



Amber 273350: What to Expect

Amber is a graduate of the Behavior Modification Program and needs a special home. Amber is a sensitive but sweet girl who is ready to find her forever home. She may be timid at first, but once she feels safe, her sweet personality shines— savoring tasty Churu treats, sunbathing on her perch by the window, and happily playing with her favorite toys. Amber may never be a social butterfly with everyone she meets, but with patience and time to build trust, she will form a strong, loving bond with her person.

Amber was surrendered to OHS after developing conflict with the male cat in her home. Prior to this, she had lived peacefully with him and had no history of issues between them. The change occurred after the male cat experienced a medical emergency and spent time hospitalized. When he returned home, Amber appeared unable to recognize or accept him and began guarding resources such as food and the litter box from him.

Based on the history provided, Amber may have experienced what is known as non-recognition aggression. This behavior can occur when a cat returns home after a separation—particularly following a veterinary visit or hospitalization—and smells unfamiliar due to clinic odors, contact with other animals, medications, or stress-related pheromones. Because cats rely heavily on scent to identify one another, a returning housemate may be perceived as a stranger, leading to defensive or territorial behavior.

It is important to note that Amber did not display similar concerns with the female cat in the home. In fact, she was often observed cuddling and resting with the female cat, suggesting she was capable of forming positive relationships with other cats. However, given the challenges she experienced with the male cat after his return home, Amber may be happiest and most successful as the only cat in her new home.

When Amber arrived at OHS she displayed fearful, defensive behavior that would present itself as hissing, swatting, lunging, and attempting to bite if we got too close to her. Because of the high stress she was experiencing, the decision was made to place her in our Behavior Modification Program. The environment in the BMOD program is better suited at helping cats feel comfortable in a shelter environment. With the larger kennel space, access to windows, increased enrichment, and dedicated one-on-one time with our team, we were able to help her decompress and learn more about her personality.

Amber was nervous for the first few weeks in the BMOD program and spent most of her time watching us with wide eyes from her cat tower. In the beginning she would growl and hiss when we approached, but we understood this was her way of communicating that she was scared. To help her build confidence and trust, the team focused on a calm, consistent presence—speaking softly to her and simply sitting nearby so she could become comfortable with us at her own pace and pairing these interactions with tasty treats. It didn't take long to discover that Churus are her absolute favorite! Amber began to readily eat the treats we offered her in our presence, and she began to show an avid interest in toys. When we waved the wand toy through the air, we watched her expertly stalk and pounce on it with great delight. By using toys and treats (two things Amber loves) it helped her to understand that only good things happen when people are around.

Although Amber became more comfortable around us, she still struggled when hands approached to pet her and would often growl or hiss if we reached toward her. To help her build positive associations with touch, we introduced a touch tool—an object that acts as an extension of the hand. In Amber’s case, we used a back scratcher.

When we first brought the scratcher near her, she would lean forward to investigate and sniff it. As we gently touched her cheek with it, she relaxed and leaned into the contact, clearly enjoying the interaction. Over time, this helped her gain confidence with physical affection. Before long, Amber was happily accepting petting from hands, leaning in for attention, purring, and offering affectionate headbutts. Today, she has formed bonds with several team members and looks forward to visits, happily spending time with the people she trusts.

What Amber needed most to thrive was a calm environment, along with the patience and time to observe her surroundings and build a sense of safety at her own pace. By using treats and toys, we were able to create positive associations with people, helping her gain confidence and trust. Today, she eagerly looks forward to our visits, happily accepting treats, engaging in play, and enjoying gentle affection. Amber will do best in a quiet home with someone who understands that trust takes time and is willing to provide the patience and support she needs to settle in and feel secure.

Her new family should be prepared for the possibility that she may hide for a few weeks, or even longer, as she adjusts to her new environment. During this time, it’s important to introduce her to new experiences slowly and at her own pace. Amber may hiss, swat, or retreat when she feels overwhelmed or scared, so creating a safe, calm space for her is essential. Set her up in a small, quiet room where she can relax and feel secure, with appropriate hiding spots such as a covered bed or enclosed hideaway. At the same time, avoid hiding places that are completely inaccessible, like tight spaces under heavy furniture, as these can make it difficult to build trust and bond with her. The setup of her initial room will play a major role in how quickly she begins to acclimate. Consider carefully which room in your home would be best. If it’s a bedroom, think about whether she could get under the bed or dresser in a way that limits interaction. If it’s a bathroom or laundry room, consider whether frequent noise and traffic might be overwhelming for her. Choose a space that is quiet, low-traffic, and allows you to interact with her in a gentle, consistent way. This will help her feel safe while still giving you opportunities to build trust. While she is in her hiding spot, use a calm voice and offer positive reinforcement through treats. You can place a small amount of wet food or a treat on a spoon and offer it near her safe space. Over time, repeated gentle interactions like this can help her learn that people are associated with positive experiences, such as food and safety, which will gradually build her confidence and trust.

Here’s how to help Amber during your first months together:

This step is crucial in helping Amber acclimate to her new home. Confine Amber to one cat-proof room in your house. Provide Amber with a litter box, food, water, and a bed. Ensure she cannot get to *inappropriate* hiding spots (under the bed, in a closet, on top of a cabinet, etc.). Instead, provide her with a safe, comfortable hiding place like her cat carrier, a hidey-bed, or a large dog crate covered with a blanket.

Spend time with Amber in her room. Don’t force her out of her hiding spot. Instead, encourage her to come out on her own using happy talk, offering a toy or treats. Once she is using the litter box, eating regularly, and coming out of hiding to interact with you, you can start introducing her to the rest of your home. Start by propping the door open and allowing her to come out on her own. Don’t force it! If you come across something that you can tell Amber is worried about, allow her to hang back or hide if she chooses to do so.

Continue to provide a safe space. Even when Amber has started exploring the rest of the house, give her a safe space that she can retreat to. When she is in her safe space, insist that guests leave her alone and try to ignore her yourself. That way, when she comes out, you can reward her bravery with your attention.

No visitors (at first). Allow Amber time to adjust to your house, routine, and lifestyle before introducing her to new people. When you have visitors over, give Amber the freedom to make the decision to interact (or not!). Ask new people to ignore her – or if Amber seems curious or interested, have the new person toss her treats or offer a favorite toy. We want exciting, good things to come from new people.

Practice crate training. Leave her carrier out all the time, so it's just a part of her normal environment. Add a bed and keep the door securely propped open so she can go in and out on her own, making sure the door won't swing shut and frighten her. You can also clicker train her to run into the carrier on cue. Helping Amber get comfortable with her carrier will make it easier when it's time to visit the vet.

Visiting the vet: Unless it's an emergency, give Amber time to bond to you before taking her to the vet. Vet visits will more than likely be scary, but if she already trusts you, your presence may help her feel more comfortable.

Patience will come in handy for you. Amber is a cat that needs an understanding owner who has the time and desire to allow her to adapt in her own time. She may never be a social butterfly, and that's okay! Getting to know her and watching her come out of her shell will be extremely rewarding. Celebrate those small victories.

We're here to help!

We want Amber to be successful in her new home. We are available to answer questions via phone and email. Call the Behavior helpline at (503)416-2983 or email the BMOD Cat trainers at bmodcat@oregonhumane.org to connect with the Feline Behavior Modification department.

Please keep in touch so we can continue to support you and Amber now and in the future. Please reach out if you have any questions or concerns – or just to give an update. We love to see photos and hear how our friends are doing!

Thank you for adopting from the Oregon Humane Society. Congratulations on your new cat!