

Creative Strategies to Get Your Indoor Cat Moving

Your indoor kitty doesn't have the freedom that she would in the wild, so it's up to you to bring out her natural behaviors to help her get the exercise and mental stimulation she needs. Here are ways to interact with your cat - and strategies to inspire her to play and exercise on her own.

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Nov 29, 2022 • 5 min read

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Cats are designed for physical activity and mental stimulation; unfortunately, too many indoor kitties are overfed, under-exercised, and bored silly
- The best way to get your cat moving and cure boredom is through both interactive and independent play
- Another great strategy is to encourage your cat to hunt for his food, which allows him to act out instinctive feline behaviors

Felines in the wild (including big cats and neighborhood feral colonies) are typically lean, lithe, and very active. It's the nature of all cats to be on the move, and in fact it's essential to their physical and emotional wellbeing.

I believe most housecats today are not only overfed and under-exercised, but also very bored, and boredom isn't a healthy emotional state.

"Boredom is not the trivial annoyance it is sometimes dismissed as," writes Charlotte C. Burns of the Royal Veterinary College in an essay published in the journal Animal Behaviour. Animal boredom is biologically plausible: animals avoid monotony and seek stimulation."¹

Bored cats are more likely to engage in negative behaviors, including general nutty or wild behavior; chasing their tails or human ankles; continually knocking items off tables, counters, or shelves; excessive vocalization; and attention-seeking behavior (being intentionally annoying).

If one or more of these behaviors describes a furry little creature under your roof, there's a very good chance your cat could benefit from additional mental stimulation.

Interactive Toys to Get Your Cat Moving

One of the best ways to get indoor cats moving and mentally stimulated is through interactive play that encourages their natural stalking and hunting behaviors. However, since many cats at play tend to have short attention spans, and others become stressed or hyper-aroused, it's a good idea to keep play sessions short.

Set a goal of two or three 10-minute daily sessions, and if possible, do them at the same time each day so your cat learns to look forward to them. Keep a selection of interactive toys on hand, such as a laser pointer so your cat can chase and pounce on the red dot as you move it around. Also invest in a few feather toys, which are irresistible to many kitties.

“You want to get your cat running, leaping and jumping,” explains feline behavior consultant Dr. Marci Koski. “You want to get him engaged in the prey sequence, which is staring, stalking and chasing, pouncing and grabbing, and then performing a kill bite. That will tap into his predatory instincts and let him feel like a cat.”

Another option is the furry little (fake) mice that are such a hit with cats. They’re not the real thing, of course, and your kitty knows it, but they’ll do in a pinch. Cats seem to like the size, texture, and “battability” of the mice. Try flicking one across the floor in front of your cat and see how she reacts.

Many cats also think it’s great fun to chase and swat castile soap bubbles blown into the air. And don’t overlook the benefit of catnip toys during play sessions. Many cats are really into ping pong balls, as well.

After a play session, Dr. Marci suggests giving your cat a meal (more about this shortly). After he eats, he’ll do a little grooming then settle down for a snooze.

“Hunt, eat, groom, sleep — it’s a very natural pattern for felines,” she explains. “Self-play toys, like little balls and mice, are great, but they’re not going to engage a cat in all four steps of the prey sequence. So, go with an interactive wand toy twice a day.

And if your cat flops down like he’s really bored after a minute or so, he’s faking. Give him about a 30-second rest and reengage him. What’s happening is he has fallen back into the staring part of the prey sequence. He’s trying to figure out that lure and how to get it. Don’t let him fool you. He still wants to play. Just give him a little break, and then re-engage him with the wand.”

Inspiring Cats to Play and Exercise on Their Own

Climbing, scratching, and stretching are natural feline activities that help keep their bodies well-conditioned and their minds stimulated.

If you don’t have one already, consider purchasing or making an indoor cat tree. Ideally, it should reach from floor to ceiling, be very stable (not wobbly), and should be covered with a variety of materials that will entice kitty to climb, stretch, and claw. If you can place your cat tree near a window, even better.

Cats also enjoy climbing to high perches to watch the world from a safe distance, so make sure the cat tree has at least one. You can also add wall shelves and window seats to give kitty a range of choices.

When cats in the wild feel threatened, they head for trees, dens, or caves to seek safety. Indoor kitties obviously don’t have that option, so their obsession with hiding in boxes may be an adaptation. Studies show access to hiding boxes reduces feline stress, especially in shelter cats.

Many cats also use hiding boxes as cardboard jungle gyms and spend time playing in and around them, so consider placing a few around your home and see what happens!

A secure outdoor enclosure offers your indoor kitty the opportunity to experience the outdoors safely and provides both physical and mental stimulation without the risks of free roaming. Depending on where it's located, it can also give her an opportunity to make contact with the earth and ground herself.

Many cat parents are creating safe outdoor enclosures or cat patios that allow their feline family members secure access to the outdoors. The enclosure should be open air, allowing kitty exposure to fresh air and sunlight, but shielded enough to prevent escape or a predator from gaining access.

Another way to get a willing cat outdoors in nice weather is to train her to walk on a harness and leash. This obviously won't be the answer for every cat, but if you feel yours might enjoy going for walks, here are 10 tips for training a cat to walk on a leash.

Mealtime = Playtime

Because our cats don't have the freedom they would in the wild, it's up to us to find creative ways to allow them to perform the natural behaviors that keep boredom at bay. A great way to do this is to have your kitty hunt for her meals.

One way to do this is to separate her daily portion of food into three to five small meals fed throughout the day in a variety of puzzle toys or **indoor hunting feeder mice** filled with freeze dried raw food or dehydrated meats. If you work outside the home, you can give her two or three food-stuffed toys before you leave the house, then a couple at dinnertime and one at bedtime.

This will encourage her to hunt and eat on a schedule similar to her wild cousins, and as an added bonus, she might just sleep through the night.

Another way to have your cat hunt for food is by hiding her food bowls in various locations around the house. Start with one bowl in the usual spot, and then place additional bowls in other areas where she's sure to find them. You can also do this with puzzle toys.

Sources and References

[PetMD](#)

¹ [Animal Behaviour, Volume 130, August 2017, Pages 141-151](#)
