

# KEEPING AN INDOOR CAT HAPPY

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## 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?

For many people the thought of keeping a cat totally indoors seems to fly in the face of everything that the species stands for and certainly there is a lot to be said for cats having the freedom to roam around a wider territory and to come into contact with other cats and with natural prey. However, there are many certain 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 (cars, trains, dogs, predators, humans, etc.) and are at far less risk of contracting parasites and more serious 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 two years), while most indoor cats 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.

## 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, its need to be able to retreat and hide and its need to feel in control. Providing for the behavioral needs of a 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. Toys are therefore essential for an indoor cat and you need to make sure that the ones that you buy are attractive to your pet. Those that squeak and can be moved rapidly and unpredictably are probably the best. You can also select toys that mimic real prey in terms of size, texture and color. Small toys, and it is worth remembering that small toys that resemble mice rather than rats, are usually more successful! Play sessions for indoor cats need to be frequent and regular and if your cat is interested and willing you should aim to give your cat at least three play sessions of 10 minutes, every day. You can have hours of fun playing with your cat, but remember that the independent action of hunting is important, so do not be tempted to get too involved in the play sessions and give your cat plenty of opportunity to catch its prey. If you do not want to induce your cat to ambush your hands and ankles later on, it is also worth avoiding any predatory play with human flesh, so hands and feet under the covers and running fingers across the back of the sofa are not advisable.

## **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. Of course cats are famous for their desire to sleep and it is certainly true that your cat will be happy to wile away many an hour in front of the fire or next to the radiator. However, indoor cats do 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. 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. 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 position on the scratching surface.

## **SHOULD I FEED MY CAT AT SPECIFIC TIMES OR SHOULD I LEAVE FOOD DOWN 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 that allow the cat to eat when it wants to and to consume small amounts frequently, are most natural. 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 1 in 15 hunting expeditions will be successful per day and in order to acquire enough food to survive most

cats need in excess of 100 hunting expeditions a day. This can take between 6 and 8 hours a day and it is not hard to see how simply providing ad lib food in a bowl is likely to leave most cats with a lot of time on their hands! Cats that have access to outdoors will compensate by spending time hunting insects, but for an indoor cat there has to be another approach. One solution is to put a proportion of the cat's daily food ration in a puzzle feeder, which the cat needs to work at in order to gain access to the food, and another is to scatter the food around the house 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 which 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. Commercial toys that deliver food when chewed or manipulated are also available.

### **DOES MY CAT NEED TO CLIMB?**

The picture of a cat stuck in a tree or stranded on a roof top 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. It is therefore very important to have accessible high up resting places and while built-in wardrobes may be great in terms of space saving for people you need to realize that they are not so good for your cat! Tops of fridge 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 and radiator cradles. High vantage points allow your cat to observe the world from a place of safety. When it is not allowed the option of escaping through the cat flap these vantage points become all the more important.

### **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 and when a cat is spending considerable amounts of time hiding it is important to examine why. In a cat that has recently moved into a home hiding may be a perfectly normal response to the overwhelming amount of new information. In a cat that has been resident in the house for some time hiding is likely to be a sign that all is not well. 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 and 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. If hiding persists and is accompanied by lack of appetite you should consult your veterinarian for advice.

### **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 and in these cases there are a number of alternatives. The harness and lead approach is certainly one, but you are right to mention the fact 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 accessed 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 high up resting places should all be available within the pen.