

What's in a [Pet's] Name?

Tips to Keep in Mind When Naming Your Pet

By Andrea Vardaro Tucker, ELS

My neighbor has a fairly unique name: Tisha. But when she was searching for a pet to adopt, she stumbled upon a dog also named Tisha. Canine Tisha ended up finding another home, and my neighbor and her family adopted a dog named Millie, which kept things simple. But human Tisha always wondered what would have happened if she had adopted her canine namesake.

This past summer, actor Dennis Quaid did just that, rescuing a cat named Dennis Quaid.

Whether you're considering renaming an adopted pet or choosing a name for your brand-new puppy or kitten, here are some tips for selecting a pet-perfect moniker.

Can you rename an adopted pet?

People's identities are tied up in their names, so renaming seems like a big deal. Not so for our pets, according to veterinarian and board-certified veterinary behaviorist Dr. Christopher Pachel, who owns the Animal Behavior Clinic in Portland, Oregon. For pets, he says, names are "more of a label or attention-getter."

Most pets are already used to responding to multiple "names." My dog, for instance, is just as likely to answer to "pretty girl," "baby dog," and "Col-ar Bear" as to her given name, Cole.

As easily as pets pick up their nicknames, they can learn a new name. And learning a new name would cause less confusion for most pets than hearing their pet parents call out the same name or even



a similar-sounding name for other members of the household. (See the sidebar for advice on renaming a pet.)

"It comes back to clarity," Dr. Pachel explains.

Is renaming an older pet too confusing?

Dr. Pachel says renaming an older pet is less about age itself than how we go about the process of changing the pet's name. Most dogs and cats, regardless of age, will pick up on the positive reinforcement you give when they respond to a new name.

That said, change can be harder for older pets, and seniors sometimes have a harder time relearning things. In this case, if you have 2 pets with names that could be confused, permanently changing a preexisting pet's name to one of

her nicknames might be easier than introducing a completely different name to a newly adopted older pet.

What are some of the most purr-fect, pup-ular names?

Pet parents get inspiration from current events, celebrities, and even food and beverages for their pets' names. But mostly, they stick to human names. One pet name report* turned up the following most popular pet names of 2019 (see the chart on the next page).

What naming conventions do pets best respond to?

As seen in many of the most popular pet names, some basics work well:

- **Pick a name that's easy to say.** Think 1 or 2 syllables with an "a" or "e" sound at the end.
- **Add a nickname** if your pet's full name is long or hard to say.

- **Use unique sounds** that easily distinguish the name from commands and other pets' and human family members' names.
- **Avoid negative associations or sounds** that might startle or scare your pet.

"I do find that individual animals seem to respond differently to different phonetic sounds," says Dr. Pachel. Some dogs and cats, for instance, respond well to harder consonants, but those percussive sounds might startle another pet—especially if you're adopting one with an unknown history who might associate harsh sounds with a past trauma.

"Audition options by watching the dog or cat's body language," Dr. Pachel recommends. You don't need to commit to a name right away. Take some time to see what types of sounds your pet responds to best.

Are there special considerations for naming special needs pets?

Remember that, for pets, their name mainly serves to alert them to listen. So don't worry that your special needs pet might not "know" her name. Instead, focus on *function*—finding a cue that alerts your pet that "this pertains to you," Dr. Pachel says. For example, if your pet is hearing impaired, a double tap on the floor or a flash of light might be what you use to get her attention, regardless of the name you call her. If you have more than one pet, use different signals to distinguish them from each other.

"Customize that attention-getter based on whatever [your pet's] limitations might be," Dr. Pachel says.

The bottom line?

If your pet's name isn't working, don't stress. You can almost always change it to something you both will love.

HealthyPet copy editor *Andrea Vardaro Tucker* and her husband named their now-11-year-old Westie after *Cole Hamels*, a pitcher for the 2008 World Series-winning Philadelphia Phillies. This followed the tradition of Andrea's parents naming her childhood dog "Tugger" after Phillies pitcher *Tug McGraw*, who helped the team win the 1980 World Series.



Most Popular Pet Names of 2019*

Ranking	Female Dogs	Male Dogs	Female Cats	Male Cats
1	Bella	Max	Luna	Oliver
2	Luna	Charlie	Bella	Leo
3	Lucy	Cooper	Lily	Milo
4	Daisy	Buddy	Lucy	Charlie
5	Lily	Rocky	Kitty	Max
6	Zoe	Milo	Callie	Jack
7	Lola	Jack	Nala	Simba
8	Molly	Bear	Zoe	Loki
9	Sadie	Duke	Chloe	Oscar
10	Bailey	Teddy	Sophie	Jasper

*The Dog People: The 100 most popular male and female dog names of 2019. rover.com/blog/dog-names; 100 top male and female cat names of 2019. rover.com/blog/best-cat-names. Both accessed September 16, 2020.

How to Rename a Pet

Take this same approach for renaming either a canine or feline companion:

1. **Work one-on-one with the pet whose name you're changing to teach her the word that represents her new name.**
2. **Say the new name while presenting a reward so your pet associates her new name with something positive.**
3. **Don't say the new name for any other reason.**
4. **Repeat these steps several times a day (this could take anywhere from a couple of sessions to a few weeks).**
5. **If another pet shares that new pet's former name, your pre-existing pet can join the training sessions once your newer pet has mastered her new name.**