

Are You Depriving Your Indoor-Only Cat of a Natural Life?

Not everyone agrees that indoor-only living is the ideal situation for cats, as 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. Be aware of the 10 risks cats face when living entirely indoors, and a practical compromise.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Most experts in feline health agree that indoor-only living isn't entirely natural for cats, however, the upside is they are safer and healthier than kitties allowed to roam freely outdoors
- Lifestyle risks for indoor-only cats include boredom, obesity, and behavior problems
- Risks for indoor-outdoor and free-roaming outdoor cats include a variety of injuries, predators, and infectious diseases
- To keep your indoor cat healthy, safe, and mentally stimulated, provide regular supervised adventures outdoors, and an optimal (stress-free and enriched) environment indoors

There is an ongoing debate in the U.S. and other countries relative to the lifestyle risks of indoor vs. outdoor cats. Advocates for allowing cats access to the outdoors believe it provides them opportunities to exercise the full range of natural feline behaviors

As Dr. Margie Scherk, a veterinarian with a feline-only practice in Vancouver, Canada explains, 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."¹ It's also a fact that indoor-only living isn't risk-free for cats.

Risks Associated With Indoor-Only Living

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

- Boredom
- **Diabetes**
- Inactivity, decreased fitness
- Lower urinary tract diseases
- Behavior problems (spraying, scratching, obsessive behavior)
- Hyperthyroidism
- Household hazards (burns, poison exposure, falls)

- Dermatologic problems (atopic dermatitis, acral lick dermatitis)
- **Obesity.**
- Odontoclastic resorptive lesions

Risks Associated With a Free-Roaming Lifestyle

Thanks to **KittyCams**, we've also learned a great deal about the risky business cats can get caught up in when they roam free outdoors:

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

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.³

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.

A Practical Compromise

If you want your cat to remain healthy, with a nice long lifespan, she should live exclusively indoors. While being indoors all the time isn't what most cats would choose, it's by far the safest life we can choose for them. While indoor living isn't an entirely natural environment for your cat, letting her run around loose outside presents much more risk than keeping her "captive" in your home.

However, just because your kitty lives inside doesn't mean she can't go on supervised visits outside to lounge in the sun, exercise and ground herself on a daily basis, if she chooses. Think of housecats like toddlers — they should live inside but should have some outdoor time daily, weather permitting. Outdoor adventures are wonderful for cats if 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 (cat patio) that prevents him from getting out and other animals from getting in.

How to Improve Your Cat's Indoor Lifestyle

The following suggestions can go a long way toward providing feline family members with everything they need to thrive in "captivity" as indoor pets.

- **Feed a moisture rich, nutritionally optimal, species-specific 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 (vs. human grade) ingredients, and diets containing grains with mycotoxin risks, high glycemic potatoes, or other glyphosate-laden starches.

The nutrition that generates the least amount of metabolic stress for most cats, regardless of age, mimics their ancestral diet: whole, raw (or gently cooked), minimally processed, organic, non-GMO, ultra-low carb meals that meet their unique nutritional requirements. Fresh 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** — Sadly, a 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.

- **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 (usually by you engaging in play) 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 treats.

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.

- **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 cats 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 unnecessary vaccines or chemical pest preventives at every visit.

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

[PetMD August 31, 2020](#)

¹ [dvm360, July 8, 2019](#)

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

³ [Science-Based Medicine, May 11, 2018](#)
