

Six Questions You Should Ask Before Adopting a Shelter Pet

Shelter pets are in no way damaged goods, but every abandoned animal has a past, and you need to know as much about your prospective pet's past as you can. Here are six important and hopefully revealing questions to help you get started.

Reviewed by [Dr. Becker](#)

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- If you're thinking about adding a pet to your household, hopefully you'll visit local shelters and rescue organizations and adopt a homeless animal
- Every abandoned pet has a past, and the more you can learn about your prospective animal companion's history, the better prepared you'll be to have a successful adoption
- You'll definitely want to ask the animal shelter about your prospective pet's behavior assessment, medical care, diet and other concerns
- Some shelters conduct very thorough behavior assessments on dogs that go far beyond determining adoptability, and can provide insight into whether a particular dog is a good fit for your lifestyle
- Rehabilitating an abused pet presents a significant challenge, because these animals have been exposed to negative things they can't unlearn despite your best efforts. But it's important to feel hopeful, because life-changing progress can be made and there's nothing more gratifying

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If you're thinking about adding a pet to the family, it's a good idea to visit local shelters and rescues in your area. There are so many deserving dogs, cats and other animal companions waiting for new homes, so every prospective pet parent should consider the homeless population in their area first.

Contrary to what some people believe, shelter pets are not "damaged goods." However, each abandoned animal has a past, so the more you can learn from the shelter about a pet you're considering, the more prepared you'll be to make the right choices for him or her.

Six Questions to Ask the Animal Shelter

1. **What is your soon-to-be pet's history?** — How did he wind up at the shelter? Was he picked up as a stray, or did a previous owner turn him in? Generally speaking, the behavior of an animal who has survived the mean streets will differ from that of a relinquished family pet.

This is good information to have for a better understanding of your new dog's or cat's behavior and training needs.

2. **Has she been behavior-tested?** — Most large shelters and rescue organizations perform basic behavior testing as part of their assessment of the adoptability of the animals they take in. Knowing what types of tests were conducted on your future pet and her results will help you fill in the gaps in her training if you decide to take her home.

Some shelters conduct very thorough behavior assessments on dogs that go far beyond determining adoptability, and can provide insight into whether a particular dog is a good fit for your lifestyle.

For example, if a dog you're interested in is very high-energy and you're looking for a lower energy lapdog, this dog is probably better suited to someone else's home.

A comprehensive behavior and temperament assessment can determine a dog's level of sociability with other pets, his degree of independence and whether he's suited for a home with children or an adult-only home.

3. **Does your prospective pet have a known history of being abused?** — If you know or suspect a dog or cat was abused before she came to you, it's important to keep two things in mind: you shouldn't expect an overnight change in her, and you shouldn't count on a complete turnaround in her trust level or behavior.

It takes time to help an abused animal learn to be less fearful and develop trust in humans again.

With knowledge, hard work and commitment, a previously abused pet can be transformed into a much-loved member of your family, but she can't be reborn. It's important to always remember that.

Here are some general guidelines for creating a safe environment for a previously abused dog or cat:

- 🐾 Make her feel loved and needed; communicate clearly with her
- 🐾 Don't force anything on her under any circumstances — allow her to adapt to her new family and life at her own pace. Provide her with a safe place where she can be alone when she feels like it
- 🐾 Protect her from whatever she fears
- 🐾 Create opportunities for her to be successful and build her confidence
- 🐾 Feed her a balanced, species-appropriate diet and make sure she gets plenty of physical activity

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4. **What veterinary care has he received?** — Most animal adoption organizations arrange to have pets' health checked by a veterinarian before they are put up for adoption. Adoptive owners typically receive paperwork detailing the medical care the animal received while at the shelter.

It's not unusual for large shelters to err on the side of over treating dogs and cats with an unknown medical history, so your new pet could come home with a fresh spay or neuter incision, dewormed and/or heavily vaccinated.

Many shelters recommend that new owners take their pet to a veterinarian for an exam within a specified number of days from the date of adoption. Sometimes local veterinarians contract with shelters to provide the exams at no charge.

If you feel your dog or cat may have been medically over treated at the shelter, make an appointment with a **holistic or integrative vet** who can recommend a detoxification protocol to help bring your pet's body back in balance.

5. **What are the steps involved in the adoption?** — Shelters and rescue groups vary widely when it comes to vetting prospective adoptive families. For example, some shelters allow adopters to take a new pet home immediately. Others require you to wait until the animal has been spayed or neutered, dewormed and/or vaccinated at the shelter.

Some organizations require home inspections before releasing a pet; others require potential adopters to bring other pets in the household and family members for a meet-and-greet before the adoption is finalized.

6. **What food has she been eating?** — Some shelters send newly adopted pets home with a supply of the food they've been eating, but if this isn't the case with your prospective dog or cat, ask what the shelter is feeding and continue that diet for at least a week or two once she's home.

It's likely you'll want to transition her to a different food, preferably a nutritionally balanced, species-appropriate raw diet, but it doesn't need to happen on day one. Everything in your pet's new life with you will be a bit overwhelming and stressful for her in the beginning, so it's best not to add a dietary change to the mix right away.

If you're considering adopting a dog, the program A Sound Beginning is highly recommended. It is lovingly and expertly designed to help rescue dogs and adoptive guardians learn to communicate effectively and form an unbreakable bond.

Sources and References

[Humane Society of the United States \(Archived\)](#)
