

Choosing a Pet Sitter

Pet Sitters do much more than provide your pet with food and water while you're away from home. A good pet sitter also spends quality time with your pet, gives him exercise, and knows how to tell if your pet needs veterinary attention. What's more, pet sitters typically offer additional services, such as bringing in mail and newspapers, watering plants, turning lights on and off, and providing homes with a lived-in look to deter crime.

But just because someone calls herself a pet sitter doesn't mean she's qualified to do the job. This information will help you find the best pet sitter for you and your pet.

Why hire a pet sitter?

When you must be away – say for travel or an emergency – and don't want to leave your pet in a boarding kennel, who takes care of your pet? If you're like many pet owners, you ask a friend or neighbor to stop in and pour some kibble and water in your pet's bowls. But is this what's best for your pet? There's a good chance that your friends and neighbors lack proper pet-care experience and have even forgotten to show up. They may also resent frequent requests to look after your pet while you're gone. So what is the solution? Consider hiring a "pet sitter" – a professional, qualified individual paid to care for your pet.

A pet sitter offers both you and your pet many benefits.

Your pet gets:

- the environment he knows best
- his same diet and routine
- relief from traveling to and staying in an unfamiliar place with other animals (such as a boarding kennel)
- attention while you're away

You get:

- happier friends and neighbors, who aren't burdened with caring for your pet
- the peace of mind that comes from knowing that your pet is being cared for by a professional
- someone to bring in your newspaper and mail so potential burglars don't know you're away
- someone who will come to your home so you don't have to drive your pet to a boarding kennel
- other services provided by most pet sitter, such as plant watering and pet grooming

Where do I find a pet sitter?

Start with a recommendation from a friend, neighbor, veterinarian, humane society or dog trainer. Check the Yellow Pages under “Pet Sitting Services”. You can also contact the National Association of Professional Pet Sitters (1-800-296-PETS or www.petsitters.org) or Pet Sitters International (1-800-268-SITS or www.petsit.com) for a referral. Both organizations offer pet-sitter accreditation to those who demonstrate professional experience, complete pet-care-related home study courses, attend professional conferences and abide by a code of ethics set by the organizations.

What should I look for?

It’s important to learn all you can about prospective pet sitters’ qualifications and services. Before selecting a pet sitter, interview the candidates over the phone or at your home. Find out the following:

- Can the pet sitter provide written proof that she has commercial liability insurance (to cover accidents and negligence) and is bonded (to protect against theft by a pet sitter or her employees).
- What training has the pet sitter received?
- Will the pet sitter record notes about your pet, such as his likes, dislikes, fears, habits, medical conditions, medications and routines?
- Is the pet sitter associated with a veterinarian who can provide emergency services?
- What will happen if the pet sitter experiences car trouble or becomes ill? Does she have backup?
- Will the pet sitter provide related services such as in-home grooming, dog walking, dog training and play time?
- Will the pet sitter provide a written service contract spelling out services and fees?
- If the pet sitter provides live-in services, what are the specific times she agrees to be with your pet? Is this detailed in the contract?
- How does your pet sitter make sure that you have returned home?
- Will the pet sitter provide you with the phone numbers of other clients who have agreed to serve as references?

Even if you like what you hear from your pet sitter and her references, it’s important to have the prospective pet sitter come to your home to meet your pet before actually hiring her for a pet-sitting job. Watch how she interacts with your pet – does your pet seem comfortable with the person? If this visit goes well, start by hiring the pet sitter to care for your pet during a short trip, such as a weekend excursion. That way, you can work out any problems before leaving your beloved pet in the pet sitter’s care for longer periods.

How can I help the pet sitter and my pet?

Of course, even the most trustworthy, experienced pet sitter will have trouble if you haven’t also kept your end of the bargain. Here are your responsibilities:

- Make reservations with your pet sitter early, especially during holidays
- Ensure your pet is well socialized and allows strangers to handle him
- Affix current identification tags to your pet’s collar

- Maintain current vaccinations for your pet
- Leave clear instructions detailing specific pet-care responsibilities and emergency contact information, including how to reach you and your veterinarian.
- Leave pet food and supplies in one place
- Buy extra pet supplies in case you're away longer than planned
- Leave a key with a trustworthy neighbor as a backup, and give him and your pet sitter each other's phone numbers. Be sure those extra keys work before giving them out
- Show the pet sitter your home's important safety features such as the circuit breaker and security system

Finally, have a safe and fun trip. And remember to bring your pet sitter's phone number in case your plans change – or you just want to find out how Fluffy and Fido are doing.

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