



Cat Foster Care Manual

Medicine Hat SPCA cat foster care manual has information on preparing for, bringing home and caring for a foster cat to prepare him or her for a forever home.

Table of Contents

Section 1: Introduction

- Frequently asked questions

Section 2: Preparing for your foster cat

- Supplies you'll need
- Cat-proofing your home

Section 3: Bringing home your foster cat

- Cat introductions
- Dog introductions
- Children and cats

Section 4: Daily care

- Feeding
- Daily routine
- Litter box habits
- Grooming

- Mental stimulation and exercise
- Safety requirements

Section 5: Medical and emergency protocols

- Veterinary care
- Signs of illness and what to do next
- Common ailments in animals from shelters
- Criteria for emergencies

Section 6: Behavior support

Section 1: Introduction

Thank you so much for your interest in fostering pets for the Medicine Hat SPCA. By opening up your home to foster pets, you're not only helping to save lives, you're providing the individual attention and love these cats desperately need.

Once you have completed and submitted the foster application, our foster coordinator will get in touch with you. All foster families will receive a copy of this manual to allow for consistent guidelines and care.

Many of the cats who need foster homes require extra care and attention, which shelters often don't have the staff or resources to provide. But in a loving foster home, every cat can get the individual attention he or she needs to find a forever family.

Foster homes are asked to provide care for the cats, as well as transportation to and from veterinary appointments as needed, and transportation to the Medicine Hat SPCA facility. Care for foster cats includes feeding according to size and needs, and lots of play time and positive socialization.

Although fostering is a lot of work, it is a very rewarding experience. By participating in this program, you are saving lives and helping many different types of cats find the families they've been longing for. Through fostering, we can work together to Save Them All.

Frequently asked questions

What do foster families need to provide?

- A healthy and safe environment for their foster cats
- Transportation to and from the adoption center and all vet appointments as needed
- Socialization and cuddle time to help teach the cats about positive family and pet relationships
- Lots of exercise and positive stimulation to help them develop into great cats

How much time do I need to spend with a foster cat?

As much time as you can. With that said, the amount of time will vary depending on the energy level and needs of the cat you are fostering. It is ideal to spend around two hours a day socializing and playing with your foster cat to ensure that he or she receives adequate attention and stimulation.

Can I foster cats even if I have a full-time job?

Yes. The foster application is designed as a survey to help the foster coordinator match you with the best animal for your needs and your current schedule. If you have a full-time job, the foster coordinator will match you with a cat who may be OK alone during the workday. You would then just need to provide ample attention to the cat before and/or after your workday.

How long will the cat need to be in foster care?

It varies, depending on the condition of the foster cat. Foster homes are generally needed for cats with medical or behavioral issues that are best resolved in a home setting rather than a kennel environment. Different special needs require different amounts of time for healing.

How often does my foster cat need to go to the SPCA?

Our pet adoption center has a wonderful success rate for finding homes for cats, so cats who are ready for adoption don't usually need to go into foster homes first. As mentioned above, the cats available for fostering will be those with medical or behavioral conditions that need to be overcome before adoption. This means that foster cats should only need to come to the pet adoption center once they are ready for adoption or if a quick medical checkup is required.

When is my foster cat ready for adoption?

When a foster cat has been cleared for adoption by the Animal Health Lead in coordination with our Veterinarian, a time will be scheduled for you to return the cat to the pet adoption center.

Will I need to give medicine to my foster cat?

While we do our best to ensure that we are aware of all the conditions that a foster cat may have prior to going home, many illnesses have incubation periods, meaning symptoms can arise after you take a cat home. So while some cats do not require any medicine, others may. If your foster cat needs medications, we can show you how to administer them before you take the animal home.

Can I let my foster cat play with my personal pets?

There are a few guidelines that we ask foster families to adhere to regarding their personal pets. While foster cats playing with other pets is often fine, we require that all of your personal pets are healthy and up-to-date on all vaccines. Cats in shelters are very susceptible to illness and can carry or catch different diseases. If, for any reason, your personal pet becomes ill while you are fostering a pet, we cannot provide medical care for your personal pet.

Important note: If your personal cat is allowed outdoors, he or she cannot interact with your foster cat. Foster cats are typically more at risk of illness and we want to limit that risk by not exposing them to anything from the outdoors.

Will it be hard to say goodbye to my foster cat?

Saying goodbye can be the most difficult part of fostering, but keep in mind that many more cats in the facility need wonderful foster homes like yours. Remember, you are playing a crucial role in helping to Save Them All.

What if my foster cat bites me?

If any of your foster pets bite you and break skin, causing you to bleed, you need to report the bite to the foster coordinator within 24 hours of when the bite occurred. The teeth of the animal, not the nails, must have broken the skin. If you are unsure, then please report the bite anyway.

What if my foster cat is not working out?

You are not required to continue to foster a cat if you feel it's not working out. However, we may not have an immediate alternate foster home or space for the cat at our adoption center. We will work on moving your foster cat out as soon as possible, but ask for your understanding and patience. Please call the foster coordinator during business hours if this situation arises.

Section 2: Preparing for your foster cat

When you take your foster cat home, he may be frightened or unsure about what's happening, so it's important not to overwhelm him. Prepare a special area for the foster cat to help ease his adjustment into a new home environment. Sometimes it is better to confine the foster cat to a small room, such as a bathroom, at first, to let him adjust before giving him free rein in your home. Equip the room with food and water dishes and a litter box.

Another reason that we recommend a small room is because cats will typically hide in new environments. It is not uncommon for a foster cat to hide underneath a bed or in a dark, quiet place for the first couple of days. Isolating your foster cat when you first take her home allows you to know what room she is in and helps you to monitor her eating, drinking and potty habits more closely.

We request that all foster cats be housed indoors only. A garage, backyard or outdoor enclosure is not a suitable accommodation for a foster cat.

During the first couple of weeks, minimize the people and pet introductions to your foster cat, so that she is only meeting immediate family and your personal pets. If you have other pets at home, it is especially important to give your foster cat a space of her own where she can stay while getting used to all the new sounds and smells. Don't leave your foster cat unattended in your home with your personal pets until you are comfortable that all of the animals can interact safely.

Supplies you'll need

We will provide you with any supplies that you may need. However, we greatly appreciate any help that you can provide in supplying items for your foster cat. Here's what you'll need to help your foster cat make a smooth transition to living in your home:

- At least one bowl for dry food and one for water
- A supply of dry cat food. If the foster cat requires canned food the foster coordinator will inform you.
- A Litter box per floor of your home.
- Non-clumping litter: Use pine pellets or clay litter.
- A soft place to sleep: Old towels or blankets work well.
- Toys: Use toys that are easy to sanitize and clean. Make sure the toys are durable and safe.
- Scratching post
- Litter Scoop
- Grooming supplies: A well-groomed cat has a better chance of getting adopted.

Cat-proofing your home

Foster cats come from a shelter environment, and even if they have previously lived in a home, we don't always know how they will react in a new home. So, before bringing home a new foster cat, you'll want to survey the area where you are going to keep the cat. Remove anything that would be unsafe or undesirable for the cat to chew on, and latch securely any cupboards that the foster cat could get into. Cats like to climb up on shelves or bookcases, so you'll want to remove anything that can be knocked down. People food and chemicals can be very harmful if consumed by cats, so please store them in a place that the foster cat cannot access.

Never underestimate your foster cat's abilities. Here are some additional tips for cat-proofing your home:

- Make sure that all trash cans are covered or latched and keep them inside a closet. (Don't forget the bathroom trash bins.)
- Keep the toilet lids closed.
- Keep both people and pet food out of reach and off all counter tops.
- Move house plants out of reach. Many house plants are toxic to cats and they like to chew on them.
- Make sure aquariums or cages that house small animals, like hamsters or fish, are securely out of reach of your foster cat.
- Remove medications, lotions or cosmetics from any accessible surfaces.
- Move and secure all electrical and phone wires out of reach. Cats may chew on or get tangled in them.
- Pick up any clothing items that have buttons or strings, which can be harmful to your foster cat if consumed.
- Relocate knickknacks or valuables that your foster cat could knock down.

Section 3: Bringing home your foster cat

Taking care of a foster cat requires a commitment from you to make sure the cat is happy and healthy. Thank you so much for opening your heart and your home to these cats who desperately need your help. Without you, we could not save as many as we do.

Your foster pet has just experienced big changes. They may have experienced changes that are new and scary, overwhelming and very different for them and it is very important to keep this in mind. It is best to keep the environment quiet for a few days so they can adjust without the added stress. Keep visitors at bay and provide a safe, quiet place for your new foster pet to “get their bearings.” Please remember that 99% of the time, we do not know the full background of your new foster pet. We do our best to provide you, as the foster home, with as many details as we can regarding the background and behaviors.

Cat introductions

If you have personal pets who are cats, you'll need to introduce them to the foster cat. Even if you know the cat you are fostering is good with other cats, you'll want to do the introductions gradually. So, before bringing your foster cat home, create a separate “territory” for her. This area should be equipped with food, water, a scratching post, a litter box, access to natural sunlight, and comfortable resting places. Your other cats should have their own separate territory.

Over a one- to two-week period, let the cats smell each other through a closed door, but don't allow them contact with one another. Exchanging blankets or towels between the areas will help them get used to each other's smells. The next step is to allow them to see each other through

a baby gate or a door that is propped open two inches. If the cats are interested in each other and seem comfortable, allow them to meet. Open the door to the rooms between the cats and observe them closely. If any cat shows signs of significant stress or aggression, separate them again and introduce them more slowly.

It's a good idea to have a broom or squirt bottle on hand to deter any fights. Never try to separate cats who are fighting with your hands or body parts. For more details on cat introductions, read "Introducing a New Cat."

Dog introductions

If you have a personal pet who's a dog, you'll need to make the introduction to the foster cat carefully and safely. Start by keeping them separated at first. As mentioned above, before you bring your foster cat home, create a separate "territory" for her and equip it with food, water, a scratching post, a litter box, and comfortable resting places.

Over a one- to two-week period, let the dog and cat smell each other through the door, but don't allow them contact with one another. Exchanging blankets or towels between the dog's area and the cat's area will help them get used to each other's smells.

After a week or two, do the face-to-face introduction. Keeping your dog on leash, allow your foster cat out in the same area. (If you have more than one dog, introduce one at a time.) Do not allow the dog to charge or run directly up to the cat. Try to distract the dog as best you can so that the cat has the chance to approach without fear. Watch the body language of each animal closely and don't continue the interaction if either pet becomes over-stimulated or aggressive. The idea is to keep the interactions positive, safe and controlled. For more details, read "Introducing a Cat and a Dog."

Finally, never leave your dog unsupervised around the foster cat.

Children and cats

Since we don't always know a foster cat's history or tolerance level for different types of people and activities, please teach your children how to act responsibly and respectfully around your foster cat. We will do our best to place you with an appropriate animal for your home situation, but you should still supervise all interactions between children and your foster cat. Key things to remind your children:

- Always leave the foster cat alone when he/she is eating or sleeping. Some cats may nip or bite if bothered while eating or startled while sleeping.
- Do not tease or rile up the foster cat.
- Don't chase the foster cat around the house; it may scare him.
- Pick up the foster cat only when an adult is there to help. Cats can become scared when picked up, and they sometimes scratch with their sharp nails, even though they don't mean to cause harm.
- Be careful when opening and closing doors so as to not accidentally let the foster cat outside.

Section 4: Daily care

Feeding

All foster cats should be fed a diet of dry cat food, unless otherwise specified by the foster coordinator. We use Natural Balance cat food and ask that you use the same or a food of similar or better quality. Feed your foster cat once or twice daily; the amount will be based on the age and weight of your foster cat. Make sure the cat always has access to fresh, clean water.

You can give your foster cat treats of any kind (unless he/she has known allergies, of course); giving treats helps you and your foster cat to bond with each other. Keep in mind that some people food and house plants (which cats like to chew on) are poisonous for cats, so remove any plants or food from areas that your foster cat can access.

Daily routine

When you first take your foster cat home, take care not to overwhelm her with too many new experiences all at once. Moving to a new environment is stressful in itself for many cats, so keep introductions to people and animals to a minimum during the first couple of weeks after you bring your foster cat home. It also helps to establish a daily routine of regularly scheduled feedings and play times.

In addition, on a daily basis, be aware of your foster cat's appetite and energy level. If she's not eating well or seems listless, something may be wrong medically. You might want to record your observations to make it easier to notice any health issues.

Litter box habits

You can help your foster cat be more adoptable by paying close attention to his litter box habits and making the litter box as inviting as possible. The litter box should be located in a place that the cat can access easily. If you have other cats, there should be one litter box for each cat in the house, plus one extra. The litter boxes should be placed in quiet, low-traffic spots so that the cats aren't startled when trying to take care of business.

You can also prevent litter box issues by keeping the litter box as clean as possible. Scoop out each litter box at least once daily, and empty it completely to clean it every two weeks. When you clean the litter box, use a mild soap (such as dishwashing soap), not strong-smelling detergents or ammonia.

If your foster cat is not using the litter box, please notify the foster coordinator immediately so you can work on resolving the issue before not using the box becomes a habit. Keep in mind that a cat may miss the litter box if she has a medical issue like diarrhea or she may avoid the box if she has a urinary tract infection, which causes pain when urinating.

If your foster cat has an accident, don't discipline or punish her. It will only teach her to fear and mistrust you. Clean up all accidents with an enzymatic cleaner. Nature's Miracle and Simple Solution are two products containing natural enzymes that tackle tough stains and odors and remove them permanently.

Grooming

A clean and well-groomed cat has a better chance of getting adopted, so brush your foster cat regularly, especially if he has longer hair. Contact the foster coordinator if you feel that your foster cat needs to see a professional groomer. If you are comfortable with it, you can trim his nails. But please be careful because you can cause pain and bleeding if you trim the nails too short.

Cats don't generally like being bathed, so please don't give your foster cat any baths.

Mental stimulation and exercise

Because play time provides stimulation, encourages socialization and releases excess energy, provide your foster cat with at least one or two play sessions per day. The length of the play sessions will vary, depending on the cat's age and health. Try a variety of toys (balls, squeaky toys, feather toys, etc.) to see which ones your foster cat prefers. Cat toys don't have to be

fancy or expensive. Cats often enjoy playing with something as simple as a paper bag (remove the handles for safety) or a box with holes cut in the sides.

Don't leave your foster cat alone with any toys that could be easily ingested or cause harm to the cat. Examples are string toys, yarn and Da Bird (feathers dangling from a string and wand). Toys such as ping-pong balls and toilet paper tubes are safe. Discourage your foster cat from play-biting your hands and feet. This is something that adopters may not find desirable.

Safety requirements

Foster cats must live indoors. If your foster cat seems very curious about going outside or is constantly at the door waiting for the right moment, please take extra precautions to ensure that he or she doesn't accidentally sneak out when you are coming or going.

If you want to take your foster cat outside on a leash and harness, you are welcome to do so in the safety of an enclosed yard or area **following approval from the Foster Coordinator**. Please ensure that the leash and harness are the right size and fit well before you take your foster cat outside. You'll also want to make sure the cat is comfortable wearing the harness before going out.

Remember, if your personal cat has access to the outdoors, he or she cannot interact with your foster cat. You'll need to keep their living quarters separate.

Section 5: Medical and emergency protocols

When you pick up your foster cat, you will receive a sheet that specifies the dates that vaccines are due and any known medical conditions to treat. You are responsible for bringing your foster cat to all medical appointments that are booked by the foster coordinator.

If you are fostering a cat who is on medications, please make sure that he/she gets all prescribed doses. Do not end medication early for any reason. If your foster animal has not responded to prescribed medications after five days (or in the time instructed by a veterinarian), please contact the foster coordinator.

Veterinary care

Signs of illness and what to do next

Cats generally do a good job of masking when they don't feel well, so determining if your foster cat is under the weather will require diligent observation of the cat's daily activity and appetite levels. It's a good idea to keep track of these levels in a journal. You'll also want to record any of the following symptoms, which could be signs of illness.

Eye discharge. It is normal for cats to have some discharge from their eyes when they wake up and some may have more than others, depending on the breed. But if your foster cat has yellow or green discharge, or swelling around the eyes (making it hard for him to open his eyes), or the third eyelid is showing, you need to contact the foster coordinator to schedule a vet appointment.

Sneezing and nasal discharge. Sneezing can be common in a cat recovering from an upper respiratory infection. If the sneezing becomes more frequent, watch for discharge coming from the nose. If the discharge is clear, the infection is probably viral and medication may not be necessary. You can try nebulizing the cat to relieve her discomfort. Nebulizing can be done by placing the cat in the bathroom with a hot shower running (do not place the cat in the shower) for 15-20 minutes.

If the discharge becomes colored, contact the foster coordinator to schedule a vet appointment because the cat may have a bacterial infection. Be sure to monitor the cat's breathing. If the cat starts to breathe with an open mouth or wheeze, call the foster coordinator immediately and follow the emergency contact protocol. Also, once you notice nasal discharge, monitor the cat's eating habits more closely to ensure that he or she is still eating.

Loss of appetite. Your foster cat may be stressed after arriving in your home, and stress can cause lack of appetite. But if the cat hasn't eaten after 24 hours, try offering a portion of canned food. If the cat still does not eat, please notify the foster coordinator. Also, if the cat has been eating well, but then stops eating for 12 to 24 hours, call the foster coordinator to set up a vet appointment. Please do not change the cat's diet without contacting the foster department. An abrupt change in diet can cause diarrhea, which can lead to dehydration.

Lethargy. The activity level of your foster cat will vary depending on age and personality. If the cat cannot be roused or seems weak and unable to stand, it's an emergency, so start the emergency contact protocol.

Dehydration. Dehydration is usually associated with diarrhea, vomiting and/or loss of appetite. To test for dehydration, gently pinch the cat's skin around the scruff area. If the skin stays taut,

the cat is dehydrated. Please call the foster coordinator the next business day to schedule a vet appointment.

Vomiting. Sometimes cats will vomit up a thick tubular hairball with bile or other liquids. This is normal, but please call the foster coordinator if the cat has out-of-the-ordinary vomiting that does not occur in conjunction with a hairball. Don't worry about one or two vomiting episodes as long as the cat is acting normally otherwise: eating, active, no diarrhea.

Pain or strain while urinating. When a cat first goes into a foster home, he or she may not urinate due to stress. If you notice the cat straining to urinate with little or no results, or crying out when urinating, please contact the foster coordinator immediately because it may be indicative of an infection or a urethral obstruction, which can be life-threatening.

Diarrhea. It is important to monitor your foster cat's pooping habits daily. Soft stool is normal for the first two or three days after taking a cat home, most likely caused by stress and a change in food. If your foster cat has liquid stool, however, please contact the foster department so that an appointment can be scheduled to ensure that the cat doesn't need medications. Keep in mind that diarrhea will dehydrate the cat, so be proactive about contacting the foster department.

Frequent ear scratching. Your foster cat may have ear mites if she scratches her ears often and/or shakes her head frequently, or if you see a dark discharge that resembles coffee grounds when you look in her ears. These can be quickly treated, please contact the foster coordinator.

Swollen, irritated ears. If your foster cat has irritated, swollen or red or pink ears that smell like yeast, he may have an ear infection called otitis. It's more common in dogs, but some cats do get it. If you see these signs, please contact the foster coordinator.

Hair loss. Please contact the foster department if you notice any hair loss on your foster cat. It is normal for cats to have thin fur around the lips, eyelids and in front of the ears, but clumpy patches of hair loss or thinning hair can indicate ringworm or dermatitis. It is important to check your foster cat's coat every day.

Common Ailments in Animals from Shelters

Shelter cats may suffer from upper respiratory infection, giardia or intestinal parasites. Symptoms of upper respiratory infection include sneezing (often with colored discharge), discharge from the nose and/or eyes, decrease in appetite, dehydration and slight lethargy. Symptoms of giardia or intestinal parasites include vomiting, diarrhea (often with a pungent odor) and/or dehydration.

If your foster cat is displaying one or more of these signs, please contact the foster coordinator. These ailments can worsen if left untreated.

Criteria for emergencies

What constitutes a medical emergency in a cat? A good rule of thumb is any situation in which you would call 911 for a person. Here are some specific symptoms that could indicate an emergency:

- Not breathing or labored breathing
- Signs of extreme dehydration: dry gums, weakness, vomiting, not urinating, skin tenting (when the skin is pulled up, it stays there)
- Abnormal lethargy or unable to stand
- Unconsciousness or unable to wake up
- Cold to the touch
- Broken bones
- Any trauma: hit by a car, dropped, stepped on
- A large wound or profuse bleeding that doesn't stop when pressure is applied

If your foster cat displays any of these symptoms, please follow the emergency phone protocol. If the animal is vomiting or has diarrhea, but is still active, eating and drinking, you can probably wait until the next day to get help.

If you think your foster pet may incur permanent damage or pass away if not seen by a veterinarian immediately, please contact Crossroads Animal Hospital and then start the emergency phone.

Section 6: Behavior support

One of your goals as a foster parent is to help prepare your foster cat for living successfully in a home. So, we ask that you help your foster cat to develop good habits and skills through the use of positive reinforcement, which builds a bond of trust between you and your foster pet. The basic idea is to reward desirable behaviors and ignore unwanted behaviors.

You must not punish a cat for a behavior that you find undesirable because punishment is ineffective at eliminating the behavior. If the cat is doing something undesirable, distract him or her before the behavior occurs. It is also important for every human in the foster home to stick to the rules established for your foster cats, which will help them to learn faster.

Some foster cats will have behavioral issues, which we are aware of at the time of their rescue. Some of these behavior challenges are fearfulness, house soiling or aggression toward other animals. We will only place cats with behavioral issues with a person who feels comfortable working with the cat on his/her particular issues. We will provide that person with all the necessary information so that proper care and training can be given to the foster cat.

If you feel unable to manage any behavior that your foster cat is exhibiting, please contact the foster coordinator during business hours to discuss the issue. We will guide you and help in every way that we can.

**Thank you so much for opening up your heart and your home to foster pets.
Together, we can Save Them All.**