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What Is a Pit Bull?

There's a great deal of confusion associated with the label "pit bull." This isn't surprising because the term doesn't describe a single breed of dog. Depending on whom you ask, it can refer to just a couple of breeds or to as many as five—and all mixes of these breeds. The most narrow and perhaps most accurate definition of the term "pit bull" refers to just two breeds: the American Pit Bull Terrier (APBT) and the American Staffordshire Terrier (AmStaff). Some people include the Bull Terrier, the Staffordshire Bull Terrier and the American Bulldog in this group because these breeds share similar head shapes and body types. However, they are distinct from the APBT and the AmStaff.



Because of the vagueness of the "pit bull" label, many people may have trouble recognizing a pit bull when they see one. Multiple breeds are commonly mistaken for pit bulls, including the Boxer, the Presa Canario, the Cane Corso, the Dogo Argentino, the Tosa Inu, the Bullmastiff, the Dogue de Bordeaux, the Alapaha Blue Blood Bulldog and the Olde English Bulldogge. Think you can accurately identify a pit bull? Test yourself by following this link: http://www.understand-a-bull.com/Findthebull/findpitbull_v3.html (http://www.understand-a-bull.com/Findthebull/findpitbull_v3.html).

The Pit Bull's History

Origins

The pit bull's ancestors hail from England and were brought to North America by English immigrants. These descendants were bred from the bulldog, which some breed historians believe originally served as a "gripping dog" for hunters of large game. (The term "bulldog" does not refer to the American Kennel Club's English Bulldog. This more recently developed breed serves as a loyal companion rather than a working dog.) Later, bulldogs were likely used as butcher's dogs and helped control large livestock. Eventually, these dogs were bred to participate in an inhumane blood sport called "baiting." Spectators found it highly entertaining to watch bulldogs pitted against bulls, bears and other large animals. During these violent events, one or more dogs were expected to attack another animal, biting it around the face and head. The dogs usually maintained their grip until the animal became exhausted from fighting and loss of blood. After animal baiting was banned in the early 1800s, people began pitting dogs against each other, and the cruel sport of dog fighting was born. As it grew in popularity, enthusiasts developed a lighter, more agile dog for the fighting ring. Some people bred their bulldogs with black and tan terriers, creating dogs who were only 25 to 30 pounds. Others may have simply selected smaller bulldogs for breeding purposes. These dogs were the forebears of the present-day pit bull.

The Pit Bull Today

Most experts agree that today's pit bull is a short-coated dog characterized by a wide skull, powerful jaws and a muscular, stocky body. But there is great variation in the pit bull's appearance. Typically 35 to 65 pounds, some weigh as little as 25 pounds, while others tip the scales at 80 pounds or more. Some have bulkier frames and colossal skulls; others have leaner, more muscular bodies. All are strong and athletic. With their impressive stamina and staunch work ethic, pit bulls enjoy a variety of activities, including agility, disc dog competitions, flyball, freestyle and competition obedience. They often excel in weight-pulling contests and schutzhund. Some pit bulls work cattle in herding trials, and some still function as hunting dogs.

The Pit Bull Temperament

Dog breeds are characterized by certain behavioral traits. Each breed was developed to perform a specific job, whether it be hunting rabbits, retrieving downed birds, herding livestock or sitting on people's laps. When developing a breed, breeders select only those dogs who perform their job best to produce the next generation.

Physical abilities and behavior are both important facets of any breed. A well-bred dog should have both the physical attributes necessary to perform his job and the behavioral tendencies needed to learn it. It's not surprising that individuals of a specific breed tend to look and behave somewhat similarly. However,

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it's important to realize that even though a breed may be characterized by certain behaviors, individuals of the same breed can vary tremendously. Some dogs are courageous, while others are timid. Some dogs are tenacious, while others are easygoing. Some dogs are sociable, while others are aloof. Like people, all dogs have unique personalities.

The Influence of a Fighting History

When two dogs fight, the conflict is usually ritualized. The objective is for one dog to win the disagreement with little or no bloodshed. The participants try to intimidate each other by engaging in plenty of dramatic-looking behavior, which may include posturing, circling, growling, showing teeth and snarling. Bites delivered during a fight are typically inhibited because the point is to cause pain but not necessarily to inflict serious injuries. Pit bulls have been bred to behave differently during a fight. They may not give warning before becoming aggressive, and they're less likely to back down when clashing with an opponent. When provoked, they may become aggressive more readily than another breed might. Sometimes they don't inhibit their bites, so they may cause injury more often than other dogs.

Should You Keep a Pit Bull Away from Other Dogs?

Pit bulls were genetically selected for their fighting ability. What does this mean? It doesn't mean that they can't be around other dogs, that they're unpredictably aggressive or that they will always fight to the death. These are all common myths about pit bulls. It does mean that they may be easily encouraged to fight with other dogs.

The best way to prevent the development of aggressive behavior toward other dogs is to focus on early socialization. To learn how to interact, play and communicate with members of their own species, dogs of all breeds need to be well socialized during puppyhood. If a puppy has many good experiences with other dogs, any future unpleasant experiences will have less of an impact on him. Suppose a puppy is playing with another dog and the play escalates into a fight. This is relatively normal, and most well-socialized puppies will still want to play with other dogs afterward. If, on the other hand, the puppy has had very few experiences with other dogs, a spat may make a bigger impression on him. He may decide that he doesn't like other dogs, and that feeling may contribute to fearful or aggressive responses to them when he matures.

Pit bull puppies may need even more socialization than other breeds. Numerous positive social experiences can teach a pit bull puppy to enjoy the company of other dogs. Frequent social interaction may also help pit bull puppies modify their natural play style, which is often more rough-and-tumble than that of other breeds. However, because of pit bulls' natural tendencies, a little squabble between friends can turn into a serious fight, even if a pit bull has been very well socialized. And, after experiencing a fight or two, a pit bull may become testy with unfamiliar dogs in general. Some pit bulls, like individuals of many breeds, only remain friendly with dogs they meet during puppyhood—which is another great reason to make sure your pit bull puppy makes plenty of friends.

Are Pit Bulls Dangerous to People?

Despite the fact that pit bulls were bred to fight with each other, early breeders took pride in producing dogs that were trustworthy and friendly to people. Handlers bathed their opponent's dog before a match, stood in the pits with the battling dogs and often pulled them apart to end a fight. Any dog who behaved aggressively toward a person was culled, or killed, to avoid passing on such an undesirable trait. Pit bulls typically lived in their owner's homes, where they earned the nickname "nursemaid's dog" because they were so reliable with young children. In fact, "Pete the Pup," the children's friend from the old TV series "Our Gang," was a pit bull.

Why the Bad Rap?

Sadly, the pit bull has acquired a reputation as an unpredictable and dangerous menace. His intimidating appearance has made him attractive to people looking for a macho status symbol, and this popularity has encouraged unscrupulous breeders to produce puppies without maintaining the pit bull's typical good nature with people. To make matters worse, irresponsible owners interested in presenting a tough image often encourage their pit bulls to behave aggressively. If a pit bull does bite, he's far more likely to inflict serious injuries than most other breeds, simply because of his size and strength. A pit bull bite is also far more likely to draw media attention. Many dogs of other breeds bite people, but these incidents almost always go unreported. They're just not exciting enough fodder for television and print.

Despite this bad rap, a well-bred, well-socialized and well-trained pit bull is one of the most delightful, intelligent and gentle dogs imaginable. It is truly a shame that the media continues to portray such a warped image of this beautiful, loyal and affectionate breed. Pit bulls once enjoyed a wonderful reputation. Some of the most famous dogs in American history were pit bulls. A pit bull named Stubby, a decorated hero during World War One, earned several medals and was even honored at the White House. During duty, he warned soldiers of gas attacks, found wounded men in need of help and listened for oncoming artillery rounds. Pit bulls have been featured in well-known advertising campaigns for companies such as Levis, Buster Brown Shoes and Wells Fargo. The image of a pit bull, which was considered a symbol of unflinching bravery and reliability, represented the United States on recruiting and propaganda posters during World War One. Many famous figures, including Helen Keller, President Theodore Roosevelt, General George Patton, President Woodrow Wilson, Fred Astaire and Humphrey Bogart, shared their lives and homes with pit bulls.

Modern pit bulls can still be ambassadors for their breed. Some are registered therapy dogs and spend time visiting hospitals and nursing homes. Some work in search-and-rescue. Tahoe, Cheyenne and Dakota, three search-and-rescue pit bulls from Sacramento, California, worked tirelessly at the World Trade Center during the aftermath of 9/11. Others, like Popsicle, an accomplished U.S. customs dog, work in narcotics and explosives detection. Still others serve as protection or sentry dogs for the police. The majority are cherished family members. Pit bulls become very attached to their people, and most love nothing better than cuddling on the couch or sleeping in bed with their pet parents (preferably under the covers!)

Pit Bull Myths

There are numerous myths circulating about pit bulls, some invented by people who are afraid of the breed and others disseminated by well-meaning pit bull advocates. A few of the most common myths follow:

- "Pit bulls have locking jaws!" This is patently false. There is nothing unique about the anatomy of pit bull jaws. They do not "lock." The pit bull's fighting style, like that of other terriers, usually involves grabbing and shaking. Perhaps because of their hunting and bull-baiting history, some pit bulls also have a tendency to grab and hold on with determination. This does not mean that they can't or won't let go of another dog once they bite. However, because they're powerful dogs, pit bulls do have strong jaw muscles. Like all dog parents, pit bull parents should know how to break up a dog fight. Please see our article on [Breaking up a Dog Fight](#) to learn more about this important topic.
- "If a pit bull bites another dog, he's going to start biting people next." Research confirms that dog-aggressive dogs are no more likely to direct aggression toward people than dogs who aren't aggressive to other dogs. In fact, some of the best fighting dogs are the most trustworthy with



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- people.
- “All pit bulls are gentle angels who can be left unsupervised with dogs of any size, cats and other animals.” Pit bulls aren’t vicious monsters—but they are dogs who have been bred to fight with other dogs. While some pit bulls are indeed very easygoing, others should not be left alone with other dogs, cats or other pets. Pit bulls are strong, determined dogs. It might not be a pit bull who starts a disagreement, but he may be the one to finish it.
- “The dog park is a great place to socialize pit bulls.” This statement is sometimes true. Some pit bulls visit dog parks on a daily basis to frolic happily with many dog friends. For others, however, the dog park isn’t an appropriate place to play. This raises quite a dilemma for some urban pit bull parents. Pit bulls are high-energy dogs and need lots of exercise, but some just aren’t good candidates for the dog park. Because they’re very muscular and easily excited, friendly pit bulls can sometimes overwhelm and even injure their playmates during rough games. And pit bulls may become aggressive more quickly when exposed to the hectic, high-octane energy of a dog park environment. If there’s a squabble, a pit bull may be one of the first dogs to jump into the fray. For these reasons, many responsible pit bull parents find other ways to exercise their dogs. (See Pit Bull Needs, below, for tips on exercising your pit bull.)

Is a Pit Bull Right for You?

Although many are self-appointed lap dogs, pit bulls, like most terriers, can be extremely tenacious and energetic, too. They’re easily excited and, when in an agitated state, they may have little control over their behavior if they haven’t been taught to inhibit their impulses. This trait has given pit bulls a reputation for being “mouthy”—they tend to bite harder in play than other breeds. They are also quite stoic and can be insensitive to pain. These characteristics make the pit bull a sturdy, enthusiastic working dog and a fun-loving companion, but they can also make this breed a handful for some pet parents. Pit bulls aren’t for everyone.

Pit Bull Needs

All pets need parents who are dedicated to meeting their behavioral and medical needs. But pit bulls require a degree of special treatment. They’re simply a lot of dog. Always ready to go, they work hard and they play hard. They’re powerful chewers, they’re energetic athletes, and their active minds need plenty of exercise, too. If you think a pit bull might be the right dog for you, read on to learn about what he’ll need in life. Consider the following needs carefully before committing to pit bull ownership.

- Thorough socialization. A young pit bull needs plenty of early socialization to people, dogs and other animals, beginning as young as seven weeks of age and continuing throughout adulthood. Providing daily socialization opportunities with new people and animals is most important during the sensitive developmental period that takes place between 7 and 16 weeks of age.
- Gentle, consistent training. All pit bull puppies and adults need good training. Their pet parents should use methods based on positive reinforcement and consistent, fair rules. Although pit bulls are tough on the outside, they’re often extremely sensitive dogs, and harsh training techniques are neither appropriate nor necessary. Puppy Kindergarten is crucial for young pit bulls. After puppyhood, your pit bull will need continued gentle guidance throughout his life. Mature pit bulls should master basic obedience skills at the very least. If possible, pit bull parents should progress through intermediate and advanced obedience as well. Earning an AKC Canine Good Citizen (CGC) certificate is an excellent way to ensure that your pit bull is a polite ambassador for his breed. Please follow this link to learn more about the CGC designation: <http://www.akc.org/events/cqc/index.cfm> (<http://www.akc.org/events/cqc/index.cfm>). To learn more about how to properly train your pit bull, please see our articles on [Training Your Dog](http://www.aspc.org/pet-care/virtual-pet-behaviorist/dog-behavior/training-your-dog) (<http://www.aspc.org/pet-care/virtual-pet-behaviorist/dog-behavior/training-your-dog>), [Clicker Training Your Pet](http://www.aspc.org/pet-care/virtual-pet-behaviorist/clicker-training-your-pet) (<http://www.aspc.org/pet-care/virtual-pet-behaviorist/clicker-training-your-pet>), [Teaching Your Dog to Sit](http://www.aspc.org/pet-care/virtual-pet-behaviorist/dog-behavior/teaching-your-dog-sit) (<http://www.aspc.org/pet-care/virtual-pet-behaviorist/dog-behavior/teaching-your-dog-sit>), [Teaching Your Dog to Lie Down](http://www.aspc.org/pet-care/virtual-pet-behaviorist/dog-behavior/teaching-your-dog-lie-down) (<http://www.aspc.org/pet-care/virtual-pet-behaviorist/dog-behavior/teaching-your-dog-lie-down>), [Teaching Your Dog to Stay](http://www.aspc.org/pet-care/virtual-pet-behaviorist/dog-behavior/teaching-your-dog-stay) (<http://www.aspc.org/pet-care/virtual-pet-behaviorist/dog-behavior/teaching-your-dog-stay>), [Teaching Your Dog to “Leave It.”](http://www.aspc.org/pet-care/virtual-pet-behaviorist/dog-behavior/teaching-your-dog-leave-it) (<http://www.aspc.org/pet-care/virtual-pet-behaviorist/dog-behavior/teaching-your-dog-leave-it>) [Teaching Your Dog Not to Jump Up on People](http://www.aspc.org/pet-care/virtual-pet-behaviorist/dog-behavior/teaching-your-dog-not-to-jump-up-on-people) (<http://www.aspc.org/pet-care/virtual-pet-behaviorist/dog-behavior/teaching-your-dog-not-to-jump-up-on-people>), [Teaching Your Dog to Come When Called](http://www.aspc.org/pet-care/virtual-pet-behaviorist/dog-behavior/teaching-your-dog-come-when-called) (<http://www.aspc.org/pet-care/virtual-pet-behaviorist/dog-behavior/teaching-your-dog-come-when-called>), [Teaching Your Dog Not to Pull on Leash](http://www.aspc.org/pet-care/virtual-pet-behaviorist/dog-behavior/teaching-your-dog-not-to-pull-on-leash) (<http://www.aspc.org/pet-care/virtual-pet-behaviorist/dog-behavior/teaching-your-dog-not-to-pull-on-leash>), [Teaching Your Dog to Settle](http://www.aspc.org/pet-care/virtual-pet-behaviorist/dog-behavior/teaching-your-dog-settle) (<http://www.aspc.org/pet-care/virtual-pet-behaviorist/dog-behavior/teaching-your-dog-settle>), [Teaching Your Dog to Wait at Doors](http://www.aspc.org/pet-care/virtual-pet-behaviorist/dog-behavior/teaching-your-dog-wait-at-doors) (<http://www.aspc.org/pet-care/virtual-pet-behaviorist/dog-behavior/teaching-your-dog-wait-at-doors>) and [Impulse Control Training and Games for Dogs](http://www.aspc.org/pet-care/virtual-pet-behaviorist/dog-behavior/impulse-control-training-and-games-dogs) (<http://www.aspc.org/pet-care/virtual-pet-behaviorist/dog-behavior/impulse-control-training-and-games-dogs>).
- Lots of exercise for the body. Because they’re athletic, high-energy dogs, pit bulls need daily aerobic exercise. If you’re a runner, an avid hiker, a Frisbee® enthusiast or a cyclist, a pit bull might be the ideal companion for you! Some pit bull parents arrange play dates with dogs who get along with theirs. Others run, cycle or use inline skates with their dogs. A rousing game of fetch or tug can also go a long way in tiring out a pit bull. For more information about ways to help your pit bull expend excess energy, please see our articles on [Teaching Your Dog to Play Fetch](http://www.aspc.org/pet-care/virtual-pet-behaviorist/dog-behavior/teaching-your-dog-play-fetch) (<http://www.aspc.org/pet-care/virtual-pet-behaviorist/dog-behavior/teaching-your-dog-play-fetch>), [Teaching Your Dog to Play Tug-of-War](http://www.aspc.org/pet-care/virtual-pet-behaviorist/dog-behavior/teaching-your-dog-play-tug-of-war) (<http://www.aspc.org/pet-care/virtual-pet-behaviorist/dog-behavior/teaching-your-dog-play-tug-of-war>) and [Exercise for Dogs](http://www.aspc.org/pet-care/virtual-pet-behaviorist/dog-behavior/exercise-dogs) (<http://www.aspc.org/pet-care/virtual-pet-behaviorist/dog-behavior/exercise-dogs>).
- Lots of exercise for the brain. Mental workouts are also a must. They can be almost as tiring as physical exercise! You can stimulate your pit bull’s mind by providing food-puzzle toys, things to chew and other types of enrichment. Giving your pit bull entertaining “jobs” to do can help keep him out of trouble when he’s home alone, too. Please see our article on [Enriching Your Dog’s Life](http://www.aspc.org/pet-care/virtual-pet-behaviorist/dog-behavior/enriching-your-dogs-life) (<http://www.aspc.org/pet-care/virtual-pet-behaviorist/dog-behavior/enriching-your-dogs-life>) to learn more.
- Neutering or spaying. Pit bulls should be neutered or spayed. In addition to the health and behavioral benefits for your dog, neutering or spaying will help reduce the number of unwanted pit bulls who end up in shelters all over the country.

Making Your Pit Bull an Ambassador

If you bring a pit bull into your life, you’re taking on a big responsibility. Many people have never met a pit bull. Realize that these people, especially those who have heard media reports proclaiming the pit bull a dangerous animal, might be afraid of your dog. Your dog can either fuel pit bull myths or become an ambassador for his breed. It’s all up to you and the way you handle him.

As a responsible pit bull parent, you have the power to educate the public and change people’s minds about this much maligned breed. The best way to accomplish this is to have a well-controlled, well-socialized, well-behaved dog at your side. It’s hard for people to make the argument that your dog is vicious when they’re faced with a peaceful, gentle pet in an obedient heel or down-stay at your feet. Teaching your pit bull a few entertaining tricks, such as high five and roll over, can make him seem less

intimidating, too. It's also a good idea to thoroughly educate yourself about pit bull history and common breed characteristics. If you're knowledgeable about the breed, you can help people understand what great dogs pit bulls can be. Please see the recommended resources below to learn where to find accurate information.

Breed-Specific Legislation (BSL) and Other Limitations

BSL: Outdated but Still Around

Pit bulls and pit bull mixes are banned in certain American cities and in some foreign countries. The ASPCA, other non-profit organizations and pit bull advocates work hard to educate lawmakers about the futility of breed-specific legislation. Although the effectiveness of this type of legislation continues to be hotly debated, recent scientific studies comparing bites to humans before and after BSL have shown that the rates remained the same after legislation was enacted.

There are several reasons why banning certain breeds is not likely to be effective. First, the breeds most often involved in bite injuries and fatalities change from year to year and from one area of the country to another, depending on the popularity of different breeds. Although genetics do play a role in determining whether a dog will bite, other factors—such as whether the animal is well socialized, supervised, humanely trained and safely confined—play much greater roles. Second, correct breed identification by bystanders, pet owners, police, medical workers and animal control personnel is notoriously unreliable. It becomes virtually impossible with mixed breeds. Third, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), which conducted a 20-year study that listed the breeds involved in fatal attacks, there's currently no accurate way to identify the total number of dogs of a particular breed and, consequently, there's no measure to determine which breeds are more likely to bite or kill. In fact, the CDC says its own 20-year study is not an appropriate tool for making breed-specific policies or legislative decisions. Instead, the organization advocates "dangerous dog" laws that focus on individual dogs of any breed who show aggressive behavior.

If you're thinking about adopting a pit bull, consider the potential downside of BSL before making a commitment. What if you want to move to a city or county that doesn't allow the breed? (If you're already a pit bull parent and you're moving to a different location, it's wise to make sure that you'll be able to keep your dog. Contact local authorities well in advance so that you can make informed decisions and necessary arrangements.)

Other Challenges to Consider

Other cons to pit bull parenthood include housing and insurance limitations. Some landlords won't allow pit bulls, and some insurance agencies refuse to offer pit bull parents coverage. If you have a pit bull and you're trying to find a place to live, it helps to make your dog his own "resume." Include a charming photo, as well as a list of any obedience classes he has taken. Many landlords are impressed by a Canine Good Citizen certificate (mentioned above). If you can show a worried landlord that you're a responsible pet parent and your pit bull is a friendly, well-behaved dog, the landlord may alter his or her rules.

Summing It All Up

Pit bulls aren't all bad. They're not ferocious beasts to be feared and reviled. Pit bulls aren't all good either. They have teeth and the potential to use them, just like any other dog. Their powerful bodies and persistent nature make them formidable animals. As such, they should be treated with care and respect. They require a great deal of exercise, proper training and responsible management. But if you're willing to devote the time and effort necessary, befriending a pit bull can be immensely rewarding. Along with their strength and spirit comes an inspiring zest for life and an ardent affinity for people. As any committed pit bull parent will tell you, beneath the brawn, most are faithful, fun-loving, affectionate companions. So before you make up your mind about them, get to know a few pit bulls. You may be surprised.

Recommended Reading and Web Sites

Great Books

- The Ultimate American Pit Bull Terrier by Jacqueline O'Neil (IDG Books Worldwide)
- The Pit Bull Placebo by Karen Delise (Anubis Publishing)

Useful Web Sites

- www.pbrc.net (/web/20140704085642/http://www.pbrc.net/): Pit Bull Rescue Central is a virtual shelter and educational resource for pit bull parents, foster parents and breed enthusiasts.
- www.badrap.org (/web/20140704085642/http://www.badrap.org/): This site was created by a group called BAD RAP (Bay Area Doglovers Responsible About Pit Bulls). It offers breed-related information, lists pros and cons of Pit Bull parenting and provides links for those interested in adopting Pit Bulls.

Related Links

[Road Trips with Your Dog](http://www.aspc.org/pet-care/virtual-pet-behaviorist/dog-behavior/road-trips-your-dog) (/web/20140704085642/http://www.aspc.org/pet-care/virtual-pet-behaviorist/dog-behavior/road-trips-your-dog)

Vacations are more fun when you share them with your dog! Before you hit the road, read some of our useful tips for ensuring your dog's safety in all aspects of your road trip.

[Re-homing Your Dog](http://www.aspc.org/pet-care/virtual-pet-behaviorist/dog-behavior/re-homing-your-dog) (/web/20140704085642/http://www.aspc.org/pet-care/virtual-pet-behaviorist/dog-behavior/re-homing-your-dog)

While dogs are typically seen as part of the family, there are circumstances that lead pet parents to consider re-homing their dogs. If financial reasons, lifestyle changes or pet behavior problems have led you to re-home your dog, learn how to make the transition as easy as possible for your dog.

[Living with Small Dogs](http://www.aspc.org/pet-care/virtual-pet-behaviorist/dog-behavior/living-small-dogs) (/web/20140704085642/http://www.aspc.org/pet-care/virtual-pet-behaviorist/dog-behavior/living-small-dogs)

To their fans, small dogs are adorable, compact, cuddly, transportable, economical pets with winsome faces and lots of personality. Other people disagree. Are little dogs really so different from big dogs? Find out.

[Moving with Your Pet](http://www.aspc.org/pet-care/virtual-pet-behaviorist/moving-your-pet) (/web/20140704085642/http://www.aspc.org/pet-care/virtual-pet-behaviorist/moving-your-pet)

Moving may be one of the most stressful life events you'll ever undertake. However, you might not realize how stressful moving can be for your pets, too. Consider your dogs and cats when choosing your dream home and neighborhood, and learn more about how to make the transition as easy as possible.

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