

6 Ways to Give Your Pet a Fresh, Healthy Start

With the new year, you get a chance at a fresh start for both yourself and your pet. Small changes can make a big difference in your pet's well-being and quality of life, so why not get started with these six steps to make this your pet's healthiest year yet?

Analysis by [Dr. Karen Shaw Becker](#)

Jan 1, 2023 • 6 min read

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Small changes can make a big difference in your pet's well-being and quality of life
- To give your pet a fresh, healthy start in the New Year, focus on feeding more unprocessed, fresh foods
- Keep your pet active via daily walks (cats too!) and vigorous play sessions; remember, mental stimulation is just as important as physical activity
- Animals that are well-socialized and well-behaved make wonderful companions and have much less chance of winding up at an animal shelter; embrace fear-free crate training, obedience training and proper socialization
- Get regular wellness care for your pets at least once a year — ideally twice a year, especially if they're older

A new year is upon us, and with it comes a chance at a fresh start — for humans and pets alike. I like to empower pet guardians and want you to know that even small changes can make a big difference in your pet's well-being and quality of life.

No matter what budget you're working with, or if you're facing time constraints, mobility problems or other issues that you feel stand in the way of giving your pet the life he deserves, know that even baby steps matter.

Six Ways to Boost Your Pet's Health and Well-Being

Remember, you don't have to make every change overnight. Instead, focus on one or two of the recommendations that follow. Implement them gradually over a period of weeks or even months. Once you and your pet have adjusted, add in a few more healthy changes. Soon your pet will be enjoying his happiest, healthiest year yet.

1. Focus on unprocessed, fresh foods — Your pet will thrive eating a diet that's as close to his ancestral diet as possible. Toward that end, feed as much unprocessed, fresh food as you can afford. This can include nutritionally balanced homemade food, commercial raw or gently cooked pet food made from human-grade ingredients or simply adding some fresh veggies to your pet's regular meal a few times a week.

Every little bit helps. For instance, when dog owners added green leafy vegetables or yellow-orange vegetables to their dog's diet at least three times a week, it prevented or dramatically slowed the development of bladder cancer in Scottish Terriers, a susceptible breed.¹

If you can't offer fresh food for every meal, that's OK. Start with two to four fresh food meals out of 14 in a week, or do a 50/50 split, meaning one meal a day is a processed pet food and the other is a fresh food meal. You can also start gradually, replacing kibble with a higher quality canned food, for instance, then work your way up to fresh, human-grade ingredients.

2. Get lots of movement — Keeping your pet active is a key part of their mental and physical well-being, and it's free! You've heard the saying "a tired dog is a good dog"? This is because when dogs are bored with a lot of pent-up energy, they're likely to engage in undesirable behaviors.

In addition to regular walks, which, by the way, are good for you too, consider adding in additional opportunities for activity and movement that you'll both enjoy.

Options include a vigorous game of fetch, checking out a nearby hiking trail or a session of active doggy daycare, if your dog enjoys it. Kitties, too, need activity and many enjoy outdoor walks on a harness and leash. You can also engage your cat in interactive play using feathers or other toys that encourage their natural stalking and hunting behaviors.

3. Stimulate their mind — Mental stimulation is just as important as physical activity. This can be as simple as giving your dog time to sniff during walks, since dogs explore the world with their noses. If you want to give her even more stimulation, get involved in K9 nose work, which encourages your dog's natural drive to hunt, coupled with her natural instinct to hunt and track scents.

Another fun option for dogs that love to dig is to create a digging box that you place in your yard.² Fill it with sand and bury toys for your dog to discover. Teaching your dog more complex games like hide and seek is also fun for both dogs and their owners.

Before you try this, I recommend getting some basic obedience training, or at a minimum being sure your dog responds consistently to verbal commands like sit, stay and lie down (even learning and practicing these basic commands count as mental stimulation).

For cats, a daily romp outside on a harness and leash can do wonders to alleviate boredom. Also provide opportunities for your cat to climb, scratch and stretch, which are all natural feline activities. I also recommend letting your kitty "hunt" for her meals, at least sometimes.

Try separating her daily portion of food into three to five small meals fed throughout the day. Place the food in a variety of puzzle toys or **indoor hunting feeder mice** filled with freeze dried raw food or dehydrated meats.

4. Embrace crate training — I'm a huge fan of crate training dogs and recommend it to every dog parent, especially those who need to houstrain a puppy. Whether your canine companion is a pup or a senior, a new member of your family or an old hand, providing him with his very own cozy space has advantages for both of you.

A crate can help not only with houstraining but also car or plane travel, and overnight stays with friends and family or at a pet-friendly hotel.

Cats, meanwhile, benefit from learning how to comfortably get in and out of their carrier, and spend time there during travel or trips to the veterinarian. The more familiar and comfortable your cat is with her carrier, and the safer she feels in it, the less stressful it will be for her when you need to move her in it.

5. Engage in training and socialization — Animals that are well-socialized and well-behaved make wonderful companions and have much less chance of winding up at an animal shelter. The ideal age to socialize puppies is between 5 weeks and 16 weeks, when they are most able to investigate new environments and stimuli.

It's also important that puppies are trained in basic obedience. One way to get your pup off to a good start is by taking advantage of local puppy classes as soon as possible. All training should be fear-free; your relationship must be built on trust, and your animal should always feel safe and protected around you.

However, even older dogs benefit from obedience training if they've never had it. Once your dog has the basics down, you can try problem solving games and teaching your dog to put toys away.

Dogs can also associate certain words with objects, so you can teach your dog the names of certain toys and play a game by having him fetch certain toys by name. I've detailed how to teach your dog five mind-challenging games here. Kittens also benefit tremendously from kitten kindergarten classes, and many adult cats are trainable as well.

6. Get regular wellness care — I like to see all my patients at least twice a year, but this is especially true for senior and geriatric dogs and cats. Around the age of 8, your pet's wellness and nutritional needs can require fine-tuning every four to six months. In older pets, it's very important to review weight, muscle tone, joint range of motion, diet, supplement protocol and exercise habits at least semi-annually.

Regular wellness visits allow your veterinarian to compare current test results with past results to check for changes that may need further investigation. Ask your vet to perform a blood test to check your pet's internal organ health to make sure you are identifying possible issues early on, when they're most easily treated.

At your visits, refuse unnecessary vaccinations to ensure your pet is not over-vaccinated, which poses health risks. I recommend bringing your pet to see an **integrative veterinarian** who will not only care for your pet but also work with you to make informed, wise lifestyle decisions over your pet's lifetime.

Remember, optimal health doesn't happen overnight, but changes you make starting today will make a difference for your pet's health during the New Year and beyond.

Sources and References

¹ [Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association, July 1, 2005, Vol. 227, No. 1, Pages 94-100](#)

² [PetMD June 13, 2016](#)
