What to consider when choosing a pet

Maybe something happened recently that got you thinking muddy paws and slobbering kisses would be a good addition to your life. An article you read that says pets can help reduce stress? A child who bounded into the kitchen and announced, “Can I get a hamster, Mom?” A long lost photo of your beloved cat from your very first apartment? A big, ole’ furry face staring back at you at the pet store?

Whoa. Not so fast. Choosing to adopt a pet is not like choosing a new pair of shoes--just something you might do on a whim. It’s a serious responsibility to bring a new life into your home, and you want to give it careful consideration. Choosing the right pet for your home, lifestyle, budget and needs can bring you years of enjoyment. Consider:

1. **Space.** Live in a small apartment? You probably want to skip the golden retriever and other dog breeds that need room to run around. Think twice about getting a squawking bird that might disturb the neighbors, and double-check your lease agreement for restrictions on pets—some have weight limits that might help steer you toward a pet that won’t cause problems for you where you live. Likewise, if you live in a subdivision and want to keep chickens, goats or a pot-bellied pig, you’ll want to check your neighborhood association’s covenants. Desperately want a horse and think you have the space? Check your town’s ordinances, or find a place to board a horse before you bring it home.

2. **Budget.** The price you pay for your pet is just the beginning. You must also provide your pet with any necessary equipment--from cages to leashes, brushes to toys. Of course, your pet will need food each and every day, and, depending on the pet, there’s frequent bedding or litter changes, grooming, and vet bills to consider. What’s more, unless your mother lives nearby and can watch Fluffy when you’re out of town, you’ll have to consider boarding or pet-sitting fees as well for when you travel.

3. **Time.** Do you work 12-hour days? Travel frequently? Have your hands full with a new job or new baby? Then you probably want to stay away from a high-need pet like a dog right now. Birds, hamsters, fish and reptiles can all bring wonder and joy into your life without demanding much time from you. On the other hand, if you’re looking for a pet to romp with the kids or tool around town with you, a dog may be just what you or your family needs. Dogs are great ways for meeting new people, getting more exercise, and teaching children about responsibility (although, who are we kidding, your 8-year-old is not going to be the one who walks the dog on those cold, rainy nights). Want the fur but not the work? Cats are notoriously independent, don’t need to be walked, and can even be left alone for a couple days with an automatic feeder.
Do You Have Room for a Pet?

Active dogs need more space and more daily exercise than older or more sedentary dogs. Some pets may get enough exercise within the confines of a house or apartment. For their own safety, dogs and cats should not be allowed to run uncontrolled, but should be walked on a leash or exercised in an enclosed area. Most animals are better kept indoors or in a suitable kennel while you're gone.

Cats, birds, and small mammals can adapt to any size living quarters.

What Activities Do You Enjoy?

You and your family should discuss the reasons you want a companion animal and what you expect an animal to do with and for you. Most people keep pets as companions, whereas others enjoy animals for showing, breeding, hunting, or other reasons. Will the animal you're considering have the temperament and physical attributes to participate in your outdoor activities (hiking, hunting, or camping) or in quiet pastimes at home? If your leisure activities take you away from home, who will care for your pet during your absences? Read about the temperaments and needs of species and breeds, and identify those that best match your lifestyle.

How Do You Spend Your Day?

Pets depend on people for daily affection and attention. Young puppies and kittens require time for housebreaking, training, and feeding. Are you gone all day? Do you frequently work late? What will you do with your pet during long absences? Feeding, exercise, grooming, and play are daily time commitments that must be considered in caring for a healthy, happy pet.

How Much Will Your Pet Cost?

The purchase price of an animal varies greatly. All pets need food and shelter, and most should have regular visits to a veterinarian for health checkups and vaccinations. Depending on the type of animal you choose, other cost considerations include emergency medical treatment, grooming, boarding, licensing, obedience training, and accessories. Pet health insurance for unexpected illnesses or injuries is available in many states.

What If a Pet Doesn't Fit Your Lifestyle?

After discussing the role a pet will play in your life and talking with knowledgeable people, you may conclude that your first choice for a pet is not appropriate, so be flexible. Your veterinarian may suggest other companion animals whose needs more closely match your own.
You can still enjoy the animals around you if a pet does not fit into your present lifestyle. Try putting a bird feeder outside your window or becoming an active member of a local zoologic society. Volunteer at a humane society or animal shelter. Consider a pet when your circumstances change.

**Veterinarians and Other Community Resources**

When your family decides it's time to actually look for a pet, each person should participate in the selection process. A good place to start is a family consultation with a veterinarian to determine the compatibility of your needs with those of the animal(s) being considered. Veterinarians can offer expert advice on the physical needs, health, and behavioral characteristics of particular animals, and can direct you to other resources.

Other good sources of guidance and literature on pets include public libraries, humane societies, animal shelters, animal control agencies, breeders, pet stores, obedience classes, and local kennel, cat, and bird clubs. Dog and cat shows offer the advantage of comparing many breeds at one time.

**A Check-up for Your New Companion**

The neighbor, breeder, shelter, or pet store where you obtain your pet should allow you to have the animal examined by a veterinarian and to return it within an agreed-upon time if the animal is unhealthy. Do this as soon as possible, before you become emotionally attached to the animal.

Your veterinarian is best qualified to assure you that your new friend is healthy and to administer the necessary vaccinations. At the same time, you can discuss proper nutrition and feeding, surgical sterilization, other preventive health measures, and grooming needs.

**Prepare Your Home for Your Pet's Arrival**

Before bringing a pet into your home, prepare a special place for it to eat and sleep. At first, try to maintain the animal's daily schedule for play, eating, and elimination. Decide where you will exercise your pet. Obtain any necessary accessories (such as collar and ID tag, leash, scratching post, litter box, crate, bird cage, etc.) before you bring your pet home. You should pet-proof your home just as you would child-proof your home to avoid accidents. Harmful cleansers, plants, electrical cords, and breakable objects should be removed from potential contact with your pet. What will you do with your pet during long absences? Feeding, exercise, grooming, and play are daily time commitments that must be considered in caring for a healthy, happy pet.