



 **Multnomah
County
Animal Services**

MCAS Foster Care Handbook: Cats



Introduction

Welcome to the foster program at Multnomah County Animal Services (MCAS). Some cats just need a little extra TLC before they are ready for adoption. Others may be too young for surgery, have an injury, are pregnant, are part of an investigation, or have a behavior or medical concern. We rely on our foster families to help by giving them time and facilitating treatment for our cats! Thank you for becoming part of the MCAS foster family. We are excited you've joined us in the commitment to help animals.



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Fostering Process

Notification

The Foster Team sends all requests for cat fosters generally once a week. Additional emails go out, should the need arise. Notifications include information regarding each animal. These include age, breed, weight, special needs, anticipated time length, a photo if allowed, and any other pertinent information. Interested parties should respond to the email or call the Foster Team.

Pickup

At this time, we cannot facilitate meet and greets between fosters or personal pets and eligible foster animals.

You will collaborate with the Foster Team to establish a pickup time. Notify them of the need for any supplies. The shelter can generally provide food, litter, a litter box, toys, and a carrier for transportation.

1. Upon arrival, enter through the administration entrance.
2. Use the buzzer button to notify the front desk staff you have arrived. Tell them you are there to pick up a foster.
3. Once inside, check in with the front desk staff. This team will provide you with the foster agreement to read, sign, and date. If available or necessary, they will provide you with paperwork including medical records, medications, and any other supplies needed.
4. Once signed, the front desk will notify the appropriate team to bring your foster to the lobby.

Follow-up Appointments

Each foster has different follow-up appointment needs. If the foster requires frequent medical appointments, the foster team will note this in the request summary. At minimum, you should expect to come to MCAS at least once a month for rechecks. Please contact Animal Health, at foster-medical-help@multco.us to schedule these appointments.

Adoption

Medical and Behavioral Clearances

Cats fostered for **medical reasons** must be officially cleared by Animal Health before they can be listed for adoption. This typically happens during a scheduled recheck appointment. Once cleared, these cats may return to the MCAS shelter for adoption or be listed for adoption out of a foster home.

For cats in foster care due to **behavioral reasons**, the timeline for adoption is determined by the shelter management team. Management will decide on a case-by-case basis whether the cat should return to the shelter environment or remain in their foster home while searching for a permanent owner.

Preparing the Adoption Profile

Before a cat is listed online, foster parents must provide the Foster Team with a clear photo and a compelling biography. To better engage potential adopters, please write the biography in the first person (from the cat's perspective).



Be sure to highlight the cat's unique quirks, enrichment needs, and how they interact with people or other pets. If a cat does not receive interest within the first two weeks, please send a new photo or suggested edits to the bio. Highlighting a different characteristic can often help the right adopter find their perfect match.

The Adoption Process

Once an animal is cleared and the profile is live, foster parents are encouraged to network their foster pets to help find a home. All potential adopters must apply through the official website. Please note that adoptions are processed on a first-come, first-served basis for all qualified applicants.

The Basics

Feeding

Your foster cat should have access to a good quality dry cat food at all times, unless otherwise instructed by Animal Health. You can also offer your foster cat canned cat food. Senior, ill, or overweight cats may benefit from additional servings of canned food. Cats should always have access to fresh water. Treats formulated for cats are a good way to build relationships and encourage positive behaviors and are also ok to give in moderation. Your foster cat should not be given milk or any human food that is not listed in this manual. If you have a cat that is struggling to eat, see the tip box in the “Common Health Concerns” section (pg. 15) for approved human food suggestions.

Cleaning Up

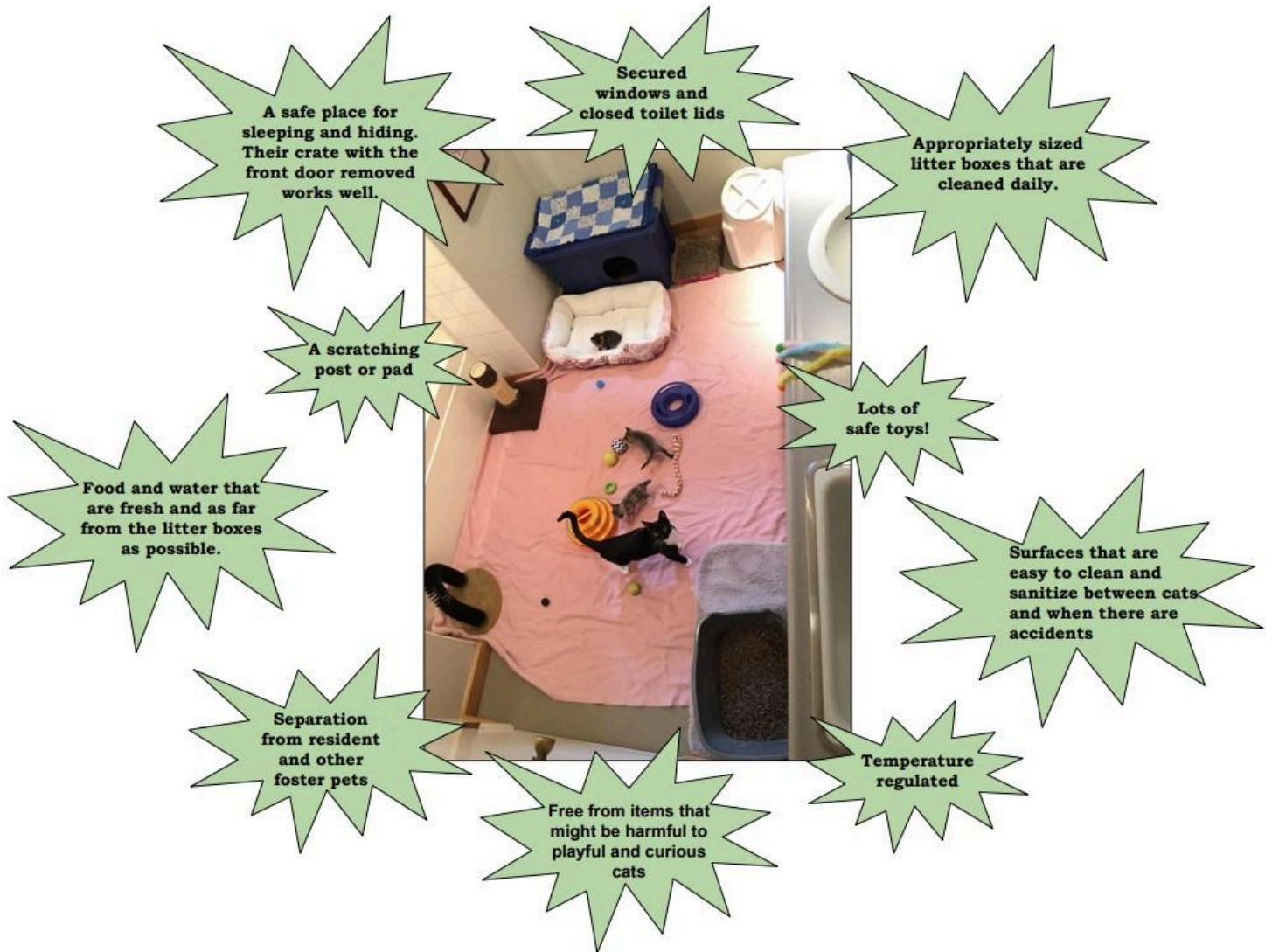
Foster cats must always have a clean home environment. Wash bedding, blankets, toys, and materials in which they come into contact. In general, you should assume that anything you cannot clean with a 1 to 32 parts bleach and cold-water solution, could have the potential to transmit germs to other pets. Areas that cannot be disinfected could hold onto germs that could be spread to other animals or even people. Carpet cannot be properly disinfected and we strongly discourage allowing foster cats to have access to it.

Creating a Safe Haven



Foster cats should be kept indoors only and be transported in a secure crate when outside of the home. Even a confident cat may take some time to adjust and should have their space limited for the first two weeks. A small room, bathroom or a large dog crate work well. Provide accessible hiding spots where the cat feels secure but remains within reach. Incorporate vertical space by placing tables or bookshelves near windows. These perches provide mental stimulation and help cats feel more confident by allowing them to

observe their surroundings from an elevated vantage point. Make sure that food, water and litter are in places that are low traffic. Limit interactions with new people for the first several days.



Common Behavior Concerns

It's natural for foster cats to experience a period of adjustment after the stress of multiple transitions. Even in a loving home environment, they may initially feel insecure. The following tips are designed to help you manage common concerns during this sensitive transition period.

Not Using the Litter Box

It is common for adult cats to experience litter box lapses as they adjust to a new environment. These issues are often temporary and can usually be resolved with a little troubleshooting.

Understanding the Behavior

The first step is to identify how the cat is marking, as this helps determine the cause:

- **Spraying:** If you find urine on vertical surfaces (like walls or chair legs), the cat is likely spraying. This is typically a stress response to a major life change, the presence of other pets, or being recently altered. It's their way of trying to feel more secure.
- **Inappropriate Elimination:** If the urine is on horizontal surfaces (like rugs or bedding), the cat may be unhappy with the litter box setup or experiencing a medical concern.

Please keep the Foster Team in the loop if you notice either of these behaviors.

Creating a Stress-Free Setup

To help your cat get back on track, try the following adjustments:

- **Provide a "Safe Zone":** Temporarily move the cat to a smaller, quiet room that is easy to clean. This helps them feel less overwhelmed by the house.
- **Optimize the Litter Box:** Cats can be quite particular. Ensure the box is uncovered and use unscented litter. Offering a second box in a different location—specifically where they've had an accident—can often solve the problem.
- **Experiment with Textures:** If they aren't using the current litter, try different types like wood pellets, wheat-based, or "Cat Attract" to see what they prefer.
- **Keep it Fresh:** Try to scoop the box at least twice a day and give it a full sanitizing wash once a week.

Cleaning and Comfort

Always clean accidents with an enzymatic cleaner specifically formulated for cat urine; standard household cleaners often leave behind scents that draw the cat back to the same spot. Using a Feliway diffuser can also help lower their stress levels.

When to Contact Animal Health - While most issues are behavioral, some are medical. Please contact Animal Health immediately if you see your foster cat:

- Straining or crying while in the box.
- Producing very little urine despite frequent attempts.
- Passing blood in their urine.

Overarousal

It's helpful to remember that some cats can become easily overwhelmed or "overaroused." This might look like striking, growling, or even nipping when they get too excited—whether by another pet or even just a little too much petting. The best approach is to gently reduce their exposure to whatever triggers that reaction. For instance, you might give them more space from other animals or keep petting sessions shorter and focused on their favorite spots.

Once you've found their "comfort zone," you can help them gain confidence through slow desensitization. Using high-value treats or wet food, you can very gradually reintroduce triggers in tiny steps—like showing them a photo of another cat from a distance before offering a treat. Keep these sessions brief and always stop while your foster cat is still feeling relaxed.

Playtime can also lead to overarousal. To keep things safe, avoid using your hands or feet as toys; instead, use wands or dangling toys to direct their energy away from your body. It's best to end play while they are still having fun but before they get too worked up. Always celebrate the good moments with rewards and simply disengage if they start to play too roughly.

CAT LANGUAGE



INTERESTED



FRIENDLY



ATTENTIVE



RELAXED



TRUSTING



FRIENDLY, RELAXED



CONTENT



CONFLICTED, CAUTIOUS



PLAYFUL



EXCITED



"THIS IS MINE"



ANXIOUS



PREDATORY



WORRIED



FRIGHTENED



THREATENED



TERRIFIED



SUPER TERRIFIED



IRRITATED



DISGUSTED

Confident Cat Program

The shelter can be a high-stress environment for cats, and many respond with extreme fear or reactivity. In some cases, these are simply affectionate house cats who are overwhelmed by the noise and activity; in others, they may be undersocialized cats who will always prefer their independence.

A quiet foster home is the most effective place to determine a cat's true personality. By following the structured steps below, we can typically understand a cat's social needs within a few weeks. This approach has a long track record of success in helping cats decompress and show their true selves.

If you find that your foster cat isn't making progress through these steps after about three weeks, please reach out to the Foster Team. We will check in with you to discuss their behavior and develop a specialized plan together.

Set Up

One of the most important components of the program is to have the right set up. Generally a large dog crate, a rolling cage, or a small bathroom are the best places to start. Ideally, the cats should be able to observe normal household activities but not be overwhelmed by them. They should be provided a space to hide so they can take breaks, but make sure that they are not out of reach. Adjust the location of the acclimation area as needed to provide balance. Fearful cats should not have access to the entire house. This will drastically increase the amount of time needed for them to come around and may cause us to assume an inaccurate assessment of their degree of socialization.



Handling

Establishing a Routine

Start by offering your foster cat a high-value treat—such as canned food, meat-based baby food, or a little tuna juice—and then immediately walk away. Aim

for three to five of these short sessions daily. Creating a predictable schedule helps a nervous cat feel more secure. After the first few days, try staying in the room at a distance after you've put the food down. Over the following week, gradually move closer to their enclosure while they eat. If the cat stops eating, you are likely too close; simply take a step back until they feel comfortable again.

Gradual Interaction

Once the cat is comfortable with you sitting nearby, try resting your hand near the food dish while they eat. As they gain confidence, you can attempt a gentle pet on the face or head. If they seem overwhelmed by direct touch, try using an "extender" like a wand toy or a back scratcher to offer pets from a distance.

The golden rule is to **stop moving forward if the cat stops eating**. Work toward the goal of petting them while they enjoy their food. Once they are relaxed with that, try petting them briefly *before* offering the food, followed by a treat to reward the interaction. You can also try using toys or food to gently coax them onto your lap. Throughout this process, continue to expose them to normal household sounds at a low volume to help them acclimate.

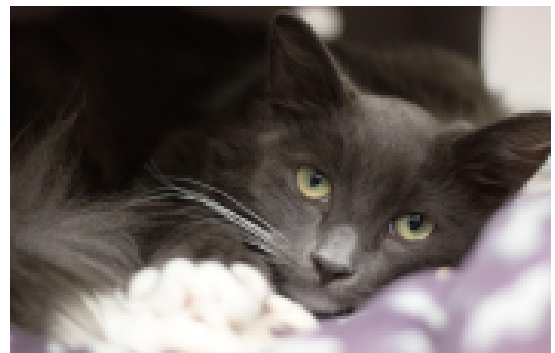
Expanding Their World

When your foster cat is consistently responding to your touch with lean-ins, purring, or other positive signs, you can begin to increase their living space. Continue using toys and treats to encourage interaction and further strengthen the bond of trust between you.

Getting Ready for Adoption

As soon as you can comfortably pet your foster cat, please email a description and biography to the Foster Team. It isn't necessary for the cat to be easy to catch, comfortable being picked up, or a "lap cat" before they are listed for adoption.

The adoptive family will receive guidance on how to continue the socialization plan you've started. Our goal is to provide a solid foundation of trust while empowering the new owners to finish the journey—allowing you to open your home to the next cat in need.



What If They Don't Come Around

While every cat progresses at their own pace, most should reach the point of allowing physical touch—even if they aren't fully enthusiastic about it yet—by the third week. If you aren't seeing this level of progress by that time, please reach out to the Foster Team for additional tips and support.

In some cases, we may determine that a cat is better suited for our "Kitties for Hire" program. Not every cat is destined to be a social lap cat, and that is perfectly okay; there is a wonderful home out there for every personality. Following this structured approach allows us to find the best path forward quickly, ensuring the cat doesn't experience unnecessary stress during the process.

Court Case Animals

MCAS operates as a branch of law enforcement for Multnomah County. As a result, at any time, we are actively investigating a portion of the animals housed.



The law considers these animals as “evidence” in an active court case. Because of this, they must remain in the care of MCAS until case resolution. We have no control over hearing timelines. Cases may last a few days or up to a couple years.

Whenever possible, we try to place the animals into foster homes to minimize the time that they have to stay in the shelter. Foster parents **do not have to commit to the entire time of the case**. If you foster a court case animal, and have another commitment, you can collaborate with the Foster Team to provide alternate temporary or permanent placement.

In the same way that evidence is very carefully tracked and handled in the legal system, these animals must also be very carefully handled. Some examples include, but are not limited to:

- No photographs – No social media posts
- No discussions with outside parties about their cases or condition

These animals come with some extra work and rules, but they are often some of the most grateful creatures in our care. Your home may be the first family that has ever provided them with stable affection or a warm bed to call their own.

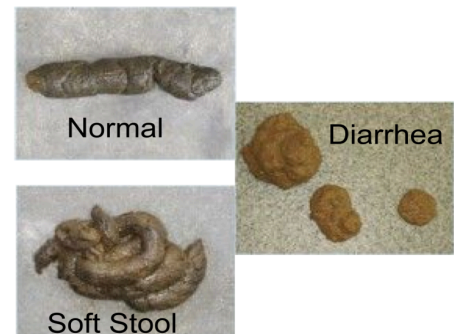
Common Health Concerns

All cats should receive health exams before going into foster care. Any known health concerns will be discussed with the foster parent prior to pick up. However, it is possible for symptoms to develop after the cats are taken home. Because of this, it is very important to keep your foster cats in a separate area, with separate bedding and without contact to your other household animals for two weeks. MCAS is not responsible for treating any other animals in the foster home, even if something is shared from a foster pet

It is expected that all veterinary care will be provided by MCAS or the approved emergency veterinarian (see pg. 26) under an emergency situation only. A foster parent may not take a foster pet to any other veterinarian. No medications, prescription or otherwise, are allowed to be given to foster pets unless previously authorized by MCAS veterinarian staff. Failure to follow this rule may result in no longer being a foster parent with MCAS. Any unauthorized veterinary care will not be reimbursed by MCAS.

Diarrhea

Diarrhea can be caused by a variety of things, including a change in diet and stress. You should expect soft stool or diarrhea the first couple days after coming to your home. Persistent diarrhea without improvement may indicate something more serious.



Contact Animal health if:

- Diarrhea persists for more than 72 hours
- Your foster has diarrhea and any other sign of illness, such as lethargy, loss of appetite, hypersalivation with excessive lip licking, or vomiting.

Vomiting

Vomiting may also be the result of stress or diet change and should be monitored. If the vomiting continues for more than 48 hours or is accompanied with lethargy or loss of appetite, Animal Health should be contacted.

Fleas

MCAS will administer flea treatment before sending your foster cat home with you. You may still see live fleas or flea debris for the next 24 hours as treatment works through the system. Contact Animal Health to schedule follow up treatments.



Ear Mites

A cat with ear mites will have crusty black debris that looks like coffee grounds in their ears. The cat may scratch their ears, shake or tilt their head and/or have a foul odor. Treatment is simple with medication, though sometimes more than one treatment is required for complete resolution.

Upper Respiratory Infection (URI)

An Upper Respiratory Infection (URI) is essentially a "cat cold." These are typically viral, though they can sometimes involve bacterial infections, and stress often makes cats more susceptible. Common symptoms include sneezing, congestion, coughing, or discharge from the eyes and nose.

Managing Mild Cases - Most mild cases resolve on their own within seven to ten days and do not require a veterinary appointment. If your foster cat has clear nasal discharge but is eating well, maintaining their weight, and acting normally, you can simply monitor them at home.

When to Contact Animal Health - Please reach out to the medical team if the URI symptoms persist beyond ten days, or if the cat develops any of the following:

- Lethargy or unusual tiredness
- A decrease in appetite or weight loss
- Colored (yellow or green) nasal discharge
- Severe congestion or difficulty breathing
- A fever



Ringworm

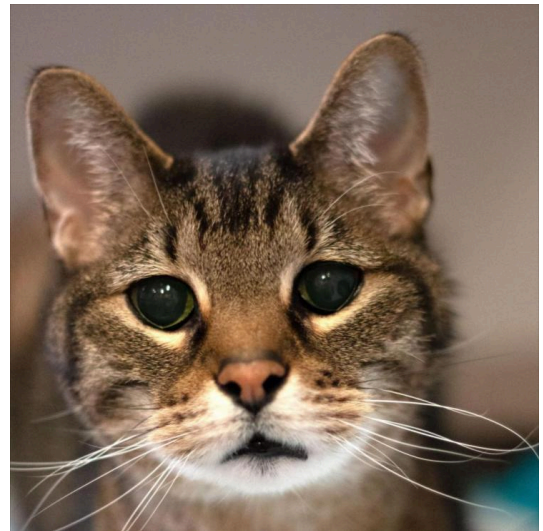
While ringworm is relatively uncommon in our adult cat population, it is a fungal infection that foster parents should be able to identify. It typically presents as dry, flaky skin or circular patches of hair loss, most often found on the head and legs. Because it is highly contagious to both humans and other animals—and because the spores can persist in a home environment for a long time—quick action is essential. Treatment generally involves a combination of oral medication and medicated baths. If you suspect your foster cat has ringworm, please contact Animal Health immediately to begin treatment and discuss how to prevent the spread to others in your home.

FIV/FeLV

In alignment with many local shelters, MCAS does not routinely test cats for FIV or FeLV; however, testing may be conducted at the discretion of the Animal Health team. We will always inform foster families if a cat is known to be positive for either virus. It is helpful to know that FIV is typically only transmitted through deep bite wounds or mating, while FeLV can spread more easily through close contact and shared saliva, such as mutual grooming. Fortunately, these viruses do not survive long in the environment, and standard cleaning protocols are effective at eliminating any risk to other cats in the home.

Hyperthyroidism

Hyperthyroidism is a condition that is common in older cats. It is caused by an abnormally functioning thyroid gland. It can cause excessive drinking and urination, restlessness, vomiting, and/or diarrhea. Cats often lose weight, despite having an eager appetite. Life-long medication is typically required and these cats should always have access to water.



Emergencies

For emergencies between the hours of 8AM and 5:30PM:

1. Email the medical team at foster-medical-help@multco.us **AND** call 503-988-9075. Leave a message.
2. Come to the shelter **immediately!** Do not wait for a response.
3. Please have the animal ID number with you and provide this number at all points of contact whenever possible but do not let it delay you.

For emergencies between the hours of 5:30PM and 8AM:

- In case of an emergency or suspected emergency, call and/or take the animal to the following approved, after-hours veterinary clinic:

Dove Lewis
1945 NW Pettygrove St
Portland, OR 97209
503-228-7281

- If possible, bring your foster's medical records with you.
- Upon arrival at the ER clinic, tell them the animal is a foster with MCAS. This ensures that the care goes under MCAS's file along with follow-up and billing. They will not charge you for the care provided.
- Notify MCAS as soon as possible that you have taken an animal to an after-hours veterinarian via email at foster-medical-help@multco.us and a call to 503-988-9075. Please include the animal number in your message.
- **DoveLewis Emergency Animal Hospital** is the only authorized outside facility for emergency care.

Not Immediately Concerning - Appropriate to Monitor

- URI
 - Clear ocular or nasal discharge, sneezing
 - Cat is otherwise eating and active
- Poor appetite of less than 48 hours (cat is still active)
- Lethargy (low energy) of less than 48 hours
- Vomiting of less than 24 hours (cat still active and eating)
- Diarrhea of less than 3 days (cat still active and eating)
- Lack of bowel movement of less than 48 hours
- Weight loss of less than 10%

Non-Emergency - Notify Animal Health at foster-medical-help@multco.us

- URI
 - Significant ocular or nasal discharge
 - Any degree of signs where the cat is also lethargic or anorexic
- Diarrhea
 - No stool improvement after 3 days (if cat is active and eating)
 - Diarrhea lasting 24 hours (if cat is lethargic and anorexic)
- Vomiting
 - No improvement after 24 hours (if cat is active and eating)
 - Vomiting of less than 24 hours (if cat is lethargic and anorexic)
- Poor appetite of over 48 hours
- Lethargy of more than 48 hours
- Lack of bowel movement of over 48 hours
- Weight loss of more than 10%
- Hair loss
- Skin or ear infections
- Swollen or closed eyes (may be an emergency, contact for guidance)
- Mild trauma, pain or lameness
- Mild bleeding that is no longer active
- Seizures (a single, short-lasting one)

Emergency - Requires Immediate Attention – See “Emergencies” on previous page for guidance

- Unresponsive or collapsed
- Severe trauma or pain
- Labored or difficulty breathing
- No urine production after 24 hours of straining to urinate
- Significant active bleeding
- Seizures (more than 3 in a 24 hour period or 1 that lasts more than 3 minutes)
- Continuous vomiting over 24 hours and unable to hold down food/water

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: Can I let my foster cat interact with my personal pets?

A: We do the best we can to notify foster parents of all known illnesses that a cat may have. Unfortunately, they may be carrying a disease or parasite without showing symptoms for quite some time. We highly recommend keeping foster cats and personal pets separate at all times. At a minimum, we recommend a two-week quarantine period. Personal pets must be up to date on vaccines, parasite preventatives and be healthy.

Q: How much personal time will I need to dedicate to fostering cats?

A: The daily time commitment varies depending on the cat's specific needs, but you can generally expect to spend between one and three hours interacting with your foster. For cats focusing on behavioral goals, this time is most effective when broken down into several short, ten-minute sessions throughout the day.



Q: How does medical treatment work with an MCAS foster pet?

A: As an MCAS foster parent, you will be required to work with our onsite veterinary staff for all routine care and emergencies that occur during the hours of 8AM and 5:30PM. This may mean several visits to our location throughout the time you have the foster animal.

Q: How long will I be fostering each pet?

A: Fostering durations vary depending on each cat's individual needs. While MCAS typically seeks a two- to four-week placement, some cats may require a significantly longer stay to fully decompress or heal. The initial foster request will provide you with an estimated timeframe so you can plan accordingly.

Q: What are the common reasons that cats need fostering?

A: Cats typically require foster care when they are recovering from illness or injury, need support with a behavioral concern, or simply find the shelter environment too overwhelming to thrive.

Q: Will I get reimbursed for things that I buy for my foster?

A: While we truly appreciate the extra care you provide, our policy does not allow for the reimbursement of outside purchases. To support you, we will continue to supply all necessary basics—including food and litter—for as long as your foster animal is with you.

Q: What should I do if my foster cat bites someone?

A: If your foster cat bites someone and breaks the skin, please notify the Foster Team within **24 hours**. Per legal requirements, all bites must be documented and the cat must undergo a 10-day quarantine. This applies to all bites, including accidental or "play" bites. During this period, the cat must remain either at your home or the shelter, depending on the severity and circumstances of the incident. In either location, the cat must be kept strictly isolated from new people and pets. The final determination regarding the quarantine location is at the discretion of the shelter. We are here to guide you through this process and support both you and the cat.

Q: What should I do if my foster cat escapes?

A: If your foster cat escapes, make every attempt to get them back into the home as soon as possible. If you lose track of them, contact the Foster Team immediately and file a lost report on the MCAS lost and found page.

Q: What if I want to adopt one of my foster cats?

A: We love it when our fosters decide to make it official! You are always welcome to adopt your foster cat. If the animal is already **listed for adoption**, please note that we review applications in the order they are received. However, if they **aren't listed yet**, simply reach out to the Foster Team; they'll send you a direct link to apply. Once you've submitted your application, an adoption counselor will contact you to walk you through the final steps.

Q: What if one of my friends or family members wants to adopt?

A: We invite you to share your foster's story with friends, family, and your social networks to help them find the perfect match. If you find a potential match, please send the person's full name, email, and phone number to the Foster Team. We'll follow up with a link to our application. If the animal is already listed on our website, please ask them to apply directly there.

Additional Resources

- www.aspcapro.org - A resource for a variety of topics regarding shelter animals and their care.
- www.maddiesfund.org - A great resource for a wide variety of information including many how-to videos.
- www.sfspca.org - San Francisco SPCA has an online cat behavior library.
- www.dovelewis.org/pet-owners/pet-loss-support - Dove Lewis has a wide range of Pet Loss Support resources including art therapy, remembrance ceremonies, and grief support.
- <https://bestfriends.org/resources/cats> - Best Friends is the largest No-Kill Animal Sanctuary in the United States. Their website is full of great behavior and medical tips.