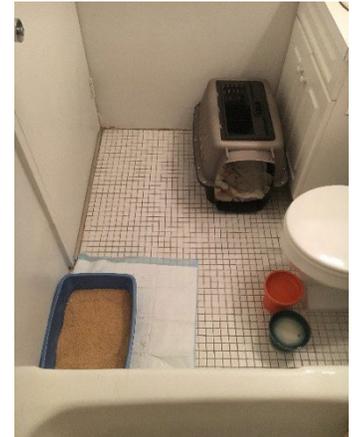
Help them feel cozy and secure. When first getting to your home, keep your cat confined in a quiet, low-traffic area such as a bathroom or small bedroom. This will reduce their exposure to things that might frighten them. Make sure to cat-proof by blocking off any small spaces where the cat might try to hide but do provide several appropriate hiding spots such as cardboard boxes, a cat carrier with the door propped open, or a cat tree. Avoid physically removing a fearful cat from where they are hiding unless necessary. Be sure your cat has access to comfy bedding, toys, food, water, a scratcher, and a litter box. Once the cat is moving around this space confidently, you can begin to slowly introduce them to the rest of your home.

Practice a “considerate approach.” A considerate approach means that you are approaching the cat in a way that considers the cat’s point of view. Avoid picking up, leaning over, or reaching for the cat as these can be perceived as threatening.

Instead, sit or kneel about 1-2 feet away from them, facing to the side. Avoid staring directly at the cat, instead, look at them for a second or two then blink slowly and look away for a moment. Offer some tasty treats by either rolling them toward the cat or placing them gently near them. Try engaging them by waving a wand toy low to the ground. Keep your movements slow, your voice low, and your hand below the cat’s eye level.

Let them choose. Allowing your cat to interact with you on their own terms will help them learn to trust you. Pay attention to the cat’s body language and stop interacting with them if they appear stressed. In fact, sometimes just acting like you are not paying them any mind at all can go a long way in letting a fearful cat know you mean no harm. Fearful cats tend to warm up to their main caretaker, but likely will remain fearful of visitors. It is important that you do not force your cat to interact with any visitors if they are frightened of them, or they may become even more scared. Instead, have them ignore your cat. If your cat comes out of hiding, visitors should gently toss treats but not attempt to interact further.

Have a fearful kitten? Check out [How to Successfully Foster an Undersocialized Kitten](#).



A bathroom is a good place for a cat to settle into a new home.