

Taking the Risks Out of Laser Pointer Play

Laser pointers can be an excellent way to get your cat moving for much-needed exercise, but there are some downsides to using them as well. Find out how to use laser pointer toys safely, as well as alternatives for stimulating your cat's natural hunting instinct if she doesn't enjoy them.

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Laser pointers can be an excellent way to get in some much-needed activity for your cat but caution is warranted
- Because there's nothing for your cat to "catch" at the end, some cats grow frustrated and may even develop behavior problems as a result
- Clicker training your cat, and rewarding her for "catching" the laser, is one way to use laser pointer toys safely
- If you have more than one cat, get multiple laser pointers for playtime so they don't have to compete with each other, especially if the cats don't know each other well
- If your cat doesn't seem to enjoy the play, or if she seems overly frustrated by them, there are many alternatives to laser pointers that will stimulate your cat's natural hunting instinct

Cats have a natural, strong drive to hunt and stalk prey. In a typical home, most indoor cats rarely get to live out this natural instinct, instead becoming increasingly bored and possibly stressed out. Many indoor kitties are also seriously lacking in the physical activity department.

Giving your cat plenty of opportunities to not only engage in instinctual behaviors but also simply move around is crucial for your cat's well-being — and laser pointers can help you do this.

Still, there are some caveats to be aware of when it comes to this particular toy. When choosing whether or not to use one with your cat, there are pros and cons to be aware of.

Benefits of Laser Pointers for Cats

Many cats find the pinpoint of light from a laser pointer irresistible. It can be an excellent way to get in some much-needed activity for your cat. The majority of cats in the U.S. are overweight, so the more you can get them moving, the better. Laser pointers also provide an outlet for your cat, allowing him to run and chase after "prey," fulfilling this natural instinct.

As an interactive toy, laser pointers can be a bonding tool for you and your cat. When you play, allow your cat to chase and pounce on the red dot as you move it around and encourage your cat to run, jump and really get active. There are also automatic laser toys available, which can give your kitty something to chase while you're not home. You can also

use one strategically in the early morning hours so your cat lets you sleep in.

Risks of Laser Pointers for Cats

There are some downsides to laser pointers, the primary one being that there's nothing for your cat to "catch" at the end. In dogs, never getting to catch prey at the end of a laser pointer chase has been linked with behavior problems or could even lead to an obsession with chasing the light.

It was originally believed that cats would be less likely than dogs to develop an obsession and accompanying behavior problems as a result of chasing laser beams, but that might not be the case with all cats. It's possible that some kitties may also engage in a compulsive behavior, including repetitive behaviors, created by chasing a laser pointer too much.

Tips for Safe Laser Pointer Play

Because laser pointers can be useful to encourage physical activity in your cat — and many cats love them — you don't need to avoid them completely. Veterinary behaviorist Dr. John Ciribassi suggests the best way to safely play with your kitty and a laser pointer is to first clicker train your cat. The click of the clicker, followed by a delicious treat, lets your kitty know she has pleased you and been rewarded for it.

Once she's clicker trained, allow your cat to periodically "catch" the laser light and when she does, deliver a click followed by a treat. This lets her know she's "won" and something good is coming. You're providing her with a concrete, tangible result for catching the laser light, and this will hopefully help avoid any of its potential downsides.

If you have more than one cat, you may want to get multiple laser pointers for playtime so they don't have to compete with each other. This is especially important if the cats don't know each other well. Use a separate laser pointer for each cat and move the lights in opposite directions to give the cats space.

As you play with your cat, do your best to mimic an interaction between a hunter and its prey. Move the laser the way a mouse might scurry across the floor, using small, catchy movements and vertical movements as well, such as a bird taking flight. Start by moving the light a few feet from your cat and moving it away when she pounces. Sometimes, though, allow your cat to "catch" the light before moving it again.

If your cat seems upset or frustrated during a play session, offer him a toy, such as a catnip-stuffed mouse or ping pong ball, to catch. 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 the laser pointer, store it out of sight and rotate in a new type of toy for your cat to enjoy.

Alternatives to Laser Pointers

If your cat doesn't seem to enjoy the play, or if she seems overly frustrated by them, there are many alternatives to laser pointers. 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.

Feather wands are also enticing to many cats, especially if you move it around in a life-like fashion, twitching it or quickly lurching it into the air.

Puzzle toys, like a box with holes to reach his paws in or a tube that requires him to reach in to pull out “prey,” also stimulate and engage your cat’s hunting instinct. You can also make intriguing toys out of items you may have around your house.

Some cats enjoy batting around a crumpled ball of paper while others love chasing a string you drag across the floor. My favorite DIY cat toy is an organic cotton baby sock filled with organic catnip and knotted or sewn closed.

So to answer the question, “Are laser pointers safe for cats?” the answer is they can be, when used with caution. Laser pointers used in moderation to get your cat moving are fine, assuming your cat seems to be having fun. But be sure to rotate their use and avoid long play sessions without giving your cat a break and a chance to catch “real” prey, such as a stuffed mouse.

Sources and References

^{1, 2} [dvm360, December 11, 2019](#)

³ [PetMD September 22, 2021](#)
