While there are always cats of all sizes, shapes and ages in need of homes, feline senior citizens are most often overlooked for adoption and underrated. Older cats may lose their homes when owners die or become infirm. They may also be sent to animal shelters when their owners’ living circumstances change due to a move — or when a cat’s failing health or a behavior issue prompts relinquishment.

OLDER CATS OFTEN OVERLOOKED
Senior cats often have little chance for adoption, says Jacque Lynn Schultz, Director and Companion Animal Programs Advisor with the ASPCA Shelter Outreach in New York City.

“Due to the overload of animals, too many shelters have arbitrary age limits for euthanasia,” she says, adding that in many cases, cats aged five and above may be euthanized automatically.

“A 12-year-old cat is just not high on the adoption list,” agrees Arnold Plotnick, DVM, a veterinarian board-certified in internal medicine and feline medicine, and medical editor of Catnip. He operates a cat-only practice in New York City. “But adopting one of these golden oldies offers incredible rewards. You really may be saving his life.”

A lifetime of modern care means cats live longer, healthier lives than ever before. But shelters and experts define old age differently.

“In some cats we see, aging changes occur as early as seven years, but by 11, most cats will start to experience some changes,” says James Richards, DVM, a feline specialist and director of the Cornell Feline Health Center, Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine in Ithaca, New York.

It’s not unusual for well-cared-for cats to enjoy life into their late teens or even twenties. Dr. Richards shares his days with Dr. Mew who will be 17 this year. Schultz adopted Gray-C (Gray Cat) the day she was scheduled for euthanasia and they’ve been together more than 20 years.

FELINES ARE LIVING LONGER
A good definition of old age for an animal is the last 25 percent of her life. But since we can’t predict life span, we can’t know when old age begins for individual cats. With an average potential life span of 15 to 17 years, adopting a 10-year-old cat means you can expect to share another five or more happy years together.

“Emphasis should be on quality of life and not quantity of life,” says Dr. Plotnick.

While kittens can be non-stop fun, they’re also works-in-progress. You cannot accurately predict adult temperament in these youngsters.

“I’ve had kittens showered with attention become the sweetest things, and others that remain aloof and standoffish,” says Dr. Plotnick.

The biggest advantage of adopting a senior cat is you’re getting a known quantity. Behavior patterns generally are established. You’ll already know whether the cat likes or dislikes dogs, other cats, children, lap-sitting, and playing.

Older cats tend to be more sedate than kittens, and less inclined to

With the average life span of cats between 15 and 17 years, adopting a 10-year-old cat at a shelter means you potentially can share five or more happy years together.
climb curtains, attack toes, or conduct gravity experiments by knocking breakables off high spots.

“These animals are a little easier to transition, especially if you don’t have another cat in your home,” says Schultz.

Adopting a senior citizen cat offers a wonderful solution for both the person and the needy feline. For example, the San Francisco SPCA offers a special program aimed at elderly adopters concerned about pets who might outlive them, says Holly Stempien Fink, the shelter’s adoption director.

“For a $25 yearly membership, we take care of up to two animals after an owner has passed or has become infirm and can’t take care of their animals,” she says.

At an animal shelter, don’t expect senior cats to sell themselves the way a kitten would, says Schultz.

“They’re quieter. They’re a little shook up, because they used to live in a home, and all of a sudden their world has been rocked,” explains Schultz. “They need people willing to come in and take a second look.”

It may take senior cats longer to adapt in new homes. They need more emotional support, love and affection — especially during those first days and weeks. Comfort and routine becomes much more important.

Older pets also become impatient. They want to go to the litter box, be fed, and receive attention.

HEARING AND EYESIGHT MAY FADE

Just like older people, aging cats may develop vision and hearing problems. Schultz says Gray-C sleeps about 18 hours a day, is deaf, and becomes confused when her failing eyesight results in bumping her nose into a wall. But every morning, Gray-C decides it’s time to get up, and her head-butting mimics the persistence of a two-year-old.

“Older cats are at increased risk for illness,” says Dr. Plotnick. “So when you adopt a cat who is older, he is a little more likely to get sick, and may be more of an expense.” If you’re adopting a cat who requires medication once or twice a day, you must make arrangements so he always receives his treatments — even if you’re at work or out of town on a long weekend.

Animals adopted from shelters affiliated with PetFinder.com are encouraged to purchase appropriate pet insurance, such as Shelter Care or Pet Care Pals.

“Then if anything happens in that first month, you’ve got a nice safety net,” says Schultz.

PetFinder.com is a resource for shelters and rescue groups to post advertisements for placing adoptable pets. This year Petfinder.com celebrates its 10th anniversary and 10 million pet adoptions.

Adjust your home to protect your cats, and to maintain their physical and emotional health. Good nutrition supports an aging cat’s health. Therapeutic diets help with chronic diseases. Soft diets may work best for old cats with missing teeth. If giving your cat needed pill medications each day makes your cat avoid you, ask about having all medicines compounded into a single flavored treat.

Aged athletes may not be able to run as fast, jump as high, or play as long as in their youth, but they still enjoy these activities in a modified version.

“My little Mewser is less able to jump up on things,” says Dr. Richards.

To assist older cats, Dr. Richards suggests offering ramps or footstools for easy access. Provide a litter box on every floor instead of expecting senior cats to go up and down stairs to reach a bathroom area. Place a warm lamp above a soft bed for a heated resting place, and elevate...
food bowls to accommodate the stiff neck and shoulders that no longer easily bend.

Your cat’s surroundings greatly influence his quality of life. For instance, blind cats rely on a ‘memory map,’ and may require some time to adapt if you rearrange the furniture. Use baby gaits to barricade dangerous stairways.

**SENIORS GIVE AGELESS JOY**

“The time you’ll have with an older cat you adopt obviously will be shorter,” says Dr. Plotnick. “But it doesn’t mean it’s any less fulfilling or less rewarding. In their golden years, these cats deserve to be treated well and made to feel special.”

Joyce Fuhrman, an intake evaluator and foster-mom with Siamese Rescue of Virginia, certainly understands Dr. Plotnick’s take-home message. She has a special place in her heart for what she calls “Meezer Geezers.” Although she also has younger cats, Fuhrman currently has three “geezer” — senior-aged Siamese cats Fanny, 15; Austin, 13; and Pacci, 12, in her Hagerstown, Maryland home.

“Veterinary medicine has advanced so much that a cat who is 12 or 13 is really not an old cat anymore,” she says. “They don’t need to be discarded like a piece of trash. It’s my time to give back to them. I wouldn’t even look at adopting a cat now who is under 10 years old.”

Tracy Painter, a coordinator with Mid-Pacific Bengal Rescue, knew that Tuffy, about 12 years old, would never get adopted from the local shelter.

“We brought him home planning to foster until we could place him, but he’s just the sweetest old man and he wormed his way into our hearts,” she says. “He is missing one upper left canine, so his lip sticks up in a goofy little grin.”

She calls him an all-around love bug. Tuffy gets along famously with dogs, cats, strangers — and even birds that Painter rehabs.

---

**CHECK OUT THESE SPECIAL ADOPTION PROGRAMS**

November is Adopt a Senior Pet Month sponsored by PetFinder.com. The Web site outlines all the benefits of adopting a senior pet. People can search for cats by size, gender and age, even color. As of the latest report, PetFinder.com had 75,752 adoptable cats in the database, with 2,730 designated as seniors.

Year-round programs sponsored by San Francisco SPCA promote the Pets & Seniors Program or Friendship Adoption Program. The SPCA waives adoption fees for anyone 62 years old or older interested in adopting an animal that is three years old or older. The program began over eight years ago. Last year, 43 Friendship Adoptions took place.

May is Older American’s Month and The Humane Society of the United States partners with this promotion to highlight the health benefits of pets for the elderly. Seniors are encouraged to consider adopting an older adult animal. Additional information on pets, animal-friendly rental housing, shelters in your area and related topics can be found at www.hsus.org/petsforhealth.

June is designated as Adopt-A-Shelter-Cat Month and sponsored by the ASPCA. The www.aspca.org Web site offers free cat behavior material, including introducing newly-adopted cats to cats who currently live in your home.

— Amy Shojai