

The Top Eight Concerns of Rental Managers and How to Address Them

1. What about damage to the unit?

Most managers and rental home owners have this concern. You have several options for protecting your property, depending on your local laws.

First, state in the lease agreement that residents are liable for all damages caused by their pet(s). Require an additional refundable security deposit specifically to cover any pet-related damage. If the law allows, don't designate it as a "pet deposit," but instead as part of the security deposit, which can be applied to any and all damages, regardless of the cause.

Second, just as you do with your regular lease agreement, discuss each pet policy with the resident at the time the agreement is signed—and stress compliance. At the end of a resident's tenancy, inspect the unit or home with the resident before he or she leaves. If there is any damage, note it in writing and be sure that both you and the resident sign off on it. Take photographs for documentation.

2. What about mandating that cats be declawed?

Cats may scratch some furnishings and drapes, but it is rare for cats to scratch other surfaces in an apartment or rental home. What's more, it is easy to use positive training techniques to direct this natural behavior to appropriate objects, such as a scratching post. If you manage a furnished property, choose furnishings with fabrics that are less likely to appeal to cats; smooth, tightly woven fabrics are generally less appealing to cats than rougher fabrics. Because removing claws involves the amputation of bones as well as claws, The Humane Society of the United States opposes declawing when it is done solely for the convenience of caregivers or rental managers.

3. What about odors caused by pets?

Responsible pet owners understand the importance of maintaining a clean and safe environment for their pets. They empty their cat's litter box regularly, clean up any accidents that occur when an animal is ill or old, and pick up after their dog. Requiring that pets be sterilized will make them less likely to urinate as a form of marking their territory, and will remove the pungent-smelling urine of an unneutered animal.

If you manage a large housing community, you may want to designate a separate washer and dryer so that non-pet-owning residents do not have to launder their belongings in machines used for pet bedding and toys.

4. What about barking?

Unwanted barking can be a frustrating problem that results in an unhappy pet owner, unhappy neighbors, and an unhappy dog. A responsible owner doesn't let her dog's barking become a nuisance. With training, barking problems can be solved. But in the event a dog continues to bark, a pet addendum to the lease should protect your interests, and those of resident neighbors, by spelling out what steps can be taken to rectify the problem. These steps also can apply to noisy cats and birds.

5. What about pet waste disposal?

Your rental property's pet policies should require that all cats and dogs be kept under the control of their owners at all times. Cats should be kept indoors where they can use a litter box. Cat owners should be instructed to double-bag their cat's waste, and special receptacles should be designated for the waste so that other residents aren't exposed to cat waste in common trash containers. These same waste-disposal guidelines should apply to rabbits, guinea pigs, hamsters, gerbils, ferrets, mice, and rats.

Dog caregivers should be required to pick up after their dogs. Some large rental communities provide designated toileting areas for dogs and may provide disposable dog-waste bags for this purpose.

6. What about fleas?

Responsible pet owners maintain flea-free pets using the many safe and effective products available through veterinarians. When you interview prospective residents with pets, ask them what kind of flea control program they use. A pet addendum to your rental agreement should reserve your right to have the premises professionally treated, at the resident's expense, in the event there is evidence of fleas after the resident has vacated the premises.

7. What about dangerous dogs?

All residents and their pets should be evaluated on an individual basis. Size and breed do not indicate a pet's temperament, and local laws may prohibit you from excluding any animal based on breed alone. Do not permit particular dogs with a known history of dangerous behavior. Require references from former apartment owners, neighbors, veterinarians, and trainers. Because unsterilized dogs are up to three times more likely to bite, require that all dogs be spayed or neutered. A pet addendum to your rental agreement should include an indemnification clause to protect you and your company from any liability in the event a resident's pet causes any injury to a person or damage to personal property. If a resident dog displays dangerous behavior, contact your local animal care and control agency to obtain information about dangerous dog laws in your area.

8. Where can resident managers and rental property owners get help locally?

Your local humane society or animal shelter may be able to provide free information and advice to your pet-owning residents. Contact your local humane society to find out how it can assist you. If you have residents who would like to adopt a pet, require that they inform you before they bring the pet into the community. The animal care professionals can help your residents successfully find pets that suit their lifestyles and living situations.

Information from The Humane Society of the United States: www.humanesociety.org