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Choosing the Right Pet

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Owning a pet can be fun and rewarding, but it is also a big responsibility. Put some forethought into your choice of pet to ensure that your pet experience is a good one.

"Before bringing a pet home you should research the needs of the animal you are thinking about getting. Owning a pet is a commitment that can last many years. Don't get a pet just because it's cool," advises Dr. Julia Whittington, a veterinarian at the University of Illinois Veterinary Teaching Hospital in Urbana.

Choose a pet that fits with your lifestyle. Time is one of the most important things to consider when shopping for a pet. "When considering buying a new pet ask yourself 'How much time does this pet require?' If you don't have that much spare time you're willing to devote to your new friend, don't bring the animal home," says Dr. Whittington.

Dogs in general are more time-consuming pets than are cats or caged pets. Eight hours is a long time for a dog to remain in a crate or home without a "bathroom break." All dogs require a certain amount of exercise, too. For some breeds several short walks a day will suffice, but active dogs need more time to walk off their energy.

Attention is a basic pet need. Without interaction with their owners, pets can suffer from separation anxiety or boredom, which can lead to problems for you. Upset animals tend to destroy things.

Also consider the pet's environmental needs. A big dog needs more space—both inside and outside your home—than does a lap dog. Some animals, such as sugar gliders, do better when owners have more than one. Not all animals are active during the day. Rabbits are most active at dusk and dawn; sugar gliders are nocturnal. If you are considering these pets, ask yourself if activity and noise at these times would bother you.

"Another consideration when looking for the right pet is its lifespan. Cats and dogs mean a commitment of at least 10 years. Some parrots can live for 40 years, so owners may need to make provisions for their birds in their wills," comments Dr. Whittington.

"To make sure you are aware of the potential complications that can arise when owning specific pets, schedule a pre-purchase pet counseling session with your local veterinarian. Another good resource is your public library. If you use the Internet for your research, make sure the information is from a reputable source," advises Dr. Whittington.

Research is especially important when considering exotic pets, which are becoming more and more popular. They have very different needs from those of a cat or dog, both at home and at the vet's. Find a veterinarian in your area familiar with the exotic species you choose.

Once you've decided on a pet, where should you buy it? Not all pet stores and breeders are created equal. "There are good ones and not so good ones. Look for

a high quality breeder or pet store. Are the cages clean and the animals not crowded? Is the staff knowledgeable? Do they have detailed information about the pets they sell?" says Dr. Whittington.

Take a look at the animals they have. Healthy animals are bright, alert, and responsive. Healthy, happy animals love to eat. Are the pets at this store eating? If the animals are lethargic, are missing hair, and are not kept in sanitary conditions, find the door as quickly as possible. All animals that you bring home should go to the veterinarian for a health check after purchase. This benefits and protects both you and your pet.

For more information about different animal species, animal care needs, and where to look for that perfect pet, contact your local veterinarian.

Source: Dr. Julia Whittington

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