

# Who Knew Feeding Your Kitty Could Be This Fun?

For the ultimate in environmental enrichment - and for increasing activity in healthy, sedentary cats - I highly recommend this creative method of feeding. This fun gadget turns meals into opportunities for physical and mental stimulation.

**Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker**

## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- A recent study suggests domestic cats do not engage in contrafreeloading behavior, meaning they choose not to work for food (e.g., from a food puzzle) if they have access to the same food for “free”
- Contrafreeloading is seen in many other species both wild and domestic, including dogs, mice, rats, monkeys and chimpanzees, so cats present an interesting exception within the research
- It’s important to note that cats will work for food if it’s their only option, so healthy indoor kitties should be offered a variety of ways to “hunt” for their meals to encourage physical activity and mental stimulation on a daily basis

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I’m guessing most of you reading here today have never heard the term “contrafreeloading.” What it describes is the drive of certain animals to work for food even when the same food is available for “free” — right there for the taking, no effort required.

*“Contrafreeloading behavior has been observed in many different species, including dogs, mice, rats, monkeys, and chimpanzees,” writes Marc Bekoff, Ph.D. in Psychology Today. “The glaring exceptions within this research have been domestic cats, who seem to prefer being served by their human pet.”<sup>1</sup>*

## **Problem: Cats Won’t Work for Food if They Don’t Need To**

Bekoff isn’t alone in his assessment of freeloading felines. Researchers at the University of California, Davis School of Veterinary Medicine presented the results of their study of domestic cat feeding behaviors at a virtual conference of the Animal Behavior Society (ABS) this past July.<sup>2</sup>

Since a previous study of six laboratory cats found little evidence of contrafreeloading, UC Davis cat behaviorist and study co-author Mikel Delgado and her team decided to test house cats, theorizing that the combination of a home environment and increased activity might make them more likely to contrafreeload.

The 18 cats involved in the experiment wore an activity tracker and were presented with a choice between a food puzzle and a tray of free food. The cats consumed more food from the tray than the puzzle, and most cats chose to eat from the tray first and spent more time eating from the tray compared to the puzzle. From the study abstract:

*“Our results indicate there is no sign of contrafreeloading among domestic cats. There was no relationship between activity as recorded by the tracker and tendencies to interact with the puzzle. Further research is required to understand why among tested animals, only cats seem to not express contrafreeloading behavior.”*

As noted above, this behavior in cats differs from the behavior of several other animals both wild and domestic that have been studied over the years.

*“There are different theories about why animals might contrafreeload,” explained Delgado, “including boredom in captive environments, stimulating natural foraging behaviors, and creating a sense of control over the environment and outcomes.”<sup>3</sup>*

Delgado theorizes that while it’s unclear exactly why cats don’t often exhibit the behavior, it could be because the activity of removing food from puzzles doesn’t closely mirror natural feline hunting behavior. But with that said, when there are no freebies available, cats can and do use food puzzles. Further, previous research by Delgado and her colleagues suggests that food puzzles can provide an important enrichment activity for domestic cats.<sup>4</sup>

## **Solution: Make Working for Food Your Cat’s Only Option**

I couldn’t agree more that food puzzles and other creative means of feeding and exercising indoor cats are essential components of environmental enrichment. In fact, I encourage all guardians of healthy cats to turn as many meals as possible each day into opportunities for both physical and mental stimulation. The food puzzle I most often recommend for cats is the Doc & Phoebe’s Indoor Hunting Feeder.

I’ve been pleasantly surprised to see how quickly very obese cats start to engage with the feeder and bat it around. I’ve also seen improvement in intercat aggression in multi-cat households when the feeders are used. There are experts who believe cats who habitually knock things off counters and shelves are combating mind-numbing boredom by creating a little excitement in their environment.

*“The best day in your cat’s life shouldn’t be that day a cricket or spider got in the house and she hunted it,” says Dr. Liz Bales, who developed the feeder. “You can do this. It’s not hard. Just give your cat a way to hunt for her food. You can combine her need to eat with an eating cycle that’s emotionally fulfilling, suits her natural instincts, and provides mental engagement.”*

## **How to Encourage Hunting Behaviors in Your Cat**

Don’t free feed your kitty, also known as hosting an all-day all-she-can-eat buffet. This feeding mistake goes hand-in-hand with a poor-quality diet, specifically kibble, because it’s the only type of food you can safely leave at room temperature day and night. Free feeding is the perfect way to create an overweight or obese cat.

In addition, a constantly available food source turns your carnivorous hunter into a grazer, which goes against her feline nature and creates significant metabolic stress. Wild cats are always on the move in search of their next meal. Many domesticated cats, on the other hand, are free fed and know exactly where the bowl is.

The more you feed, the less interested your kitty is in "hunting" — which is good exercise — around the house. If the only time you see her in motion is when she's walking to or from the same old buffet, she's getting zero exercise and is probably bored senseless, when it comes to enjoying the art of eating (hunting).

Separate her daily food allotment into several small portions and place them in different locations around the house for her to find. Make liberal use of indoor hunting feeders or other types of food puzzles that encourage natural feline behaviors and provide mental stimulation as well.

Also consider putting food bowls or the hunting feeders at the bottom and top of as many flights of stairs as you have to encourage muscle-building exercise throughout the day. Alternatively, you can feed two portion-controlled meals a day, however, research shows feeding just one large meal day offers a number of health benefits, including a lower risk of diabetes.

If you opt to change your cat's caloric intake or number of meals you must do so very slowly, over many weeks to months. Cats need time to adapt to any change in their meals or meal schedule. By slowly working towards optimizing your cat's nutrition and feeding schedule, you'll improve her overall health over time.

## Sources and References

[Futurity August 6, 2020](#)

<sup>1</sup> [Psychology Today, May 8, 2019](#)

<sup>2</sup> [2023 ABS Virtual Conference, July 24 - August 30, 2023](#)

<sup>3</sup> [UC Davis News, Egghead, July 30, 2020](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Delgado, M. et al. Journal of Feline Medicine and Surgery, March 25, 2019](#)

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