

Before you go – checklist for pet owners

Your animals' special needs, health and safety need to be both documented and provided for while you're away. Your house sitter is prepared to make your animals' health and happiness a top priority but they can't do their best by Spot and Fluffy without all the necessary information and preparation by you. At the last count (in 2003) there were 77.7 million pet cats and 65 million pet dogs in the US. (Phew, I think our house sitter members are going to be busy!) For the purposes of this checklist I've assumed that your beloved pet is either a cat or a dog (sorry to all you bird, rabbit, mouse, fish, snake and pony owners but you will have to customise parts of this checklist for yourselves).

See also Before you go – checklist for home owners.

1. Create an information pack

It's a good idea to put an information pack together containing all of the information that your house sitter needs to provide top quality care to your pets. By placing all of your animals' records in plastic A4 sheets in a sturdy folder, this pack can be used by your house sitters for years to come. Consider including the following in your information pack:

- up-to-date immunization records
- microchip or tattoo information
- lost pet register contact information
- municipal license or registration records
- medical history (including last dates of de-flea and de-worming treatment)
- current medication (including generic names of drugs, dosage information and your usual supplier)
- vet's contact information
- after-hours animals medical emergency service contact information
- photograph of your pet that is both current and adequately detailed to identify them with
- map with the location of good dog parks and other permitted dog walking areas

2. Educate your house sitter

Knowledge is power. The more you can tell your house sitter about your animal's usual habits and quirks the more fine-tuned their care and attention can be toward your pets. Honesty is essential here. If your dog is antisocial around other dogs or about to come into season tell your house sitter. If your dog is an 'escaper' when let off the lead or your cat is a scent-marker then you need to leave this information for your house sitter. It won't necessarily put your house sitter off the assignment. However, having to chase your dog through a large park or worrying about smelly furniture covers will only cause your house sitter undue stress. It's much better for every person (and animal) concerned if your house sitter is prepared for any eventuality. Take the time to answer the following questions (where relevant) and print out your document to be added to your house sitter's information pack.

- What are the important routines in your pet's day (including eating, sleeping, exercising and playing)?
- Is your pet on a special diet? What amounts of food do they usually eat? When do they usually eat? How many treats are they usually permitted?
- Does your pet have any major and minor health problems (for example, skin allergies or old injuries)?

- Create an emergency health care plan (Which health care provider do you use? How do you get to the clinic? How will your house sitter make a payment for emergency care?)
- Where are your pet's favourite toys, chew toys and treats kept?
- Where are your pet's favourite hiding places?
- Does your pet have any unusual habits (for example, your cat may regularly vomit, your puppy may urinate when showing submission or your dog may try to leap out of open car windows)?
- Does your pet have any phobias or anxieties?
- Are any rooms or parts of the property 'off limits' for pets?
- Have a back-up plan for the care of your animals in case your house sitter has an emergency they need to attend. Leave the contact information for a vet boarding service, your local kennels or a nearby friend or relative who could care for them if needed.
- How does your dog usually travel? (Are they allowed on public transport? Can they walk in the snow or on hot pavements? Do they have a car restraint? Are they happy to be in their travel container?)

3. Animal supplies

Stock up on enough supplies to keep your animals happy and healthy while you're away (plus extra of everything in case your return is delayed). Leave your animals' supplies in one spot in plain sight for your house sitter's easy access. These supplies could include the following:

- food (main meals, dry food, treats, chewing bones)
- catnip
- food and water bowls
- medications (flea, tick, lice, heartworm, worm and mange treatment, with dosage information)
- toys (indoor chewing and tugging toys, chasing toys)
- exercise equipment (leads, balls, tennis racket, towels, cold weather gear, muzzles, collars, harness, snow boots)
- identification tags, tattoo or microchip (featuring a contact number or a number on a registration list – make sure these are current!)
- bedding (basket, mattress with pillows, blankets or duvet, spares for washing)
- cleaning equipment for your animal (medicated shampoo, towels, hoses, brushes, clippers and scissors)
- cleaning equipment for your animals' messes in your home (mops, brushes, sponges, disinfectant)
- waste collection equipment (poop scooper, bags, gloves, kitty litter and trays)
- travelling equipment (car restraints, car blankets, travel containers)

4. Preparing your animals

By doing a few simple things for your animals you can leave knowing that they'll be that much more safe and secure in your absence.

- Deal with any suspected health problems in your animals before you go.
- Ensure your dog is comfortable walking on a leash.
- Make sure your pets are wearing practical collars that fit properly (collars shouldn't be too tight or so loose that they can slip off).
- Have an identification tag engraved with a current contact number for each of your pets. Attach these tags to the D-rings on your pets' collars with a sturdy steel ring.
- Register each of your pets with a lost pet register connected to your local animal shelter.
- Take digital photographs of each of your animals showing their markings and distinctive features.

- Ideally, your house sitter should spend some time with your pets in your company before you leave. Schedule some time to take your house sitter and your dogs out for a walk. Or your house sitter could just handle your animals in your presence to get everyone acquainted with each other before you go.
- Tell them when you'll be coming back home (some people believe that our pets understand these reassuring messages).

5. Preparing your home

While you know exactly what hazards your home contains, your house sitter doesn't, so it's a good idea to attempt to really 'pet-proof' your home before you leave.

- Put anything away that could be harmful to your pet. Christmas tree decorations, tinsel, pine needles, firewood, cooked bones (think gum and gut-perforating splinters and shards), strings, ribbon or knitting wool are all potentially deadly to curious cats and dogs. Add pesticides, flavoured medicines, digestion aids, sweetened pills, chocolates, confectionary, biscuits, space cookies, tobacco and sweet liquors to this list.
- Your garage probably contains many hazardous substances such as rat poison and slug killer, fertilizers, antifreeze and pesticides. It is critical to put any dangerous substances in your garage completely out of reach of your pets (preferably behind a locked door).
- Seal off any routes to your cellar or attic so that your pets don't become 'lost' in these hard-to-get-to spaces.
- Block your pets' usual escape routes from your property. You may need to repair holes in the fence or fill scraped-out depressions beneath fences or gates with heavy objects.
- Secure any gates on your property (including those to a swimming pool).
- Unplug any appliances that your house sitter won't be using to prevent possible accidents.
- Consider installing a doorflap so that your animals can leave the house if they need to (for their toileting or in case of an emergency such as fire or flooding).
- Arrange your arsenal of cleaning equipment in plain sight for your house sitter. This can include your vacuum cleaner, mop, broom, dustpan, gloves, disinfectant, sponges and trash bags etc.
- Just before you leave, ensure that the right pets are inside the house.
- If your pet escapes the house before you leave, tell your house sitter where to look for the animal.
- And lastly, leave a piece of your worn clothing in your pets' sleeping area to give them a nice reminder of their beloved human while you're away.