

We are planning to get a new kitten. If we go to a shelter, how can we make sure it is healthy before we make the final decision?

That's great that you are planning to adopt from a shelter, but please also consider an adult cat. When you visit shelters, you will generally find more adults than kittens available, as they are harder to place, but an adult cat can certainly make a wonderful, loving pet.

A healthy kitten should have clean eyes and a clean nose. Discharge from either or sneezing could indicate a respiratory infection. Usually due to a virus, and highly contagious, it is not uncommon for shelters to have outbreaks among their cats, so this is something to check out. Try to take a quick look inside his ears. Black discharge could be a sign of ear mites. A shiny coat, free of fleas or flea debris is a good sign. There shouldn't be any scabs or bald spots, signs of a skin infection or fungal ringworm infection. Lift the kitten's tail and make sure he looks clean underneath, no signs of diarrhea. A potbelly in a kitten may mean he just ate or he may have intestinal worms. Worms are commonly transmitted from the mother and aren't a big concern. They are generally treated at your first vet visit. Try to get an idea of the temperament of the kitten. A well-socialized, healthy, active kitten will generally come to the front of the cage to greet you, rather than hiding or hissing in the back corner. Purring can be a sign of a contented, friendly kitten, but can sometimes also be a sign of fear or stress so don't put too much emphasis on that.

Once you select a kitten that seems to meet these general guidelines for health and temperament, make sure you are given a 24 to 48 hour period to have the kitten examined. If your veterinarian finds any potentially serious congenital defects such as a heart murmur or the presence of a contagious disease such as Feline Leukemia or Feline Immunodeficiency Virus, you will then need to discuss treatment options and the overall prognosis for the kitten. Whenever you are contemplating a new pet, try to be as well-informed as possible. You are making a commitment to provide loving care for its lifetime, so take your time to make the best choice. Good luck!

Francine K. Rattner, V.M.D.
South Arundel Veterinary Hospital
Edgewater, MD