

26 Cat Behavior and Training

Enrichment for Indoor Cats



I want to get a cat, but I live on a very busy main road, so I am thinking of keeping it indoors. Is that cruel?

There are many circumstances in which keeping a cat indoors may be safer for the cat and therefore, arguably, better for the cat. Indoor cats are at lower risk for injuries associated with the outdoor environment (e.g., cars, trains, dogs, predators, humans) and are at far less risk of contracting parasites and infectious diseases such as feline leukemia, feline infectious peritonitis and feline immunodeficiency virus.

Studies have consistently shown that urban cats that go outdoors have far shorter life spans (averaging 2 years or less), while most indoor cats will live over 15 years. Keeping cats indoors also prevents killing of wildlife, fouling of neighborhood yards, and fighting with other cats. Depending on your cat's personality, it may be safer for other cats and wildlife in the neighborhood if you keep your cat indoors.

If you decide to keep your cat as an indoor pet, you will need to be very aware of the extra responsibility that an indoor cat brings. You must take the time and trouble to ensure that the indoor environment offers the cat the opportunity to express as many of its natural behaviors as possible.

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What do I need to do to make my indoor cat happy?

The most important thing for you to consider when you decide to keep a cat indoors is how you are going to provide for its behavioral needs. Obviously you will have thought about the need for food, water, elimination, and warmth, but have you considered your cat's need to hunt, play, and explore, its need to be able to retreat and hide, and its need to feel in control. Instituting a consistent daily routine that provides for all of the behavioral needs of your cat is not difficult but it does require some time, some thought and some commitment.

Why does my cat need to hunt when I feed it so well?

The feline desire to hunt is not connected to the sensation of hunger and no matter how well you feed your cat it will still react to the sight and sound of

prey with an instinctive stalk. Obviously, indoor cats are unlikely to come across natural prey, but anything that moves rapidly or squeaks in a high pitch can trigger the same behavioral response. Since most outdoor cats will hunt upwards of 10 mice a day, some form of alternative outlets will be needed for an indoor cat. For social play, toys that can be moved rapidly and unpredictably are irresistible to some cats, but of little or no interest to others. You can choose toys that mimic real prey in terms of size, texture and color so that the cat can play “chase the bird,” chase the “mouse,” or chase the “bug.” Small toys are usually more appealing, but caution must be exercised to be sure they cannot be accidentally swallowed and cause intestinal blockage. Play sessions for indoor cats need to be frequent and regular and if your cat is interested and willing you should aim to give at least three play sessions every day.

Perhaps the most important time for you to initiate play is just prior to the times that the cat would normally seek attention or begin to play, nip or chase. Recent studies seem to indicate that while the cat may tire of a chase toy in just a few minutes, the desire to chase new and different toys may remain and even be heightened. Therefore, try and offer two or three chase sessions in a row with different toys to ensure that your cat is truly finished playing rather than just bored with a particular toy. Stuffing or coating the toy with food or catnip may also help to maintain and prolong its interest. You can have hours of fun playing with your cat, but remember that it is the chase and hunting action that is generally more important than the social contact so be certain to provide a variety of toys that your cat can chase and attack. It is also vital that you do not allow your cat to use the human body as “prey” since this can eventually lead to injurious consequences. Therefore, it is not advisable to let your cat play with hands and feet under the covers and running fingers across the back of the sofa (see (14) Enrichment and Activity Toys and (30) Play and Play Toys).

How do I ensure that my cat has enough to occupy its time?

One of the most important considerations for an indoor cat is how you are going to occupy it 24 hours a day. Cats are famous for their desire to sleep, and it is certainly true that most cats will be happy to while away many an hour sleeping in a warm or sunny spot. However, indoor cats also need access to activity that will stimulate both their mind and their body, and provide the exercise that they would naturally engage in if they were out and about.

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Cat aerobic centers offer climbing, hiding and playing opportunities and can be ideal for indoor cats. Your cat needs to have easy access to the center and to be able to get at it from a number of different angles. If possible, you should put it in the middle of a room rather than in a corner or under the stairs. Also consider a variety of self-play (motorized or puzzle toys) and toys that dangle from door knobs or can be batted and pounced upon, as well as new items to explore during times when you are not available to play with your cat. Scratching posts are also essential, since there is no opportunity for your cat to condition its claws on the shed roof or the fence post. You need to make sure that the post is tall enough to allow your cat to get a good stretching position along the scratching surface. See (46) Scratching Behavior and Declawing for additional suggestions on encouraging your cat to use a scratching post.

Should I feed my cat at specific times, or should I leave food in the bowl all of the time?

Cats are not social feeders and therefore set meal times are not of any inherent benefit to them. Ad lib systems allow the cat to eat when it wants to and to consume small amounts frequently, but can lead to obesity. If that is the case for your cat, see (44) Obesity and Behavior for suggestions on dealing with your cat's weight. It is important to remember that wild cats need to hunt and kill their prey before they can eat and that the whole feeding process takes some considerable time. On average, anywhere from 1 in 3 to 1 in 15 hunting expeditions will be successful per day, and in order to acquire enough food to survive (perhaps 8 to 10 mice in an average day) many cats will need in excess of 30 hunting expeditions a day.

Thus, for wild cats, hunting and feeding can take up several hours a day and expend a great deal of energy; it's not hard to see how simply providing free choice food in a bowl is likely to leave most cats with a lot of time on their paws! Cats that have access to outdoors may compensate by spending time hunting, but for an indoor cat a different approach will be needed. One solution is to put a proportion of the cat's daily food ration in a puzzle feeder or feeder toy (see (11) Behavior Management Products and (30) Play and Play Toys), which the cat needs to work at in order to gain access to the food. Another is to scatter the food around the house in several bowls and let the cat hunt it out. Puzzle feeders do not need to be expensive, and you can easily make your own from an old plastic drink bottle. All you need to do is cut holes in the bottle that are just a little larger than the diameter of the dried cat food, and then file the holes so that there are no sharp edges that could harm your cat. Fill the bottle with dry food and then watch your cat play with the bottle and get rewarded as the food falls through the holes. For canned foods an ice cube tray may make feeding more challenging. Timed feeders are also available to deliver food at selected intervals during the day. Also see (11) Behavior Management Products and (17) Working for Food.

Does my cat need to climb?

The picture of a cat stuck in a tree or stranded on a rooftop is a familiar one, but the fact is that cats need to climb. Getting up high is an important way to relieve stress in the feline world and when your cat is feeling under pressure its instinct will be to move upwards; this may be especially necessary in homes with multiple cats. It is therefore very important to have accessible high up resting places. The tops of refrigerators or freezers, bookcases, and stereo hi-fi cabinets are all popular resting places for cats, but if all of the furniture in your house is built-in you will need to make special provision for your cat in the form of shelves or radiator cradles. High vantage points allow your cat to observe the world from a place of safety and escape if it feels the

“Cats need to climb and perch.”

need to do so. Some cats need a little encouragement to use a play center; however, a little enticement with some play toys, treats, or a little catnip in the area should increase its appeal.

If my cat hides on top of the furniture or spends its time behind the sofa, should I be concerned?

Hiding is an important coping strategy for cats but when a cat spends considerable amounts of time hiding it is important to examine why. If the cat has recently moved into a new home, hiding may be a perfectly normal response to the overwhelming amount of new information. If the cat has been living in the house for some time, hiding is likely to be a sign that all is not well, either emotionally or perhaps physically. If it is possible to identify the reason for the hiding, then it is important to treat that first. In many cases no clear cause can be found and in these situations you need to resist the temptation to bring the cat out to face the world. Hiding serves a purpose for the solitary hunter who needs to assess potential danger from a safe haven; simply denying the chance to hide will make things harder for the cat. Instead you should allow your pet to withdraw into safety, at least in the short term, and then work to make the home so appealing that it cannot resist the temptation to join in. Provide sufficient perching and hiding areas (carriers, boxes) for each cat to have a secure area if desired. If hiding persists and is accompanied by lack of appetite you should consult your veterinarian for advice. Feliway® (a synthetic feline pheromone) can be useful in some of these cases for reducing anxiety.

I would like to give my cat some fresh air, but I am not sure if it will walk on a lead. Is there any alternative?

Some cats may need to be kept permanently indoors and this can work as long as owners are aware of the responsibility that it brings. For others access to outdoors needs to be restricted, but owners would like to offer some contact with the world outside; in these cases, there are a number of alternatives. The harness and lead approach is certainly one, but you are right to recognize that not all cats will learn to walk in this way. Introducing harnesses as early as possible will help, and making a kitten accustomed to the lead will minimize resistance to its use as an adult. If you have tried introducing your cat to the harness and you have been met with overwhelming resistance, you may wish to consider the use of an outdoor pen. Since cats can climb, the pen will either need a roof to prevent escape or have the sides angled inward at the top to prevent climbing over. There are a number of commercial cat containment products for both indoor and outdoor use. Ideally the pen will be accessible from the house via a cat door flap and will offer the cat access to outdoors while offering you complete peace of mind. If a pen is to be used successfully, it should mimic the outside world as closely as possible and cat furniture, tree trunks, toys, scratching posts, and elevated resting-places should all be available within the pen. The cat should never be allowed access to the outdoor pen when no one is home since escape may be possible and the cat become lost.

For websites on feline enrichment and preventing behavior problems, see indoorpet.osu.edu, catvets.org, and fabcats.org.