



# PET TALK

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## WHICH PET IS RIGHT FOR YOU\*

It is estimated that almost 40% of American households currently own at least one pet. Unfortunately, the most common cause of early pet death is not due to disease or disability, but due to euthanasia. According to the Humane Society of the United States, between six and eight million dogs and cats enter a shelter each year and between three and four million are euthanized each year. One of the biggest reasons that these animals end up in shelters is inappropriate selection of pets by owners for their lifestyle and animal experience.

There are many factors to consider when choosing a pet and are several topics that everyone considering pet ownership should think about before making their decision. This kind of forethought is very beneficial for both owner and pet. Time and attention are a requirement for all types of pets. Even the easiest of pets to care for will still require time spent feeding and maintaining the pet's living area. Like people, pets have personalities and some are more independent than others. In general, cats, fish and birds need less attention than dogs. Large pets, like horses, require increased or decreased attention based on the season and/or use of the animal.

Maintenance needs vary based on pet selection. There are a few pets that need little or no attention

over their lifetimes. For example, a pet tarantula will not require much more than feeding and cleaning its living quarters. One of the most time consuming activities of maintenance is grooming. Obviously, grooming needs depend largely on the type and length of the animal's hair or coat. For example, double coated animals and long haired animals require more grooming than their single coat and short haired counterparts. If not properly groomed, the under coat can become matted and this can cause sores on the skin that potentially could become infected.

Pest control is another type of maintenance required by most warm blooded pets and some reptiles. A good rule of thumb is the larger the pet, the more hair they have, and the longer the pet is outdoors the more maintenance they will require.

Children and existing family pets add another variable to the decision of choosing a new pet. There is not a 'perfect' way to predict how well the new pet will get along with other pets or children. Easy trainability of a pet indicates a better chance that the pet will be sociable with other animals and children. If an owner is seeking a pet for a child, it might be appropriate to get a pet that requires minimal time and maintenance so if the child is not prepared for the challenges of pet ownership, the pet will not be in danger. Younger pets

are more likely to acclimate themselves to pets and children already living in the home. Early socialization and close monitoring at first can help prevent potential problems from occurring.

Noise and disorder are issues for some pet owners. Many types of pets shed hair or feathers that can make it almost impossible to protect the environment from disorder. Shedding is also an important factor if the owner or someone in the family has pet allergies. Animals that shed a lot of hair and dander can aggravate allergies. This would make cats a poor choice because they are constantly grooming themselves. Additionally, cats have a protein in their saliva that can be a potent allergen for many individuals. Aside from shedding, many animals that require more attention than an owner can provide will become

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destructive and produce messes or noise out of boredom. High energy animals kept in small spaces without the opportunity for adequate exercise are most likely to display behavior problems. Cats are usually less noisy than dogs but this is relative depending on the breed. For example, Siamese cats can be quite vocal and the Basenji breed of dog is genetically unable to bark. Ferrets, which are genetically related to skunks, can secrete a discharge with a musky smell that some people find offensive. If allergies, messiness, or noise are issues that cause concern for potential pet owners, then the family should probably consider pets like a fish or an animal that is content to live outdoors.

Climate and housing are important to consider when choosing a pet. It is crucial to understand the climate a where a pet was historically bred especially if an owner is planning to keep a pet outdoors. For example, an owner who lives in a cold climate would not want to keep an animal without the necessary adaptation mechanisms to protect it from the cold. Likewise, owners living in a hot climate would probably not want a dog with an extremely heavy coat, such a breed like the Malamute. The home situation of the owner should also be considered. Does the owner live in a small apartment or in a house on several acres of land? Small apartments are great for small pets like cats and hamsters, but would be inappropriate for large animals like Golden Retrievers or ponies. In addition, some large dogs or even highly energetic small dogs need considerable time outside for exercise.

Your personal activity level may not seem like a factor that you need to consider before choosing a pet, but it is critical to try to match an

owner's activity level with that of a pet. If an animal is more active than an owner, the animal may become destructive simply due to lack of exercise or stimulation. On the other hand, an owner that is extremely active might be disappointed if their companion turns out to be a couch potato. Owners should investigate the relative activity and energy level of the pet they are considering. There are resources in your local library or on the internet that can help you determine the activity levels of various species of pets.

The last consideration, but an extremely important one, is the level of commitment to a pet. Everything else about owning a pet can be included in commitment. When you decide on pet ownership, you are committing personal resources such as attention, maintenance, and activity level for that pet. But in addition, you also are committing financial resources to the pet for appropriate housing, food and health maintenance costs. Owners need to be prepared for both routine costs of ownership plus one time emergency costs. Average yearly costs for dogs can range from around \$500 to several thousands of dollars. Average yearly costs for cats can range from about \$400 to a thousand dollars. Even with pets likes ferrets or fish, your costs for food alone can be anywhere from \$90-\$200. (Pet University 2007; *Economics of Pet Ownership*, Cost of owning) The costs for dogs and cats include things like food, housing, grooming, immunizations and routine veterinary expenses. The estimates do not include emergency care if the pet is injured by a car or other type of accident. Also, the owner needs to keep in mind the varying life span for different animals. The average

lifespan for different animals is seen in the table below. So the owner needs to determine not only their current lifestyle and finances but their future life situation as well.

Once all these questions have been objectively answered, people considering pet ownership can determine which, if any, pet is right for them. These determinations should be made prior to actually looking for a pet. Many of the problems that arise in pet ownership are a result of inappropriate or hasty decisions that an owner makes based on an emotional reaction to seeing a puppy or kitten. While you will never find a pet that meets all your requirements, prioritizing those requirements that are most important to you will help you match up with the best pet for you.

Doing just a little bit of research before purchasing a pet can let you know what to expect once you bring the pet home. It is important for this matching of pet to owner be done because appropriate pet selection can save lives and help keep down the number of pets that end up in shelters each year.

Longevity of Various Animals	
Animal	Life span
Dog, small	17 years
Dog, Large	12 years
Cat	20 years
Horse	30 years
Parrot	80 years
Macaw	50 years
Box turtle	120 years
Mouse	4 years
Hamster	2 years

*\*This article was provided by:  
Jan K. Hastings, PharmD, Associate Professor  
University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences  
College of Pharmacy*