

BEFORE You get a Pet

Rea Cord, Director, Humane Society of Elmore County

How many pets are too many pets? Answers to this question will invariably depend on your personal view of animals in general, but there are considerations that anyone should think about before they take on even one pet. There are three main concerns an owner should take into account before adding any pet whether it is a dog, cat, horse, guinea pig, bird, etc and those are cost, time & space.

Cost – too often a potential owner only looks at the purchase (adoption) price of a pet but there are far more costs involved than the initial purchase price. Every pet requires food but some pets have specialized diet requirements that may cost more than originally planned for. Most dogs and cats do fine on commercial foods, but what happens if your pet has a medical problem requiring a prescription diet or medicines? And even standard pet food prices have increased significantly since consumers want higher quality foods for their pets. An aging horse may require more expensive Senior Feed and supplements to keep it healthy. Many of the larger birds such as parrots require fresh fruits and vegetables which could put a crimp in a family's grocery bill. Today's veterinarians have tremendous capabilities, but many of these technologies and treatments can be fairly expensive though payment options often do exist. The reality is that many pets are turned into shelters by their owners because the owner can no longer afford their pet(s).

Time – be honest with yourself as to the amount of time you have to give your pet a good quality of life. Dogs thrive on being with us! The dog in a pen at the far end of the yard that sees its owner ten minutes a day when it is fed and watered is not a pet, but just a resident animal. Our dogs and cats love to be with us – that is why they are in over 60% of U.S. households. So is it fair to get a puppy only to leave it alone in the backyard twenty plus hours/day? Those are the pups turned into shelters at around a year old because they are digging and chewing and have become unmanageable since they have grown up alone and are simply bored and lonely. And what about the time it takes to muck out a horse's stall, or clean the guinea pig's cage, or groom the long-haired cat? Be honest with yourself when evaluating a potential pet to make sure you do have the time that animal will require keeping it healthy and happy. As reasons for surrendering pets, not having enough time follows closely behind not being able to afford the pet.

Space – we need to remember that animals have different physiological needs than ours. A Yorkie's exercise needs can likely be met with a good walk and playtime in a small apartment, but a highly energetic & intelligent breed like a Border Collie not only needs a LOT of physical exercise, but mental activity as well. Many hunting breeds like hounds & retrievers were bred to cover a lot of territory for many hours, so life in small back yard may result in a dog that becomes very destructive as it tries to burn all the energy it has but cannot use. Indoor only cats can be quite happy but still need enough space to give them distance from each other if it is a multiple cat home. What about horses? Horses are range animals and when they are able to graze freely on acreage tend to be healthier and easier to keep, as well as potentially costing less to feed. A horse in a small corral with no grazing cannot exercise adequately and costs much more to maintain since the owner must supplement it with feed and hay at all times. Probably most Guinea Pigs live in cages that are far too small for them. The optimal space for one or two Guinea Pigs is around 7.5 square feet so do you have space for that?

Simple numbers do not answer the question of how many pets are too many. The answer lies in how you answer each of the above questions. If you can afford to provide appropriate care, have the time to give all your pets the care and attention they need, and have the space so that your pets can live a good quality of life dependent on their species and breed characteristics, then that answer may be one, or four, or twenty or more. What should be foremost in any pet owner's mind is the quality of life for the pet – each and every one of them.