

Could This Common Toy Harm Your Pet?

Experts weigh in on the psychological impacts of laser pointers on cats and dogs. At the same time, it may seem like harmless fun, but the endless pursuit with no reward could harm your pet's well-being.

Analysis by [Dr. Karen Shaw Becker](#)

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Veterinary behaviorists are warning pet parents that cats can develop behavior disorders as a result of chasing, but never catching, the little red beams emitted by laser toys
- The problem was first identified in dogs, who can also become so obsessed with chasing the light that they develop behavior problems
- Some cats develop a compulsion, eventually spending most of their waking hours chasing things, to the point that it becomes a quality-of-life issue
- One way to use a laser pointer safely with your cat is to incorporate clicker training and treats into play sessions so that kitty is allowed to “win” at the game
- There are also lots of great alternatives to laser toys to ensure your feline family member gets daily exercise

At first glance, it would seem laser pointers are the perfect interactive toy for cats and the humans who love them, because they require minimal effort on our part, and most kitties can't resist chasing that little red beam.

However, many veterinary behaviorists don't see it that way, including Dr. John Ciribassi. In a 2020 interview with veterinary publication *dvm360*, Ciribassi explained that the problem with laser pointers is there's no endpoint — no point at which cats actually physical catch something.¹ While they're certainly eager to chase the laser light, even if they seem to “catch” it, they have nothing to show for their effort.

According to Ciribassi, this type of pointless play can lead to behavior problems in cats, for example, they can develop a tendency to compulsively chase shadows or reflections. Some kitties wind up spending most of the day looking for things that resemble a laser pointer.

Dogs Were Actually the First Laser Toy ‘Victims’

Interestingly, the problem with laser play was first identified in dogs. According to a 2012 article in *LiveScience*, “The lack of closure in laser-beam chasing could be messing with your dog's head.”²

Dr. Nicholas Dodman, animal behavior expert and professor emeritus at Tufts University's Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine, explained in an interview with *LiveScience* that many dogs instinctively chase laser beams because to a dog, anything that moves like that is begging to be chased. Movement triggers the innate canine prey

drive, which is why smaller prey animals often stop moving and freeze in their tracks.

And while dogs don't see colors all that well, they have a keen ability to detect motion with their eyes. The continuous movement of a laser dot stimulates their predatory systems, making it impossible for them not to chase it. "They can't help themselves," says Dodman. "They are obliged to chase it."

Similar to Ciribassi's concerns about cats, Dodman believes dogs can get so obsessed with chasing the light that they develop behavior problems.

"I've seen light chasing as a pathology where they will just constantly chase around a light or shadow and pounce upon it. They spend their whole lives wishing and waiting," says Dodman.³

Never actually successfully catching their "prey" can drive dogs slightly nuts. The same principle applies with bomb or **drug sniffing dogs**, as well as **search and rescue canines**. Trainers of these dogs have learned there are psychological consequences when the animals don't find what they're looking for, so their handlers occasionally arrange for them to find a target in the interest of keeping them emotionally balanced.

Laser Pointers Can Also Be Problematic for Cats

Back in 2013, it was generally thought that cats would be less likely than dogs to develop an obsession and accompanying behavior problems as a result of chasing laser beams. For one thing, felines in the wild stalk prey for just a few minutes at a stretch and move on. In addition, cats tend to have relatively short attention spans, so it was assumed they'd be unlikely to engage in endless pursuit of a laser dot.

However, in Ciribassi's experience, cats who develop a **compulsive disorder** as a result of chasing a laser pointer spend most of their day engaged in repetitive behaviors. They lose interest in normal feline behaviors like interacting with their humans or even eating and spend all their time chasing things they imagine resemble the beam from a laser pointer. As you can imagine, this can become a quality-of-life issue for these kitties.

Safe Laser Pointer Play With Cats

Since laser toys can be very beneficial in keeping cats physically active and their predatory drive stimulated, it's important not to "throw the baby out with the bathwater," says Ciribassi.

He believes 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 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.

10 Great Alternatives to Laser Pointers

1. **Hunting for food and treats** — Your cat, while domesticated, has maintained much of his natural drive to engage in the same behaviors as his counterparts in the wild, including hunting for food, which also happens to be great exercise. A great way to do that with an indoor cat is to have him "hunt" for his meals and treats.

Separate his 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. You can also hide his food bowls or food puzzle toys in various spots around the house.

2. **Cat trees and elevated vertical spaces** — Climbing, scratching, and stretching are natural feline activities that help keep their bodies well-conditioned and their minds stimulated. Indoor cat trees should ideally reach from floor to ceiling, be very stable (not wobbly), and covered with a variety of cat-tractive materials to 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.

3. **Outdoor enclosures** — Providing your indoor cat the opportunity to experience the outdoors safely provides both physical and mental stimulation without the risks of free roaming. It also gives her an opportunity for beneficial **grounding**.

Many cat parents are creating safe outdoor enclosures or cat patios — catios — 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.

4. **Leash walks** — Another way to get a willing cat outdoors in nice weather is to **walk him on a harness and leash**.
5. **Motorized interactive toys** — Battery operated cat toys that move in random patterns, similar to a cat's prey, are also irresistibly engaging.
6. **Feather toys** — Interactive feather toys, especially one called Da Bird, are irresistible to most cats.

*"What I recommend is two play sessions a day, and work up to 10 or 15 minutes per play session," says **feline behavior consultant Dr. Marci Koski**. "You want to get your cat running, leaping and jumping. 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."*

7. **Fake furry mice** — These little mouse toys are also a hit with most 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 kitty and see how she reacts.
8. **Soap bubbles** — Many cats think it's great fun to chase and swat bubbles floating in the air!
9. **Catnip** — Some kitties go wild for catnip, so a catnip toy can be an ideal way to get your kitty in the mood for some interactive playtime. When a susceptible cat (not all cats are affected by catnip) absorbs the nepetalactone in the herb, her pleasure centers in the brain are activated and the next thing you know, she's rolling around in a state of goofy bliss.

And despite the fact that catnip appears to make kitties "high," it's an entirely harmless and non-addictive herb.

10. **Hiding boxes** — When cats in the wild feel threatened, they head for trees, dens, or caves to seek safety. Captive kitties don't have that option, so their obsession with hiding in boxes may be an adaptation. And 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.

Sources and References

¹ [dvm360, December 11, 2019](#)

^{2,3} [LiveScience July 26, 2012](#)
