

Play With Your Cat

While pet owners would never consider withholding food or water from their cats, many forget to provide adequate exercise and stimulation. Yes, cats do sleep a lot, but play is an important component of any pet's health and well-being. The release of energy triggered by regular daily interactive play sessions can help alleviate stress and prevent behavior problems.

Stress Reduction

The average indoor cat is subject to a variety of stressors, usually the result of perceived or real invasions of her territory. Seeing a roaming cat out the window that she can't chase away, having houseguests, adding a new resident (human or animal) or a trip to the veterinarian can cause your cat anxiety.

One response to stress for many cats is eliminating outside the litter box. Another response may be redirected aggression – where the cat takes out her frustration on another cat, the family dog or you. Over time, stress can cause chronic medical problems. Engaging your cat in regular play sessions can help alleviate her stress and help keep her mentally and physically healthy.

Preventing Behavior Problems

Without appropriate outlets for their energy, cats may attack ankles, play too roughly or interrupt their owner's sleep with nocturnal adventures. Several interactive play sessions per day, especially one timed shortly before bedtime, can help reduce or eliminate these behaviors.

Structured Play Sessions

Simulating the hunt

Create your play sessions to mimic the cat's natural hunting behavior. Remember, cats are natural hunters, and we originally domesticated them to rid our homes and barns of rodents and other vermin. Choose a fishing-pole toy – one that imitates the noise of flapping bird wings is irresistible to most cats. Make the toy soar around the room, engaging your cat's attention. Or simulate mouse activity by sliding the end of the toy around on the floor in quick, jerky movements. Allow the cat to pounce and catch the toy and bat it around, then start again. End the play session by allowing the cat to capture the toy. (Avoid laser lights since it is important for the cat to enjoy the satisfaction of catching the toy or prey.)

After the play session

Sessions should be long enough for the cat to get tired – probably 15 - 20 minutes depending on the age and activity level of the cat. About five minutes after the end of the session, feed your cat some canned cat food. This mimics what would happen at the end of a real hunt – the cat would eat her catch. Don't be surprised if your cat takes a long nap after a play session.

Other Toys and Activities

Provide plenty of safe toys for your cat, and rotate them to make them more interesting. (See our handout “Cat Toys and How to Use Them.”)

To allow your cat to enjoy the outdoors safely, cat fencing can be added to your yard’s existing fence. It will keep your cat in and other small animals out. Or you might wish to build or buy a small outdoor enclosure (remember, a cat shouldn’t be left unattended outdoors, even in a secure enclosure). Some cats can learn to go outdoors on a harness and leash.

Provide perches with a view. A window with a view of bird activity or squirrels can provide hours of entertainment. Some cats enjoy watching videos made especially for cats. An aquarium also makes for interesting “cat TV.”

Hide your cat’s food so she has to hunt for it, instead of putting it in a bowl. Also, toys that may be stuffed with food are available at most pet stores.

A Note about Water

Cats that drink more water are less likely to get urinary tract infections. Urinary tract infections are a leading cause of house soiling in cats. Provide several bowls of water, and make sure the water in them is always fresh. Since cats usually like to drink running water, you might want to purchase a cat water fountain, available in most pet stores. Mounting a few rabbit water bottles (the kind with the metal tubes that the animal drinks from) in several locations offers another novel opportunity to encourage your cat to drink water.