

## How to Give Your Indoor Cat the Best of Both Worlds

Cats don't choose to live their lives indoors - they're forced to. And many don't ever fully adjust to living in close contact to people. Here's how to give them best of what the indoor and outdoor worlds offer.

**Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker**

### STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- While indoor living isn't entirely natural for cats, they are safer and healthier kept inside than allowed to roam freely outside
- Lifestyle risks for indoor cats include obesity, inactivity, boredom and certain diseases
- Lifestyle risks for free-roaming outdoor cats include traffic, predators, abuse and infectious diseases
- To keep your indoor cat healthy and safe, provide regular supervised adventures outdoors, and an optimal (stress-free and enriched) environment indoors

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Not long ago at a veterinary conference, a Dr. Margie Scherk, a vet from Vancouver, Canada with a feline practice, spoke on the topic of lifestyle risks of indoor versus outdoor cats. One of her points was that while many people believe responsible cat owners keep their pets indoors, "The fact is that cats have not been selectively bred to be indoors 24 hours a day, and many don't adjust to living in close contact to people — they're forced to."<sup>1</sup>

### Lifestyle Risks of Indoor Cats

According to Scherk, who cites a 2005 study published in the journal Applied Animal Behaviour Science,<sup>2</sup> the following are risks to cats who live entirely indoors:

- Lower urinary tract diseases
- Boredom
- Hyperthyroidism
- Household hazards (burns, poison exposure, falls)
- Obesity
- Inactivity, decreased fitness
- Diabetes
- Behavior problems (spraying, scratching, obsessive behavior)
- Odontoclastic resorptive lesions
- Dermatologic problems (atopic dermatitis, acral lick dermatitis)

## Lifestyle Risks of Indoor-Outdoor and Outdoor-Only Cats

Thanks to KittyCams, researchers have been able to learn plenty about the kinds of risky business free-roaming cats get up to when they're wandering around outdoors, including:<sup>3</sup>

- Trauma (usually involving being hit by a vehicle) or human abuse
- Entering storm drains
- Parasites
- Climbing trees
- Crossing roads
- Climbing on roofs
- Having non-aggressive contact with unfamiliar cats (infectious disease risk)
- Having contact with wild animals (injury and disease risk)
- Consuming solids or liquids left by owners, baits
- Crawling into car engines

Cats are also prey for wildlife such as coyotes, mountain lions, wolves and raptors, and fights among outdoor cats can also lead to serious injury and infections, including bite abscesses. Sadly, cruel humans also pose a grave risk to cats through gunshots, poisonings, burnings and asphyxia.<sup>4</sup>

Infectious diseases, several of which are zoonotic (can be spread to humans) commonly sicken and kill outdoor cats, including feline retroviruses, mycoplasmosis, toxoplasmosis, bartonellosis (cat scratch fever), tularemia, plague and rabies, along with worms, ectoparasites and fungal infections.

## Cats Should Live Indoors but Have Supervised Time Outdoors

Given the risks associated with living entirely indoors, Scherk believes it should be the goal of veterinarians to encourage people to make indoor living more suitable for cats by decreasing stressful stimuli and enriching and improving the environment.

I certainly agree. I tend to think of cats like humans; we live in protected, safe environments indoors, but enjoy going outside, and spending lots of time outside, in safe environments. Living indoors all the time isn't what most cats would choose, nor is it an entirely natural environment for them, but it's by far the safest life we can choose for them. Letting them roam free outdoors some or all of the time presents much more risk.

But just because your kitty lives inside doesn't mean she can't go on supervised visits outside to bask in the sun, exercise and ground herself on a daily basis. Outdoor adventures are wonderful for cats, as long as they're safe.

I recommend walking your cat in nice weather using a harness. This gets him out into the fresh air, stimulates his senses and gets his paws in direct contact with the ground. An alternative is a safe, fully enclosed catio that prevents him from getting out and other animals from getting in. Many cats with catios spend the majority of their days outside, but safe.

## How to Provide Your Cat With an Optimal Life Indoors

- **Enrich the indoor environment** — The term "environmental enrichment" means to improve or enhance the living situation of captive animals to optimize their health, longevity and quality of life. The more comfortable your cat feels in your home, the lower her stress level. Reducing stress is extremely important in keeping cats physically healthy.

Enriching your kitty's surroundings means creating minimally stressful living quarters and reducing or eliminating changes in her life that cause anxiety. Jackson Galaxy has written several books on creating feline environmental enrichment around the house that I highly recommend.

The essentials of your cat's life — food, water and litterbox (which should be kept scrupulously clean), should be located in a safe, secure location away from any area that is noisy enough to startle her or make her feel trapped and unable to escape. Your cat also needs approved places for climbing and scratching (natural feline behaviors) in her indoor environment, as well as her own resting place and a hiding place where she feels untouchable.

Think about what you can do to appeal to your kitty's visual, auditory and olfactory senses. For example, some cats can gaze out the window for hours, while others are captivated by fish in an aquarium. Some even enjoy kitty videos.

When you're away from home, open all your shades and blinds to provide natural light during the day. Provide background noise for kitty similar to the ambient sounds she hears when you're at home, for example, nature music or a TV at low volume. You can stimulate your cat's keen sense of smell with cat-safe herbs or synthetic feline pheromones.

- **Make sure he gets daily exercise** — Consistent daily exercise, including at least 20 minutes of high-intensity activity will help your cat burn fat and increase muscle tone. Make sure he has things to climb on, like a multilevel cat tree or tower. Think like a cat and choose toys and activities that answer his need for hunting, stalking and pouncing on "prey."

Because our cats don't have the freedom they would in the wild, it's up to us to give them opportunities to practice those natural instincts. A great way to do that is to have your kitty "hunt" for his food. Try separating his daily portion of freeze-dried raw food into three to five small meals fed throughout the day in a variety of puzzle toys or indoor hunting feeder mice, or load them with a small piece of tasty, dehydrated meat treat.

This will encourage him to "hunt" and eat on a schedule similar to his wild cousins, and as an added bonus, he might just sleep through the night thanks to the puzzle toy you give him at bedtime.

- **Feed a moisture-rich, nutritionally balanced, species-appropriate diet** — Offering your cat an optimal diet is the single most important thing you can do to help her have a long, healthy life. That's why it's important to understand that some foods are metabolically stressful, for example, all dry (kibble) formulas, processed pet food (canned or dry) containing feed-grade (versus human-grade) ingredients and diets containing grains, potatoes or other starches.

The nutrition that generates the least amount of metabolic stress for most cats, regardless of age, is their ancestral diet: whole, raw (or gently cooked), unprocessed, organic, non-GMO and in its natural form. Animal meat should be the foundation of your kitty's diet throughout her life. Filtered, pure, fresh water in nontoxic metal or glass (not plastic) bowls is also important.

- **Keep your cat at a healthy weight** — Tragically, the majority of cats in the U.S. are overweight or obese. The obesity-related diseases overweight kitties inevitably acquire shorten their lifespans and often destroy their quality of life along the way. If you want your kitty by your side and able to get around comfortably for 20 years, one of the worst things you can do is encourage him to get fat.

The first step in keeping your cat at a healthy weight is to feed an optimal diet as I described above. It's equally important not to free-feed. It's also important to calculate kcal (kilocalorie) requirements for your cat's ideal weight and include treats in his total daily calorie count.

- **Schedule regular veterinary wellness exams** — I recommend twice-yearly wellness visits because:
  - Changes in your kitty's health can happen rapidly, especially on the inside where you can't see it, like sudden changes in kidney health
  - Sick cats often show no signs of illness, but early detection allows for early intervention
  - Semi-annual visits give you and your veterinarian the opportunity to closely monitor changes in your kitty's behavior and attitude that require further investigation

At a minimum, younger healthy cats should see the vet once a year. Kitties over the age of 7 and those with chronic health conditions should be seen twice a year or more frequently if necessary. If your cat hates car travel, consider a mobile vet who makes house calls.

I recommend that you find a veterinarian whose practice philosophy you're comfortable with. This may be a holistic or integrative veterinarian, or a conventional veterinarian who doesn't aggressively promote vaccines, pest preventives or veterinary drugs at every visit. House call vets can also be a great, lower stress option for indoor kitties.

Generally speaking, if you're dealing with a conventional vet, you'll need to advocate for your cat and push back as necessary, politely but firmly. Always remember that you have the final say in what treatments and chemicals are administered to your pet.

## Sources and References

<sup>1</sup> [dvm360, July 8, 2019](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Applied Animal Behaviour Science, Volume 93, Issues 1–2, September 2005, Pages 97-109](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Veterinary Record \(2013\)](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Science-Based Medicine, May 11, 2018](#)

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