

As soon as you enter an animal shelter, the temptation to adopt will be very great. That's why it's so important to consider whether bringing an animal into your life is right for you before any adorable faces find their way into your heart.

Far too many animals in this country are initially loved and then neglected or abandoned over time because owners decide -- too late -- that caring for pets is more responsibility than they actually want.

The truth is, adopting a companion animal is a big step -- one that will affect your lifestyle for many years. Have you thought about how a pet will be completely dependent on you for his or her entire life? What will happen if you decide to move? And have you considered whether your lifestyle and personality would make you a better dog owner or cat owner?

### How Long is a Lifetime?

With good care, most dogs can live 12 to 15 years and most cats can live 15 to 20 years, so it is critical that you consider what is likely to be happening in your own life over the next 15 to 20 years -- before you adopt a pet.

- What major changes might happen to you during a pet's lifetime? Marriage? Children? New job? Long-distance move? Are you willing to continue spending the time, energy and money to care for your pet when taking on new responsibilities like those?
- What will you do if your spouse or child is allergic to or cannot get along with your pet?
- If you're getting a pet for children you have now, are you willing to take on the responsibility of caring for this pet when your children grow up, lose interest or move away?
- Have you previously owned a pet that died prematurely due to a preventable accident or illness, such as being hit by a car or suffering from heartworm disease? If so, what will you do differently with a new pet to prevent the same thing from happening again?

