

Six Top Toys to Fulfill Your Pet's Desire to Hunt

Certain pets are natural-born hunters with a strong drive to go after prey. While many spend their hours indoors, you can still help them fulfill their deepest desires. Here are six terrific toys that will entertain your pet for hours.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Cats are natural born hunters, with a strong drive to go after prey
- Cats with no way to express their innate desire to hunt may act out in other ways, leading to behavioral problems
- Top toys to fulfill your cat's desire to hunt include feather wands (that you move around), treat-dispensing toys, puzzle toys and catnip mice
- Homemade toys, including string that you drag across the floor and ping pong balls, can also stimulate your cat's hunting instincts
- Change up your cat's toys often, and interact with him during play sessions, to provide the most mental stimulation

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Cats are natural born hunters, with a strong drive to go after prey. Free-ranging domestic cats are such stealthy hunters that it's estimated they kill up to 4 billion birds and 22 billion mammals in the U.S. every year.¹ Most cat owners don't want their pets killing live animals, and if your pet is an indoor cat, he won't have the chance. But this doesn't mean that his hunting instinct has gone away.

Cats with no way to express their innate behaviors, such as scratching and, yes, hunting, may act out in other ways. The frustration and stress that results from a lack of appropriate mental and physical stimulation may lead to litterbox issues, aggression, marking or other behavioral problems. In turn, behavioral issues are one of the top reasons why cats get surrendered to animal shelters.

It's a vicious cycle, and one that's not your cat's fault. Fortunately, it's easy to enrich your cat's environment and support his hunting instinct via play. Certain toys work better than others, though, so here are some of the best options to look for when trying to simulate hunting prey.²

Six Best Cat Toys to Fulfill Your Cat's Desire to Hunt

- **Feather wands** — With feathers like birds and the ability to move the wand in a life-like fashion, feather wands can entice even the most discerning kitty. The key to excitement lies in how you move it. Try inching it along slowly, twitching it or quickly lurching it into the air. You can also make the toy land on a treat for your

cat to discover.

Avoid hanging the feather right in front of your cat's face, as real prey would rarely make such a bold (and unwise) move. You'll soon find out which movements get your cat engaged. And while you don't want to make the game too easy, be sure to let your kitty "win" and capture the feather sometimes, lest he lose interest.

- **Treat-dispensing toys and no-bowl feeding systems** — Balls, mice and feeder toys designed to release a treat or two in response to your cat's pouncing and batting are great because they reward your cat with something to eat — a natural result of targeting prey in the wild.

Many cats enjoy "earning" their treats in this way, and treat-dispensing toys are especially useful when you need an activity to keep your cat's interest while you'll be away. Check out my interview with Dr. Bales about her indoor feline no-bowl feeding system that can dramatically improve feline behavior issues here.

- **Catnip-filled mice** — Mice toys give your cat a chance to catch, carry and "kill" their prey. You can try plush or rubber versions, with or without added bells and squeakers. Some mice cat toys come filled with catnip for an extra treat, but you can also sprinkle on some of your own. I recommend only buying certified organic catnip.
- **Puzzle toys** — Toys designed to make your cat chase and bat at a ball or challenge your cat to seek out rewards help to stimulate and engage his hunting instinct. Look for options that simulate what your cat would encounter in the wild, like a box with holes to reach his paws in or a tube that requires him to reach in to pull out "prey."
- **Homemade toys** — Some of the most intriguing toys to your cats are those you can make simply at home. For instance, a piece of string you drag across the floor, ping-pong balls to bat around, yarn toys or bits of paper rolled into balls to chase. My favorite DIY cat toy is an organic cotton baby sock filled with organic catnip and knotted or sewn closed. Similar to a mouse toy, this lets your cat have the satisfaction of catching his prey.
- **Visual stimulation** — Many cats enjoy the thrill of watching birds on a feeder or fish swim around an aquarium. If you don't have a spot for your cat to view the real thing, consider kitty videos that entice your cat with fast-moving mice or fish on the screen. For some cats, just watching the prey will be engaging enough, but others may grow frustrated without something physical to pounce on. You can solve this problem by tossing your cat a stuffed mouse or ping pong ball while he's watching his prey.

Important Cat Toy Caveats

If you're wondering why laser toys didn't make the list, it's because they should be used with caution. Some cats love them, and they can be a good way to keep your indoor cat active and running about. However, some cats become frustrated because they can't actually catch the laser. If your cat seems upset after a play session, offer him another toy to catch.

In addition, I always recommend choosing toys made from all-natural materials (organic if possible) to avoid potentially dangerous additives. Feathers on toys, for instance, have usually been dyed or chemically treated, making them potentially toxic or irritating to your cat's gastrointestinal tract. With any toy, keep a close eye on your cat during playtime and take it away if it becomes broken, worn or you notice your cat chewing on it or trying to eat it.

Keep in mind also that even the most enticing toy will lose its edge if it's the only one your cat sees every day. After a play session or two with a favorite toy, store it out of sight and rotate in a new toy or two. By changing up the rotation, the toys will be fresh and new to your cat, helping to keep him both stimulated and entertained.

Sources and References

¹ [Nature Communications January 29, 2013](#)

² [PetMD](#)
