

Could You Train Your Cat to Walk on a Leash?

While it may sound like an impossible task, most cats, and especially kittens, can learn to take walks outdoors with a harness & leash. Yet it's not as simple as slipping on any harness, attaching a leash and walking out the door. Here's your step-by-step guide to convincing kitty it's a good idea.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Indoor-only cats are much safer than free-roaming kitties, but they still benefit tremendously from time outdoors
- Cats can derive great enjoyment and mental stimulation from supervised trips outside, and they also benefit from being grounded
- Most cats (but not all), and especially kittens, can learn to walk on a harness and leash, allowing them to safely experience the great outdoors on walks with their humans
- An alternative outdoor experience for kitties who can't or won't be walked is an outdoor cat enclosure

I, like most of my veterinary colleagues, recommend that feline family members live exclusively indoors (unless you're that rare person who has a completely secure escape-and-predator-proof fenced back yard). Outdoor-only cats and free-roaming indoor/outdoor cats are at significant risk of being injured or poisoned, exposed to disease, hit by a car, and many other dangers.

But just because a cat lives indoors doesn't mean she doesn't need or deserve to spend time outside. Just like dogs, cats require mental stimulation and the opportunity to explore the world beyond their front door. Kitties also benefit from grounding. Sadly, many indoor cats spend their entire lives never feeling the earth beneath their feet.

One way to broaden your kitty's horizons and enrich her comfortable, if under-stimulating indoor existence, is to train her to walk on a harness and leash. In fact, walking your cat can be an ideal way to allow her safe, controlled access to the great outdoors.

Is Your Cat a Good Candidate for Leash Walks?

It's very important to be aware that while most cats, and especially kittens, can be trained to walk on a harness and leash, yours could be an exception.

If you suspect your cat would never under any circumstances, be agreeable to walking on a leash, or would be so terrified by the experience that she could be psychologically damaged, chances are you're probably right. It's important to never force anything on a cat. You can certainly try to gently slip a harness on her, but if she's very resistant or clearly about to have a meltdown, don't push the issue.

Some cats, especially seniors, will naturally be reluctant to wear a harness, be tethered to a leash, or put so much as a paw outdoors. Only you can decide whether the stress of a walk outweighs the benefits for your cat.

Selecting the Right Harness

There are few creatures on earth as flexible as felines, so attaching a leash to a collar is asking for trouble. Not only are kitties notorious for slipping out of their collars, but if your cat runs up a tree, a standard collar could strangle him, and a breakaway collar will detach.

Invest in a harness designed specifically for cats, or something along the lines of the Kitty Holster or Walking Jacket. The leash clip is toward the middle of these harnesses rather than the neck, which is much safer and less stressful for your kitty.

The harness should fit snugly to your cat's body, but not so tight that airflow is constricted. Make sure you can slip two fingers under the harness at the neck and under the chest. The harness clips should snap securely, and should not be the breakaway style used on some cat collars.

Convincing Kitty to Wear His Harness

If your cat has never worn a collar, getting him accustomed to one first can help desensitize him to the slightly larger tethering apparatus known as a harness.

Very few cats take right away to wearing a harness. That's why verbal praise, head scratches, and especially, healthy food treats will be your friends during training sessions.

Plan sessions for when your cat is hungry. Break the treats into tiny pieces because your kitty's willingness to cooperate will decrease as his tummy fills up. Cats aren't people-pleasers, so food treats are their primary incentive. And remember to present treats within a second or so of a desired behavior.

When you bring the harness home, put it near your cat's napping spot or food bowl and let him get used to the sight, smell, and feel of it. When he shows interest in the harness, praise him, and give him a treat.

After a few days of this, while holding your cat, give him a treat, drape the harness over him, and leave it for a minute or two. Use your cat's response and comfort level to decide the best time to secure the harness on his body. Make sure to keep the praise, petting, and food treats coming.

Leave the harness on kitty for a few minutes to start, and gradually increase the time he wears it. And remember: Don't force anything on your cat. If he's really struggling against the harness, remove it and try again later. The goal is have him associate wearing the harness with good things.

Now Comes the Leash

Once your cat is walking around comfortably in her harness, it's time to attach the leash. Use a flat cat leash, not a retractable leash. Initially, you just want her to walk around the house with the leash attached so she can get used to the feel of it.

During this time, you'll want to keep a close eye on her to make sure the leash doesn't get caught on anything. Offer treats, praise and petting as she moves around with the leash attached.

When she gets used to the presence of the leash, you can begin walking her around the house on it. Don't pull the leash or drag her with it. Let her lead, while you follow and offer treats and praise at regular intervals.

Once she seems comfortable being walked around the house, take a short trip outside. It's best to open the door and let kitty take the lead. She may be quite tentative at first, but gradually she should get curious enough to start investigating all the new smells, sights, and sounds she's experiencing.

Once your cat's curiosity has overcome her fear, you can allow her to lead you down the sidewalk, into the yard, or even around the block if she's up for it. But keep in mind that depending on her temperament, you could easily spend the next month just getting down the front walk or onto the grass.

Additional Tips for a Safe, Enjoyable Stroll With Your Cat

- If your neighborhood has lots of traffic noise, free-roaming cats or dogs, or other distractions your kitty seems threatened by, try taking him to a quieter area where he feels less overwhelmed.
- Make sure kitty doesn't pick up anything in his mouth or lick anything. And no tree climbing for leashed cats. It's too dangerous.
- Don't tie your cat's leash to something and leave him outside, even for a minute. If something spooks him, he could get tangled in the leash. If he feels threatened by another animal or person, he can't get away. Never leave your cat outside unattended for any reason.
- Expect setbacks. Your cat might be okay in a new area on Monday and when you take him there on Tuesday, something freaks him out. Step back to the last place he was comfortable and start moving forward with baby steps again. And unless he's in harm's way, resist the urge to pick him up if something spooks him. It's better for his confidence if you can leave him on the ground.

If Your Cat Simply Refuses To Be Walked Outdoors

An alternative to walking your cat is an outdoor enclosure. Many people are installing "catios" and similar types of outdoor spaces that allow feline family members safe, secure access to the outdoors.

You can go as simple or deluxe as you like with these enclosures. The one below, which belongs to a client of mine, is quite posh, but there are very simple designs as well. You can purchase one, or go the do-it-yourself route.



Source and References

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