

Contents

Which pet?	2
Toys and titbits.....	3
Parasites - fleas, lice, ticks and mange.....	4
Cats - choosing a kitten or older cat	6
Cats - the first 12 weeks and vaccination	7
Cats – neutering	8
Cats - worms.....	8
Dogs - choosing a dog.....	10
Dogs - the first 12 weeks and vaccinations.....	13
Dogs - neutering	15
Dogs - worms.....	17
Rabbits - housing, feeding, breeding and general information.....	18

Which pet?

It is very important to choose the correct pet, which will fit into your lifestyle. If the wrong choice is made, the pet can develop behavioural problems, be neglected, or eventually need to be rehomed or euthanised.

Consider:

Daily schedule - if you are at work all day, then a puppy or energetic type of dog is unsuitable, as he will become easily bored, and can develop behavioural problems like constant barking or destructiveness. All pets require some time - to feed or clean them out, exercise them, and play with them. Cats, especially if they can get outside via a cat flap, will amuse themselves all day while you are out, but dogs require exercise and mental stimulation. Giving them the run of the garden is not enough.

Finances - keeping a pet can become very expensive. You must budget for feeding, housing, veterinary treatment, purchase costs, and many other factors

Size of home - is there a garden for a dog to run in; is your flat big enough to keep an indoor cat? Hamsters or goldfish, on the other hand, take up relatively small spaces.

Expectation - do you want a pet that will give you affection and interact with you, like a dog or cat, or are you happy caring for a fish or hamster

Health - if allergies are a problem in the family, dogs and cats, which shed hair, may be unsuitable

Experience/knowledge - some birds, and the more exotic pets have particular needs which must be met, and need a knowledgeable owner. Certain dogs may be more suited to people who have experience of handling difficult dogs

Number of pets - a single cat or dog will be happy as long as you interact with them regularly. Caged pets often need companionship of their own species - rabbits, gerbils and guinea pigs for example are best kept in pairs or groups - whereas hamsters are solitary. Birds are usually flock orientated, and are best kept in pairs or groups. Are you prepared to look after two or more of your chosen pet?

Lifespan - a pet bought for a young child may still be alive when the child has grown up and left home, leaving someone else to care for it. Dogs and cats can live for 15 or 16 years or longer, hamsters for 3.

Do not take on any animal on impulse - always research the animal's needs first. You can talk to your local vet or the appropriate breed society about the animal you wish to keep, talk to other owners, and read books about the type of pet. It is important that you have this knowledge before you buy or receive the pet, so that you know what to expect and are adequately prepared.

Toys and titbits

Wild animals spend most of their lives seeking food, often in packs, then eating it and sleeping. Because we feed our pets, they do not get the exercise or mental stimulation of searching for food, and if the owner is at work all day, the pet does not get all the social interaction he needs. It is vital to provide mental stimulation for the pet - usually in the form of exercise, toys and play.

Terriers enjoy a simple rope hanging from a tree branch in the garden. They will tug at it; jump at it and even swing on it. Keep the end of the rope at least a foot above the ground so that the dog cannot become tangled in it, and do not have knots in it which could stop the teeth sliding free.

Balls and discs are good for games of throw and retrieve. Make sure the ball is not small enough to be swallowed (like a squash ball) or hard enough to cause damage (like a golf ball). Any toy should be made of durable plastic or rubber, which cannot be chewed and parts swallowed, as this can cause serious intestinal blockages. Throwing stones can damage a dog's teeth, or if swallowed can cause blockages. Throwing sticks can be dangerous, as dogs can run onto sticks which have lodged in the ground, or pieces of wood can embed themselves in the dog's mouth or skin when the stick is carried or chewed.

Cats need toys too - especially those that the cat can "hunt". They love to chase and pounce on toys - ping pong balls, wind-up mice, toys dangling from the scratching post, or "fishing" toys (sticks with the toy hanging from string at one end) are all good. Be careful that the cat cannot eat wind-up toys or toys with string, or get tangled in the string.

There are many toys available for budgies - bells, mirrors, and plastic birds for instance. Make sure that the clapper of the bell cannot be detached and swallowed, and that plastic items are durable enough that they cannot be chewed. Fruit tree branches are cheap, and safe if chewed and eaten.

Hamsters and other caged pets should have playthings too. Anything made of plastic will be chewed very quickly - including sleeping boxes. Exercise wheels for tailed rodents should have a solid back so that the tail cannot be caught in the spokes and damaged. The same applies to long haired hamsters. Hamster exercise balls are not recommended as they can cause overheating, stress or exhaustion.

Treats and titbits are very useful as rewards for training, and can occasionally be given at other times. But they must be used in moderation as they can lead to obesity in any animal. They may also cause stomach upsets. If a pet is getting extra treats, take account of this in his daily diet and cut down the amount in the food bowl correspondingly, to avoid putting on weight.

Parasites - fleas, lice, ticks and mange

Fleas

A common problem on cats and dogs, causing discomfort, itchiness, skin problems and, in serious cases, iron deficiency and anaemia. Both the cat flea and the dog flea can be found on either pet.

Life cycle - adult fleas spend their entire life on the animal, and their life span can be from 8 to 100 days. The female flea lays hundreds of eggs in her lifespan, and these eggs drop off the pet into the surrounding environment e.g. bedding, furnishings, carpets. The eggs hatch into larvae which find a warm, humid place to develop into a cocoon. Central heating creates an ideal environment all year round. Fleas can stay in this form for up to 6 months until the temperature is warm enough for them to hatch. They must then find a dog or cat to jump onto within 8 hours.

Fleas can therefore survive for a long time off the animal, making treatment of the environment very important in their control.

Signs - the animal may be scratching. You may see adult fleas moving in the coat (brown, 2mm long) but they can move very fast so can be difficult to spot. "Flea dirt" is easier to see - black specks of digested blood which turn red-brown when rubbed onto wet cotton wool. Occasionally you can see white eggs. Fleas can bite humans (but not live on them) and cause small itchy red spots, often on the arms.

Treatment - you must treat both the pet (and any other dogs/cats in the house) and the environment. Treating the pet alone may mean eggs dormant in the house will hatch in a month or two and reinfect the pet.

- Treating the pet: spot on preparations (usually applied to the back of the neck) are extremely effective and easy to use. They are usually applied every 4-8 weeks. Your vet can give you more information on these, and supply them to you. In the past, powders, shampoos and flea collars have been used.
- Treating the environment: a common method is to use a long-acting household spray. One thorough treatment can be effective for up to a year. Also available from your vet is an injection for your pet which causes the adult fleas to become sterile, so any eggs they produce will not hatch.

Lice

Lice are not as common as fleas, and easier to control as they spend their entire life on the pet. They are most often seen on puppies.

Signs - the animal may be scratching. Lice are usually seen around the head, especially the ears, but can be found all over the body. They can grow to the size of a grain of bird seed, and lay small white sticky eggs called nits which can be seen attached to hairs.

Treatment - lice are easily treated using the same spot-on preparations as for fleas.

Ticks

Ticks are often found on dogs and cats. They are usually picked up in woody or heathery areas in the spring and autumn.

Signs - when they first attach to the animal they are quite small - 2-3mm- but as they suck the pet's blood over the course of 7-10 days they become round, enlarged and blue-grey in colour.

Many people mistake them for warts. They can be 7-8mm when fully engorged. At this point they may fall off by themselves. They are most often found on the head, neck and front legs of the pet. Ticks can be removed with tweezers, but great care must be taken to remove the whole tick - often the mouthparts can be left in the animal's skin. If in doubt, consult your vet.

Treatment - removal of the tick. If you live in an area prone to high tick populations, spot-on preparations are available to help repel ticks.

Ticks can occasionally carry disease - mention to the vet if your animal becomes ill soon after it has been bitten by a tick.

Mites

A variety of mites can cause skin conditions in dogs and cats.

Signs - these vary depending on the type of mite. Extreme itch, excessive dandruff, hair loss, ear disease and skin irritation are some of the different signs. The mites themselves cannot be seen. Some mites are highly contagious to other dogs or cats, and others can cause skin irritation in humans too.

Treatment - mite infestations need veterinary attention and can be quite difficult to treat, so consult your vet if you are worried.

Cats - choosing a kitten or older cat

KITTENS

ADVANTAGES

- 8 week old kittens are unlikely to have developed any bad habits
- kittens are fun to watch playing, and to play with
- they can adapt easily to your routine, and you can train them according to your needs
- Young kittens are easily socialised, especially if the home they were born into had children.

Socialisation is extremely important for kittens between 2-7 weeks old, so it is very important that they have had a lot of handling and met different sorts of people at their original home. This is one of the reasons why it is better to buy a kitten direct from the breeder, so that you can see the environment he has been brought up in, and the parents. Inadequate socialisation results in a cat that is aggressive or very nervous when handled or when around strangers or new surroundings. Feral kittens are a good example of this - they are hidden away by their mother for the first 7 weeks of life, and when handled by humans become very fierce. They may never be totally at ease with people or handling.

DISADVANTAGES

- they can be messy and destructive when young

OLDER CAT

Older cats fall into two groups - known and unknown.

You may know the cat - he belonged to an elderly relative or neighbour - and therefore you know his good and bad habits, his character, his health history and whether or not he has been vaccinated and neutered. If you know he is a good, healthy, well behaved cat, then he should make a fine pet and companion. He is already litter trained, he likes to be handled and he should settle in easily.

The "stray" cat is different. Rescue shelters are full of older cats, from unknown backgrounds. You will probably be saving the life of the cat, and you may not have to pay any money for him, but you do not know his history. You will have to assume that he has not been vaccinated, you can only guess at his age, and you do not know if he is neutered or not. (It can be particularly difficult to tell if a female cat is neutered or not.) More importantly, you do not know his health history - what illnesses he has had in the past, or his behaviour - whether he has been properly socialised, whether he is litter trained, whether he has ever lived in a house or not. It is certainly an idea always to have the cat checked by a vet for health problems.

However, it is important to realise that many rescue cats settle quite happily into their new homes with very few problems, and a little bit of patience is all that is required from the new owner.

ADVANTAGES

- no need to train
- hopefully already neutered
- you may know the cat's character already
- usually more sedate than a kitten, and less likely to cause destruction

DISADVANTAGES

- may have developed bad habits, or had no training
- may not be well socialised
- can be more difficult to adapt to a change of home
- unknown health history

Cats - the first 12 weeks and vaccination

AGE: kittens are usually homed around 8 weeks old

DIET: try not to change the diet when the kitten is homed. If possible find out what the breeder weaned the kittens onto and continue to feed the same. A sudden change in diet can cause diarrhoea or stomach upsets, especially over the stressful time of moving homes.

A usual diet would be a proprietary tinned or dry kitten food and water to drink. The "big name" brands of food contain all the vitamins, minerals and amino acids in the correct balance for a kitten, so "extras" are unnecessary. Kitten foods are specifically formulated for growing cats so should be fed in preference to adult cat food. Many owners like to give cats and kittens cows milk to drink but be aware that this can cause diarrhoea.

As kittens have very small stomachs, offer meals little and often - 4 times a day is ideal. You can train the kitten into a good routine if you leave the food down for 20 minutes then take the bowl away if the kitten has not finished it, and offer no more until the next feed. Water should be freely available all the time.

NOTE - if the kitten does not eat or develops vomiting or diarrhoea, it should be taken to see the vet, as they can become weak very quickly.

BED: a cardboard box is fine, as it is easily and cheaply replaced if soiled. Cats need their own special place where they can feel safe and secure, and hide in when they are worried. Any bedding should be easily washed or disposable.

TOILET TRAINING: kittens have a well developed idea of personal hygiene, but need to be directed to the proper place. Routine is also important, as with the young of any species. Also remember - if the ultimate aim is for the cat to go to the toilet outdoors, do not give it an indoor litter tray, as this will only cause confusion when it is older. A litter tray just outside the back door is fine, even for an 8 week old kitten. You can put the tray inside a wooden box on its side to provide safety and shelter, and to keep the litter dry.

GROOMING: brush or comb your kitten lightly every day, and get him/her used to being handled all over. Look at the eyes and ears, and open the mouth, pick up the feet, and run your hand along the tummy. Doing this regularly will mean that you can detect any abnormalities quicker and have a cat that is happy to be handled.

DISCIPLINE: an effective and non-painful shock can be given via a water pistol. If the kitten gets a sudden wetting when it is clawing the sofa/wallpaper, it begins to associate the two actions and should stop with time.

VETERINARY CARE: kittens should be wormed against roundworms at least twice before they are 12 weeks old. They should also be vaccinated against feline enteritis and the cat flu viruses, and feline leukaemia virus. This usually involves 2 injections 3 weeks apart, starting from 8 weeks old. Different vets use different vaccines, so always check the timing with the vets. The costs vary - around £40 for the course of 2 injections - but again check this with your vet.

Cats – neutering

Both male and female cats are normally neutered at around 5 or 6 months of age. Puberty normally occurs at around 4 to 8 months of age in cats.

Neutering reduces the risk of contracting diseases such as feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV) and feline leukaemia virus (FeLV).

Castrating male cats will mean they are less likely to fight and roam, which in turn reduces the chance of them becoming involved in a road traffic accident. Castration will also reduce the chance of male cats spraying smelly urine in the house.

Spaying female cats obviously reduces the number of unwanted kittens but can also prevent medical problems such as pyometra and mammary tumours.

Cats - worms

Two types of worms commonly affect cats - roundworms and tapeworms. They are entirely distinct from each other and therefore their treatment and prevention methods are different.

ROUNDWORMS

Two species infect cats - *Toxocara* and *Toxascaris* (there is a *Toxocara* species which infects dogs but this is separate). They are called roundworms because they are round in cross section, like an earthworm. The adult worm looks like a piece of plastic covered wire, between 5 and 12cm long, pale beige or grey in colour, and can be curved, or coiled into a spring shape.

LIFE CYCLE - the adult worms live in the cat's intestines where they mate and lay eggs invisible to the naked eye. These are passed in the cat's faeces and, in a warm, moist environment, develop to larvae. The larvae may be eaten when a cat eats a bit of soil along with its food, eats a bird or rodent which has swallowed a larva, or rolls in sand containing larvae, and licks his coat clean. Once swallowed, the larvae move from the intestines through the bowel wall and into the cat's bloodstream. In young kittens, the larvae then travel through the liver to the lungs, from where they are coughed up and swallowed by the kitten again. They return to the intestines once more, in a more mature form. To make things even more complicated, some larvae do not complete the whole journey at once, but instead form a cyst in different parts in the cat's body. The larvae start moving again when the cat becomes pregnant (if she is a queen), and travel to the milk glands. In males or other females, the larvae start moving again if the cat is ill for any reason.

Toxocara from dogs has been known to migrate through children's bodies in the same way. Most never develop because they are in the wrong host, but very rarely a larva can reach the back of the eye and cause problems with the child's sight. It is extremely rare for this to occur with *Toxocara* from cats

SIGNS - roundworms do little harm in adult cats, although large numbers can cause diarrhoea and ill thrift in kittens. The worms are usually seen if the cat vomits, although they are not usually the cause of the vomiting.

WORMING - worm your cat for roundworms every 3 months, or more often for kittens and pregnant queens - your vet can advise you.

TAPEWORMS

Two species of tapeworms affect cats - Taenia and Dipylidium. The adults are long and flat, made up of tiny segments. You will not usually see an entire adult - instead you see the individual segments at the cat's back end.

SIGNS - the segments are seen crawling around the cat's back end, out of its anus, or in the faeces. The segments are white and look like a grain of rice, those of Dipylidium will wriggle for a while before drying out on the cat's coat, while Taenia segments do not move. The adults do not cause a problem to the cat but the passed segments may cause discomfort around the anus.

LIFE CYCLE - the segments detach from the adult when they are ripe and full of eggs, and pass out the body to continue their development. They need to pass through a secondary host before they can reinfect another cat - with Taenia this is a shrew, mouse or rabbit, with Dipylidium it is a flea or louse. The cat is then reinfected by eating the tapeworm cyst in the flea or rodent, and adult tapeworms form in the intestine.

WORMING - the adult worms can be controlled by giving suitable wormers, again every 3 months is ideal. Fleas must also be eliminated in the case of Dipylidium, as these are the secondary host. Some cats which are enthusiastic hunters may need to be treated more regularly for tapeworms, as each mouse eaten is a new source of Taenia - treat whenever the segments are seen.

Modern worming preparations available from your vet will kill both tapeworms and roundworms with one dose - these should be given every 3 months routinely. There are different forms of wormer - tablets, powders, liquids, injections and spot-on preparations. They do not all treat both types of worms, so always be advised by your vet, or read the instructions. If you have difficulty administering tablets or powders, then one of the other forms may be more suitable.

Humans cannot catch tapeworms from cats.

Dogs - choosing a dog

Buying a dog, especially a puppy, can mean that you have that dog for the next 14 or 15 years, so it is worthwhile spending time finding a dog that you like and, importantly, fits in with your lifestyle. Many dogs are abandoned or euthanised because their owners had not fully realised the work, expense or time needed to care for an animal. Do not buy a pet, or accept a free one, without thinking long and hard about it first. It is a huge commitment.

You need to consider the type of dog you want, and the lifestyle you bring him into.

DOG: points to consider

- size
- purebred or mongrel
- age
- sex
- expense
- exercise requirements
- temperament
- health
- working potential
- coat

YOU: points to consider

- finances
- size of house and garden
- daily routine
- age and family
- experience
- health
- other pets

SIZE - very large breed dogs often need less exercise, but are expensive where feeding is concerned, and can be difficult to handle, purely because of their size. A suitably sized house and garden will be necessary. Veterinary bills will be more, as most medications are given by weight.

PUREBRED/MONGREL - if you choose a purebred pup, you will have a clear idea of its size, and likely temperament when it is adult. A pedigree pup with Kennel Club papers can be very expensive - £100 -£1000. However, because purebred dogs are so highly bred, there can be inherited defects, specific to the breed. Your vet will be able to tell you which diseases or inherited problems are common to each breed. A good pedigree pup should come from parents who are free from inherited defects and examined under the BVA/KC hip dysplasia and eye schemes. Again, your vet can advise you on this. Many purebreds are bred for a specific reason e.g. working dogs, so you may want one for this reason, whose parents were proven workers.

Mongrel, or crossbreed dogs, can be from known parentage, two different purebred dogs, or can be a mixture of several different breeds. If taken as a puppy, it can be difficult to assess what size or shape the dog will be as an adult, or what length the coat. Inherited defects are less common. Crossbreeds are much cheaper to buy, or even free.

AGE - if you buy a puppy, you will have the time and work of training them, and the mess and exuberance of a young dog, but you will then have a dog trained the way you want. If you buy an older dog, or more usually, take a stray from a rescue centre, he may previously have learned bad habits, be untrained, had poor socialisation, or been cruelly looked after, which can all lead to behavioural problems. He could be aggressive, not toilet trained, bad with children or very nervous. These problems can be difficult and time consuming to train out, and such a dog is not for a novice. However, you may be able to find a dog from a known background - a neighbour who is moving away or an elderly relative. In these cases, the dog's personality and habits are known, and you should get a well trained dog without the difficult puppy and adolescence phases.

If you do want to rescue a stray, be aware that they may need to be retrained and, unless you know for sure, assume that they have had no vaccinations. Take a lot of time to choose your dog - not by looks, but by temperament, and take advice from the staff at the centre. Do not take a dog on impulse. It is very worthwhile taking the dog to obedience classes from the start, to help with training. Be prepared to put time and patience into looking after your new dog.

SEX - male dogs tend to be larger than females, and can be more dominant. Females are supposed to be easier to train. Males can have problems with mounting, roaming and aggression to other dogs, but this is reduced by castration. Females have seasons which can be a nuisance, but they can be spayed.

EXPENSE - larger dogs will eat more, pedigrees will cost more to buy, healthcare costs money in all dogs, as does kennelling, neutering, insurance and grooming.

EXERCISE - do you have the time and energy to take an active dog for a long walk every day? Working dogs, gun dogs and terriers are active dogs, and not enough exercise can cause behavioural problems like destructiveness, from boredom and frustration. Elderly people may not want a dog that needs a lot of exercise.

TEMPERAMENT - if you buy a purebred pup you should have some idea of its breed's temperament, and as a pup, you can socialise them to all sorts of different people and animals when less than 12 weeks old, which will make them better pets. Some breeds are known to be more docile or more nervous. When you get an adult dog, you may not know what its temperament is like. Also consider if you have young children or other pets, as some dogs are better with them than others.

HEALTH - make sure you always buy a dog in good health, do not be tempted to take a runt because he "looks cute". If you buy a purebred dog, he may be more prone to developing breed-specific inherited disorders.

WORKING POTENTIAL - you may want a breed for a specific reason - gun dog, sheepdog etc

COAT - long haired dogs can need a lot of grooming and cleaning, and can shed hair all over the house. They may need to be regularly clipped. Some breeds do not shed hair so are good for allergy sufferers.

FINANCES - as has been explained, dogs cost money to keep, and you must budget for the unexpected.

SIZE OF HOUSE AND GARDEN - you must have adequate space to keep a large dog or more than one dog, especially if you are out all day and leave them in the house or garden.

DAILY ROUTINE - if you work all day 5 days a week, and do not have the time to devote to twice daily walks and playtime, you should consider whether you should have a dog. Dogs need commitment in terms of time from their owner. Behavioural problems can occur as a result of boredom or loneliness.

AGE AND FAMILY - elderly people may not manage with a puppy or a large or active dog. Some dogs are unsuitable for households with young children.

EXPERIENCE - some breeds, or those with behavioural problems, are not suitable for first time owners as they require strict discipline or training.

YOUR HEALTH - if you have medical or physical problems you may not desire a dog who demands a lot of attention and exercise, but a small quiet dog can be very rewarding. If you have allergies, certain breeds are unsuitable.

OTHER PETS - some dogs do not mix with other dogs, certain breeds hate cats.

Whatever dog you decide to buy, talk to other owners of the breed if you can, seeing the parents can give you a good idea of the way a pup will turn out, and be prepared to wait to find the dog you want. Make sure any dog is in good health when you buy it. If you are worried, talk to your vet.

It is always worth getting a puppy from a reputable breeder, rather than a pet shop. The less changes of home and environment they have when they are very young, the better, as there is less risk of catching diseases, and getting stressed.

Dogs - the first 12 weeks and vaccinations

AGE: most pups are homed at around 7-8 weeks old

DIET: try not to change the diet when the pup is homed initially. Find out what the breeder fed and continue to feed this, as sudden changes in diet can cause stomach upsets. If you do have to change the food, do it gradually over 7-10 days, introducing more of the new food each day.

The "big name" brands of puppy food contain all the essential vitamins and minerals for a growing pup, so these are ideal for your new pup to eat. Dry or tinned foods are available, but always make sure it is a complete diet (not just a mixer) and it is specifically for puppies - adult food may not provide all the nutrients for the growing pup. Clean water must be freely available at all times. Milk is unnecessary in a weaned pup and may cause diarrhoea.

Do not get into the habit of feeding titbits from your table, or extra snacks between meals as this can lead to weight problems or a begging dog.

As pups have small stomachs, they need to be fed little and often - 4 times a day. Most puppy foods have instructions of how much to feed, according to weight - remember these are guidelines only, each pup is different.

FEEDING DISCIPLINE: this must be started as soon as you get your puppy. Call the pup to his meal, using the same signal all the time, and then make him sit for a moment. He must only start to eat when told to, not before. It might be necessary to hold him for the first few times, but he will soon learn. Occasionally, take the food away while he is eating, so that he does not learn to be possessive.

IDENTIFICATION: put a collar on the pup within the first few days with an address tag. The collar should be snug but not tight. The pup will object initially, but will soon get used to it. A more reliable means of identification is a microchip - about the size of a grain of rice - which your vet can insert under the skin by injection at the time of vaccination. Your pet will then have a unique number which is held on a central database. If your pet strays, dog wardens and rescue centres can scan for microchips and find the owners very quickly.

TRAINING: dogs are pack animals and have a strict social order. From the moment you get your pup he must know his position in the family - this must be lower in the "pack" than any of the humans. This is not unfair to the dog - he has pack leaders who will protect and instruct him, so he will feel safe and reassured. An uncontrolled dog is confused. If he is allowed to do something, then told off for doing the same thing, he will become stressed and this can lead to aggression. If the pack leader's role is not established early on, he will try to become dominant himself, by growling and fighting, as he would in the wild. Rules and commands must be consistent, and everyone in the family should be giving the same instructions to the pup.

Decide which parts of the house are no-go areas, and where he will sleep, then stick to these decisions. A pup will cry for the first few nights after he is parted from his litter, but do not comfort him or he will feel rewarded and will cry every night. Instead, give him a cosy, secure bed, a good meal before bedtime, and ignore the cries - he will learn that it is unproductive. Do not take him to your bed to comfort him, or he will learn to expect this.

Teach him to sit on command from an early age - this is the most useful command he can be taught, and reinforces your position as top dog.

Teach him to walk on a lead. You can use food as an incentive to stop him dragging behind you. For instance, put his dinner at one end of the room and then walk him towards it on the lead from the other.

Toilet training starts early - take him out after every meal and stay with him until something happens, then praise him. If he makes a mess indoors, clean it up but do not say anything to the dog - praise is more useful than punishment.

Groom him every day and get him used to being handled all over - eyes, ears, inside the mouth, feet, tummy and tail. This will mean you are aware more quickly of any abnormalities, and your dog will be an easier patient if he needs pills, or any treatment in later life.

Get him used to travelling in the car - a 5 minute journey every day will lead to familiarity with the car, and a dog that lies quietly.

Once he is fully vaccinated, puppy training classes are very useful for teaching discipline and for socialising your pup. Socialisation is very important to your pup's development and your dog will learn not to become very excited or noisy when encountering other dogs.

VETERINARY CARE:

VACCINATION - dogs are living much longer now, due in no small way to vaccination. Fifty years ago, diseases like distemper killed half the puppies before their first birthday. No vaccine in animals or man is 100% effective, but today's dog vaccines are extremely good, and failures are rare.

Injections must be given to a healthy animal at the right age, and the pup should be kept away from infection until the vaccine has had time to work. The vaccine stimulates the pup to make antibodies (build up immunity) against the disease. This immunity is long lasting, but wears out over time - this is why boosters are needed. Newborn animals receive antibodies through their mother's milk which protect them in the early weeks (but bottle-fed young do not, making them more susceptible to infection). However, this can make timing of vaccination difficult, as maternal antibodies will interfere with the development of immunity to vaccines.

Pups usually stop suckling by 6 weeks old, so most of the maternal antibodies are exhausted by 8-10 weeks. Correct vaccination protocols vary with the vaccine used the prevalence of infection in the local area, and the history of the bitch and kennels. Your best advice will be from the vet. Vaccination aims to prevent distemper, leptospirosis, infectious hepatitis, parainfluenza virus and parvovirus.

Usually, pups need a course of 2 injections, 2-4 weeks apart, starting from 8-10 weeks old, but this does vary. They will need to be kept away from unvaccinated dogs and places where unvaccinated dogs might have been e.g. pavements and parks, until 1-2 weeks after their last injection.

Talk to your vet about vaccinations as soon as, if not before, you first get your pup or new dog.

WORMING - pups can carry roundworms acquired from their mothers. As well as causing ill health in the pup, they can occasionally infect children. Puppies can be wormed from 2 weeks old and should be wormed regularly thereafter. Your vet can advise you on a suitable worming regime.

Dogs - neutering

WHY NEUTER?

At least 100,000 dogs are destroyed every year because they cannot be found homes, which is a very good reason for reducing the number of pups born.

It is possible to keep a non neutered bitch without breeding from her, but it takes discipline. She has to be strictly controlled when in season - kept in the house at all times or on the lead when out - but this can be difficult in a house full of people, and accidents do happen. It is also not much fun for the bitch. Seasons can be prevented by hormone injections, but their timing is strict - if you are late with the injection, she can become pregnant. The onus is on the owner to remember the dates.

THE BITCH

WHY SPAY? Once you have made the decision not to breed from your bitch, there are many good reasons for having her spayed

- There are health benefits for the bitch - no false pregnancies and no pyometra (a potentially life-threatening womb infection). If the bitch is spayed before her second season, the chances of her developing mammary tumours (breast cancer - the most common tumour in bitches) are dramatically reduced. The risk factor if the bitch is spayed before her first season is 0.05%, if spayed before her second season it is less than 10%, but after her second season it is 25%
- You no longer have to remember about anti-heat injections, or worry about her becoming pregnant. You no longer have a bitch that drips blood on the carpet twice a year, or the other problems of being in heat.

Spaying does not normally make a bitch nervous, unintelligent, vicious or fat. These are often used as excuses by owners who have bought the wrong pup, can't train their dog or overfeed.

All guide dogs are spayed (and the males castrated) and there are few nicer, better-balanced and more intelligent dogs, usually with very trim figures. If any dog is overfed it will become fat - you may need to feed less after the operation, but there is certainly no need for the dog to put on weight.

THE OPERATION spaying involves removing both ovaries and the uterus (womb). It is not normal to tie the Fallopian tubes as in humans, as this would still allow the heats to occur - the bitch would still attract nuisance males and be sexually active.

The operation is performed under general anaesthetic, and involves a day, or day and night, at the vet's surgery. There is a risk with any operation but this is minimised with the use of modern anaesthetics and skilled surgical teams. Most bitches are back to normal within 24 hours and need no after treatment except stitch removal 7-10 days later.

There are different views as to the best age to spay and the best time in relation to the last season, so talk to your own vet about this. They can still be spayed after having a litter, and when they are old. Costs do vary throughout the country and according to the weight or size of the bitch. For instance it may cost £120 for a small puppy and over £200 for an adult overweight St Bernard.

THE DOG

WHY CASTRATE?

- Stops the dog wandering in search of a mate. Dogs can smell a bitch in heat from miles away and will roam far and wide to find her. (but if they roam due to boredom, castration will not stop this)
- Controls aggression - un-neutered males are dominant and will fight other dogs for territory or for a mate. They also tend to be more dominant with humans, and castration can help stop this, in addition to good training and control by the owner.
- Stops over-exuberant sexual activity in dogs - marking territory with urine, and trying to mate with pieces of furniture or guests can be an embarrassing nuisance.
- Prevents testicular tumours, which are common in older dogs, and helps prevent some forms of disease of the prostate.

THE OPERATION castration involves removal of both testicles, not simply a vasectomy as in humans. The intention is to neuter and stop hormone production, which causes the wandering, aggression and other male behaviour. The operation can be done at any age for 5-6 months old, but the younger the operation is done, the better the results will be. Some older dogs (over 2 years old) have learned the male behaviour and it may still continue, to a lesser extent, after castration.

A general anaesthetic is required, and the dog spends a day, or a day and night, at the surgery. The only after care is normally stitch removal at 7-10 days. The cost is usually a little less than a bitch spay.

Dogs - worms

There are 2 main types of worms in dogs - roundworms or tapeworms.

ROUNDWORMS

Toxocara canis is the name of the common roundworm in dogs. The worm is round in cross section like an earthworm. The adult worm looks like a piece of plastic covered wire, between 5 and 15cm long, pale beige/grey in colour, curved or coiled into a spring shape. The worms can be seen when the dog vomits, although they are rarely the cause of the sickness. Roundworms do little harm to adult dogs, but puppies can have problems if they have large numbers of worms.

LIFE CYCLE the adult worms live in the dog's intestines, where they mate and lay eggs invisible to the naked eye. These are passed in the faeces and develop in a warm, moist environment, in about 4 weeks, to form larvae (infective eggs can survive for years outside). A dog will be infected when it eats these larvae, either through eating food that has been in contact with infected soil, eating a bird or rodent which has swallowed a larva, or by licking its feet clean after exercising on grass. The larvae reach the intestines where the adults live, but they must mature first, so, in puppies, they burrow through the bowel wall, enter the bloodstream, and travel via the liver to the lungs. They are coughed up the windpipe then swallowed, arriving back at the intestines to become adult worms. Some larvae do not complete this cycle in one hop - they form cysts in various places and are triggered to start moving again when a bitch is pregnant (and pass through the placenta to the unborn pups, or to the milk glands) or ill.

RISK TO CHILDREN *Toxocara* larvae can be swallowed by children playing on infected grassland e.g. parks, gardens. When this happens, most larvae fail to develop as they are in the wrong host. But occasionally a larva will migrate as in the dog and reach the retina (back of the eye), where it can cause interference with the child's sight. This is rare, but important, and demonstrates the need to worm dogs regularly, dispose of their faeces properly, and promote good hygiene with children.

WORMING dogs should be wormed every 3-4 months, and puppies and pregnant bitches should be wormed more often - ask your vet for details.

TAPEWORMS

The common tapeworm is called *Dipylidium*, and the segments look like creamy white grains of rice, which may wriggle, around the dog's back end or in its faeces. The adult worm consists of a large number of segments and those that we see are the ripe ones, full of eggs, detached from the main worm. The eggs cannot infect another animal until they have passed through their secondary host which is the flea or louse. Here the egg grows into a tiny cyst, and when the flea is swallowed by a dog a new tapeworm will develop in the dog's intestines from this cyst. The adults do not cause harm, but the segments may cause anal discomfort.

WORMING dogs should be wormed every 3-4 months, also fleas must be controlled, otherwise the dog can become reinfected by swallowing a cyst-carrying flea.

Other worms do infect dogs. They are all too small to be seen by the naked eye, so must be diagnosed by looking microscopically at faeces samples. A tiny tapeworm called *Echinococcus* occurs in farm dogs in sheep farming areas, and causes hydatid disease in humans. Regular worming and limiting access to sheep is the effective answer.

No-one, adults or children, can catch worms from a dog. If a child has worms, they are a human type and did not come from the family dog.

Rabbits - housing, feeding, breeding and general information

CHOOSING A RABBIT

Baby rabbits grow up very quickly. They are sexually mature and start to breed when they are between 16 and 24 weeks old, and by this time the cute little baby rabbit you bought originally may weigh as much as 4kg, and a year old buck (male) of the larger breeds will be as heavy as 8kg. This is a strong, heavy rabbit for anyone to handle, let alone a young child.

Smaller breeds like the Netherland Dwarf are less than 1.5kg when fully grown, so are a better size for children. If you have to select a baby rabbit of unknown parentage from a pet shop, beware of white ones with long ears as they are likely to be from stock bred for large size and meat production. Small pricked-up ears suggest the ancestors were dwarf breeds.

Rabbits are gregarious - they like company. But be careful when keeping more than one rabbit together - one of each sex means overproduction of baby rabbits, and two bucks will fight. So the choice is two does (females), neutered doe and neutered buck, or two neutered bucks. Some people will keep a rabbit and a guinea pig together but this can result in bullying. Two animals will mean more work, so only get a pair if you are willing to spend the extra time looking after them both - one well-looked after rabbit is better than two who are given less attention.

Rabbits can live for 8-10 years, so buying one for a child can mean the rabbit is still present when the child has grown up and left home. They do take time and effort to look after properly, so buying a rabbit is as much of a commitment as a cat or dog.

HOUSING

Rabbits need a well-built hutch - at least 5 feet by 2 feet floor space and high enough to allow the rabbit to sit upright with ears erect (about 2 feet). More space is always better. A run which allows the rabbit to spend part of the day exercising and grazing is also necessary - these should be as large as possible. Such a run should have a wire floor if on grass so there is no opportunity to burrow beneath the run and escape.

A rabbit hutch is usually kept outdoors, so it must be built to keep warm and dry in winter and cool in summer. Many of the mass-produced ones are made from flimsy timber, with a roof that overhangs by only a centimetre or so, allowing rain to blow in easily through the wire front. This type of hutch can be improved by placing it beneath a lean-to so that there is double protection from rain and snow. Felting the outside of the walls and beneath the base of the hutch (where it cannot be nibbled) adds insulation and waterproofing. Do not be tempted to cover the front of the hutch completely in bad weather - this produces a damp atmosphere inside the hutch which can be bad for your rabbit's health. The hutch should be kept out of direct sunlight and away from draughts (many are on legs to help stop damp and keep vermin out).

The hutch should have an indoor sleeping compartment, and if this is furnished with a smaller sleeping box with plenty of bedding, the rabbit can keep itself warm on the coldest of nights.

Straw or shredded paper should be used for bedding in the sleeping area, and the outer run can have wood shavings to absorb any urine or droppings. Rabbits produce a considerable quantity of droppings, usually in one corner of the hutch, and regular cleaning is essential.

Another idea for housing more than one rabbit is a permanent outdoor enclosure with a shelter, allowing them to exercise when they want.

HOUSE RABBITS

Many rabbits are kept in the house now, as they are easily litter trained. They have a cage in the house and get to exercise around the house and garden (they can be trained to use cat flaps). Litter training is achieved by repeatedly putting them in the tray, along with some droppings. Only wood or paper litter must be used. Beware of electrical cabling in the house as this can get chewed.

FEEDING

The most natural, and best, diet for rabbits is grass and hay (NOT cut grass from the lawnmower). This can be supplemented with a commercial rabbit food obtainable from most pet shops. The best feeds are rabbit pellets as these avoid the selective feeding which can sometimes be found with the muesli type mixes. They should have good hay at all times, preferably from a rack so that it remains sweet and fresh. Green food and vegetables can be fed, but in the same amounts every day - unusually large quantities of green food can cause serious digestive upsets. Fresh, clean water from a drinking bottle must always be available. Like any animal, rabbits can get fat if overfed, so do not feed too many of the widely available rabbit treats - they can get all their nutrients through hay and rabbit feed.

BREEDING

A rabbit's pregnancy lasts about 32 days, and between 3 and 12 young can be born, hairless and with their eyes closed. The eyes open at around 9 days old, and the young rabbits are weaned at about 6 weeks. Does build a nest for their young using hay, bedding and their own fur. Avoid any disturbances during the first few days after the babies are born as a harassed mother may kill and eat her young. It is wise to remove the buck too, so that he is not disruptive.

To prevent unplanned breeding and to improve the behaviour of both male and female pet rabbits, most vets recommend that bucks should be castrated and does spayed. This not only prevents breeding, but tends to produce a more placid and easily handled rabbit.

HANDLING AND GENERAL CARE

Adult rabbits can be difficult to handle, and are capable of savage kicks with the back legs, each of which has 4 sharp claws. Always support the bodyweight from behind, and it is useful to hold the hind legs to stop the kicks. The scruff of the neck can be used in addition, but always support the rest of the body, as rabbits can severely injure their backs if allowed to twist or struggle. NEVER pick up a rabbit by its ears.

Rabbits love to play, and providing toys and play areas keeps them active and stops boredom. It also allows interaction between you and the rabbit. It is important to handle your rabbit every day so that he is well socialised and easy to examine. A rabbit that is not handled enough is a frightened rabbit, which means that it will struggle and kick when picked up, may cause you or itself injury, and will be unhappy. A poorly socialised rabbit does not make a good pet, and does not encourage children (or adults) to care for it fully.

Grooming is a good way of handling your rabbit in a gentle way, and allows you to examine the rabbit all over. Rabbits hair can get matted, especially if they have been moulting, and particularly around their back end. Regular grooming prevents this.