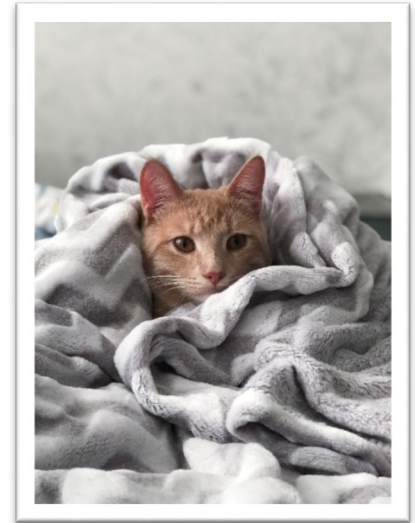


Deciding on the Right Service for your Pet

Boarding Kennel or Pet Sitter?

Pet owners searching for a suitable boarding kennel to care for their pets while they are away from their homes can be faced with a bewildering array of choices. There are a number of different types of boarding options for dogs and cats, and it's important to look beyond a shiny website to determine the best service for your pet. Not all dogs do well at traditional boarding facilities and may do better staying with a local pet sitter who takes in one or a few dogs at a time to live in their home. Conversely, some dogs – especially those dogs that are not the most dog social of pooches – will do better in a kennel environment with their own dedicated living space and run. Some cats tend to do better in their own home with a pet sitter coming to visit them daily but very social cats may need more human interaction and will be better served by staying in a pet sitter's home.



The following information will provide an overview of how to choose the right boarding facility for your pet, how to prepare for the boarding experience, and some resources on how to find boarding facilities.

What's Best for My Cat?

Dr. Jacklyn Ellis, PhD, CAAB, the Manager of Feline Enrichment at the Toronto Humane Society suggests that there is no one size fits all option for cats. A couple of important things to consider when looking at boarding options are:

- Is my cat fearful of new people?
- Is my cat fearful in new places?
- Is my cat aggressive towards people or other cats?
- Is my cat very social and loves people?

An easy way to decide on the best option is to think about what kind of situation would make your cat the happiest. If your cat does not deal with new environments well, it makes sense to have someone come over and check in on your cat once or twice daily to provide food, water, enrichment and make sure the litter box is clean. However, some cats may be very social and would be stressed with the lack of companionship. For those cats, Dr. Ellis suggests that a set up where the cat stays with a sitter in their home is best. If your cat has behavioural issues such as acute fearfulness or aggression towards unknown people, a boarding facility where the cat enjoys his/her own kennel may be the best solution.

Most boarding facilities and in-home cat sitters will have a comprehensive questionnaire that you will fill out to provide them with information about your cat which will help them also determine if your cat will be successful in their environment. Many ethical and reputable cat sitters and facilities will be happy to provide suggestions or recommendations for other services or service providers.



Choosing Your Pet Sitter or Boarding Facility

Now that you've narrowed down the type of service is best for your cat it's time to decide which facility or service you will hire. Here are some checklist items to consider before signing on the dotted line and dropping off your pet for their stay:

Commercial Boarding Facility

1. How Clean is the Facility?

It is a good idea to call ahead to arrange for a facility tour if you are using a traditional caged facility. Ask to see where the cats are kept and make note of the conditions. As a courtesy, it's always a good idea to call ahead and ask for an appointment to see the facility. Reputable facilities will make time to have you take a tour whereas an unannounced and unscheduled drop in may disrupt the staff's care schedule or interrupt important quiet time for the cats in their care.

While visiting, check if the facility looks and smells clean and if the facility is heated or air conditioned to provide a comfortable environment for the cats.

2. Does My Cat Have Water Available at All Times?

Check to ensure that cats in the facility have drinking water readily available, clean litter boxes and an enclosure or hiding area of some sort where they can choose to have some quiet time?

3. Will My Cat Receive Daily Enrichment?

Do the cats have enrichment toys available to them? If not, ask if there are reasons why the cats don't have toys while unsupervised? The facility might have safety protocols in place which only allow for supervised enrichment.

How much do the staff interact with the cats daily? Do they provide a set number of enrichment minutes a day, and have enough staff to meet the needs of the number of animals in their care?

4. **How Secure is the Facility?**
If the door to a cat's enclosure is opened and he slips out and squeezes past the kennel staff, how far can he get? Is the building door kept securely shut? What do staff do in the event that a cat escapes his kennel or cage?
5. **What Separates the Enclosures?**
While cat cages normally will be stacked or side by side, do the cats have visual barriers of any kind between cages? Can they interact between cages in an unsafe way?.
6. **What Happens if Your Cat Has a Health Emergency?**
You'll want to ensure that the person or people taking care of your cat know what to do in a medical emergency. Are staff members certified in pet first aid? Is there transportation available at all times to take your cat to the vet in case of an emergency? Ultimately, you will also have established in writing what medical decisions the kennel operator can make on your behalf, and which ones must be made by you.
7. **How Do They Handle Certain Behaviors?**
Do the staff have any formal training to equip them to deal with any behavioural issues your cat may have? Do they know how to kennel a fearful or aggressive cat? Do they have any sort of Fear Free or Low Stress Handling Certification or education?
8. **Does the facility hold a commercial boarding license and hold appropriate boarding insurance?**
These are important considerations when choosing a commercial boarding facility. Pet care providers hold insurance and various city by-laws restrict zoning for commercial boarding establishments. Ensure the facility you hire is fully licensed and insured.
9. **What are the Kennel's Health Requirements?**
Most kennels will require that your cat's vaccinations are "up-to-date," but you'll want to find out what they mean by this and exactly what vaccinations they require. No matter what your personal feelings might be towards immunization protocols, you'll probably need to meet the boarding facility's requirements in order to use their services.
10. **How is Feeding Handled?**
Find out if the kennel staff is willing and able to maintain the diet you specified for your cat. Will they honor your instructions to refrain from feeding a particular food item to your cat if your cat has diet restrictions? If you bring a week's worth of your cat's special treats, will they arrange to give them to your cat as requested?
11. **Is There a Night Shift?**
Many boarding facilities have a night shift person or video equipment to monitor animals at night. Does the facility have an appropriate emergency alert and response plan in place if animals are alone at night?
12. **Does the facility come highly recommended?**
In the end, a boarding facility's reputation says a lot about its operation. Don't rely on advertising or a great-looking website. Get references from people who use their services. Ask local vet clinic staff about them. Most facilities are happy to provide some client references you can contact.

Choosing an In-Home Boarding Service

Some pets will be more comfortable staying in a pet sitter's home. Many of the above questions are applicable when choosing an in-home pet sitter but keep in mind that your service provider does not operate a commercial or store front facility so asking for a "tour of the facility" will likely be an imposition. However, it is reasonable to ask to meet the provider in their home, where you will get a sense of the suitability of the environment for your pet. Here are some important considerations when choosing to board your cat at someone's home:



1. By-Law limitations on animals in a private residence.
How many animals will be in the home at one time? Is it a reasonable number of animals for one person to care for, and do the municipal By-Laws allow for that number of animals?
2. How do the other animals in the home interact with each other? If there is a family dog, does the dog interact well with cats? Will the animals be kept separate to avoid stress or conflict? How will your cat be introduced to other animals in the home?
3. Where will my cat stay? Will my cat be limited to a single area or have run of the house?
4. Safeguarding against escape: If my cat will have run of the house, is the home set up in such a way with safeguards to prevent my cat from bolting out of the door? Has the pet sitter ever lost an animal in their care and if so, what were the circumstances and what did they do to recover the animal?
5. Feeding and water: Will my cat have access to water and where will my cat be fed? If there are other animals in the house, will they be free feeding from the same dishes?
6. Enrichment: Does the pet sitter work out of the house all day? What kind of enrichment will my cat get during his or her stay?
7. Emergency protocols: Does the caregiver have emergency protocols in place for illness, injury or escape? Does the caregiver have kennels available and transportation available to transport my cat to a vet if necessary?
8. Cleanliness: As with a commercial boarding facility, cleanliness counts. Does the home look and smell clean? Are litterboxes readily available and cleaned daily? What substrate is used?
9. Insurance: Does my pet sitter carry insurance?
10. Handling: Does my pet sitter have any formal animal behaviour or training knowledge? Will my cat be handled with kindness? Is my pet sitter equipped to deal with any behavioural issues my cat may have?
11. Vaccinations: What vaccinations does my pet sitter require?
12. Questionnaire: Did my pet sitter provide me with a questionnaire and did that questionnaire ask me the type of questions I would consider adequate to get to know my cat enough to determine if they are the suitable place for my cat?
13. Check In and Check Out: What time can I drop my cat off and what time can I pick my cat up? Who is responsible to transport the cat to and from the sitter's home?
14. References: Can my pet sitter provide me with references from other clients that have used the service?

Choosing a Pet Sitter to Stay at Your Home

Companies like Rover, Wag or many local small pet care businesses can match you with a pet sitter who will stay in your home while you are away to care for your pet. For many, this is an ideal scenario, but as with other services, the level of professionalism or knowledge that the sitter holds will need to be determined prior to hiring that sitter. As with any other type of service, there are great pet sitters who invest in education or keep up to date with current best practices but there are also those who may not approach the job with the same level of preparedness or professionalism. Interview your candidates carefully to determine if they are the right fit for you.

Book a meet and greet with your sitter to have them over to your home. Experienced pet sitters will come armed with a number of questions about the care your pet needs, their routines, their feeding schedule, any health concerns and any behavioural concerns they need to know about. They should also be insured and bonded.

It's very reasonable for you to have a number of questions as well, and to lay out what your expectations for care are. Communication about exactly what service you need and what service the caregiver provides is an essential tool of business so don't be shy to let the pet sitter know you're your needs are.

Along with many of the questions outlined in the above section (Choosing An In Home Boarding Service), lay out your guidelines and expectations for the care of your home and your cat. Be reasonable, of course, but communicate clearly if there are restrictions on having visitors over or if there are any special rules surrounding the house stay. Provide clear written instructions for the care of your cat and be sure to list where food, toys, litter and medication (if relevant) are kept. If your cat requires medication, be sure to write out exact instructions on how to dose the cat and how often. Make sure the sitter is comfortable doing so prior to hiring that sitter – often it's a good idea to address this on your initial phone call or email to determine if a meet and greet is to be scheduled or not with this sitter. There is no sense if arranging to meet someone who does not as part of their service provide pilling or subcutaneous injections if your cat requires that level of care.

Be sure to let your sitter know if other service providers will be entering the home while you are away (such as a cleaning service) and be sure to provide your pet sitter with your contact information while away as well as an emergency contact information number and your vet information, including vaccination records. It is a good idea to call your vet in advance to let them know that someone will be staying with your cat while you are away so they have that person's name on file in case of illness or injury that requires a vet visit in your absence. Your vet office will likely also ask for a credit card number to retain on file as well.

As with every other pet sitting or boarding option, checking references is imperative. Don't simply rely on a couple of Yelp reviews, obtain the phone numbers of former clients and call them.

Doing a bit of research in advance (and leaving yourself enough time to do so) can make the difference between a great and stress free experience for you and your cat and one that is not so great. Once you have found a pet sitter that works for you, you will likely return to that service each time you need care for your pet so the advanced research into finding the right solution will provide peace of mind and stability for your pet for future trips as well so it is time well spent.