

HOME, SWEET HOME:

How to keep your cat happy at home





“ The fact is, the more time a pet cat spends safe at home, the less risk of injury or death from road accidents, fighting, and disease. A pet cat kept safe at home can live up to four times longer than a cat left to roam.

- *Australian Veterinary Association*



Contrary to some beliefs, cats do not have to roam outdoors to be happy.

If you keep your cat entertained by creating an interesting environment, which fulfils its physical, mental and social needs, it will be happy to stay entirely within the confines of your house or property.

Containing your cat means completely preventing them roaming from your property at any time, day or night. This can be achieved by keeping your cat indoors, or a combination of indoors and having a secure outdoor enclosure, or cat-proof fencing around an outdoor area. Essentially, keeping your cat safe at home and not letting them roam.

Advantages to containment

Your cat is safe



Your home is the safest place for your cat. Free roaming cats have an increased risk of injury and infection from cat fights, being injured or killed by cars, being attacked by a dog, or getting lost; and a much greater risk of catching contagious diseases.

.....

Lower cost



By keeping your cat safely contained, you reduce their chances of being in a road accident or being exposed to serious diseases such as Feline AIDS. This means that you are likely to have substantially fewer vet bills in relation to these sorts of issues.

.....

Happy neighbours



Roaming cats often cause community disputes as they wander onto neighbouring properties and spray, fight, defecate, annoy dogs and kill wildlife. Stay friendly with your neighbours by keeping your cat within your property.

.....

Protecting wildlife



Outdoor cats (even aging ones who are well fed) can cause considerable injury and death to wildlife as they instinctively hunt. Prey that is not killed is likely to die later from shock or infection. Scientists tell us cats prey on more than 186 kinds of native Australian birds, 64 mammals, 87 reptiles, 10 species of amphibians and numerous invertebrates. By containing your cat, you are actively protecting our native wildlife.

.....

Owners get to spend more time with their cat



Enjoy quality time with your cat and building a bond with them. Your cat will be there when you return from your day's activities; you will not need to wait around until your cat comes home or wonder where they are and whether they are safe.

How to transition your cat to containment



If your cat is older and used to going outside, remember that transitioning your cat indoors will need to be a gradual process as your cat adjusts to their new lifestyle.

If you are thinking about getting a new cat for your home and family, the best time to plan for keeping a cat safe at home is before you bring it home. Cats do not suit every household and it is important to consider this before adoption. With the proper care and attention, young cats can easily adapt to life at home and can live long, healthy and happy lives.

Here are some steps to follow when you decide to keep your new or existing cat safe at home.



ALL CATS:

Health and safety

Inspect door latches, fly screens, windows, balconies, and chimneys to ensure your cat won't be able to slip out unnoticed or harm itself in any way.

The basics

Always provide fresh food and water for your cat, in separate locations, and make sure your cat knows where to find them.

Cats love choice, so providing more than one source of water is a good idea.

Cats enjoy vertical as well as horizontal space so having many high places they can perch on or walk along is ideal, particularly if they are able to sunbake through a window. Scratching posts, cat grass and water fountains will also allow your cat to express natural behaviours while safe at home.

Litter tray

Cats can take some time to get used to using a litter tray, so it may require some patience. Try placing it in an obvious location, but with some privacy. Ensure it is big enough for your cat to enter it, use it and exit easily. One cat needs two trays; each additional cat needs another tray, all in different places.

Playtime

In order to meet the needs of your cat, playtime is important. Each cat should enjoy several short bursts of play each day, adjusted as necessary for their age and health status. If you are able to establish a set routine, this is reassuring for your cat. Cats are most active at dawn and dusk, so this can be a good time for play.

Companionship

One of the most important enrichments in a cat's life is interaction with humans at a level they are comfortable with – time spent playing, sitting, and sleeping with your cat will create a special bond and help fulfil its emotional needs (as well as your own).





NEW CATS:

Create a safe space

Your new cat may feel insecure and will not want to venture far, so this is the ideal time to introduce containment and establish a safe routine. Set your cat up in their own small, temporary, safe and secure space. Once settled in (it may take a few days; it may take longer), you can gently allow it to explore the rest of the house. Always leave the door to the safe space open so it can retreat there if needing privacy (or the litter box!).

Supervised excursions

If you feel your new cat would like to experience the outside, they can be taught to walk on a harness if trained from a young age. They may take you for a walk rather than the other way around, but it is a safe way for your cat to experience the outdoors.



EXISTING CATS:

Go slowly

Your cat who is used to spending time outdoors can be transitioned to being an indoor cat, but it's best to go about any changes gradually, as cats do thrive on routine. If things don't work out every time, don't lose hope. Your cat may need time to learn that being safe at home can be fun.

Timing is everything

There will be certain times in your life when it will be easier for you and your cat to make a change to routine.

These include:

When it's cold outside

When it's chilly outdoors, your cat is more likely to prefer to be snuggled up indoors than out in the cold. Use this as an opportunity to get your cat used to how sweet and safe a life at home can be.

Feeding time

Feeding time is a good opportunity to extend time safe at home. Instead of letting your cat outside straight after eating, extend the time they spend indoors.

When moving house

Moving house can be an optimal time to transition your cat indoors because new behaviours can be associated with the new environment. This will also help protect your cat from the dangers of roaming outside in unfamiliar territory.

Containment considerations



Remember...

Many cats do not like change and a sudden prevention of access to the great outdoors may create stress and frustration for your cat if they were previously allowed to roam.

These tips should help you plan for the transition:

1

Consider which containment method best suits your cat

- ▶ 100% indoors
- ▶ Indoors, but allowed outside on a lead and harness
- ▶ Indoors, with access to an enclosed outdoor area
- ▶ Cat-proof fencing of your yard
- ▶ Supervised outdoor access



2

Consider why your cat likes the outdoors

- ▶ Mating: **hopefully not!**
They should have been desexed as stipulated in the Tasmanian Cat Management Legislation
- ▶ Hunting opportunities
- ▶ Territorial behaviour
- ▶ Exploration/enrichment/exercise/information gathering - seeking behaviour which is essential for their mental wellbeing
- ▶ To know the whereabouts of other cats, or to create space from another cat they may be forced to live with

3

How can you make the transition easier for your cat?

- ▶ Rehearse. Start in winter when your cat is more likely to want to spend more time inside.
- ▶ Ensure you have met their essential needs inside the home and/or enclosure.
- ▶ Feed 2-3 times a day (or more). Play with your cat before and after the meal to avoid the 'eat and run' habit. Gradually extend the time your cat stays inside after eating.
- ▶ Interact more with your cat inside by grooming, playing etc.
- ▶ Bring the outdoors in (sensory boxes with leaves, twigs and soil).
- ▶ Make life predictable.
- ▶ Ignore your cat's efforts to be let outside. Be aware that thwarted behaviour can lead to a *frustration burst* which is a normal response. If you give in to your cat's requests, you will teach it to make an extreme song and dance to be let out – which is the opposite of what you want. Only let your cat out at designated times and try and make indoors just as inviting.
- ▶ Place a symbol at cat height on your door or cat flap that means it will not be opened (eg: X). This gives your cat a sense of predictability, so

your cat knows when the cat flap is open and that they can use it, as opposed to when its locked and they are unable to go outside.

- ▶ Teach recall (coming when called):
 - Train your cat at times when they are hungry, attentive (alert) or playful.
 - Start inside, at a close distance, using high value rewards. Teach your cat that coming when called does not end in restriction or restraint, but in more freedom.
- ▶ Consider harness training. Start inside the house first, without the lead. As your cat gets more comfortable with the harness, add the lead. Then proceed outside for short periods, close to home, at a quiet time. This is an opportunity for sensory exploration, it is not about physical exercise.

You may have to alter your methods depending on the individuality of your cat(s) and the environment you have to work within.

As you will be using food treats for training purposes, feed less at mealtimes so they aren't overfed. You might consider not feeding your cat out of a bowl but instead using food as a means of training and mental enrichment.

Finally, take it slowly. Consider your cat's personality and idiosyncrasies. Seek help if needed – talking to your veterinarian or cat behaviour consultant is a great place to start.

Stress prevention

Changing an outdoor cat to an indoor one, can cause stress and frustration – for both you and your cat! Stress is a normal part of life and is not avoidable altogether, but we can help keep it to a minimum.

In addition to providing for your cat's basic, essential requirements, consider:

✓ **A scratching pole.** Sturdy and tall (if vertical). Some cats prefer horizontal scratching surfaces. Test their preferences from carpet, to sisal, to wood. Place them in prominent areas where your cat spends a lot of time.

✓ **Litter box styles.** Test sizes and shapes and preferred locations.

✓ **Litter box materials.** Test different litter substrates and what depth they prefer. Most cats prefer unscented, fine, granular, clumping litter. Clean at least daily and wash weekly.

✓ **Elevated areas and hidey-holes.** Cats love to see and not be seen.

✓ **Social time.** With you or other animal friends at a level they are comfortable with.

✓ **Gentle grooming.**

✓ **Territory.** If you have multiple cats, it is very important that you ensure they each have their own core territory and plenty of resources and escape outlets (hidey-holes or high places).

✓ **Playtime.** Opportunities to explore, stretch and play. Hunting games (balls, fishing rods, pull toys, or feathers on wands - rotate them to prevent boredom). Let your cat have short bursts of play. Let them catch the toy, then feed them afterwards.

Other ideas: food puzzles (e.g. plastic bottles with holes cut in them), boxes, perches or shelves for climbing or retreat, scratching posts, tunnels, water features, herb gardens, lookouts over the garden, trick training and catnip.

Pheromones

Cats communicate through natural chemical signals, also known as pheromones. Pheromones can express many different things and can be used to help a cat feel comfortable. Cats 'mark their territory' by rubbing their face and body on furniture, doorways and other places to make them feel at home, leaving facial pheromones behind. These pheromones convey a message of well-being and calm. It is best not to clean these scent marks.

Spray and diffuser products are available that synthetically copy these pheromones, such as the feline facial pheromone, which can help reduce stress in cats and help them feel safe and secure. They can also be used to redirect behaviour such as scratching. If your cat's basic needs are already being met but they are still showing signs of stress, you could consider pheromone replicating products to assist. If the problematic behaviour is unrelated to stress, pheromone products may not help, and you should talk to your veterinarian.

Problem behaviours

Some cats may exhibit behaviours which you find problematic. These may include scratching furniture and meowing loudly. It is very important that you try to redirect this behaviour and replace it, through positive reinforcement, with a preferable alternative or encourage it occurring in a more appropriate place (e.g. scratching post).



Seek help if needed, starting with your local veterinarian or a cat behaviour consultant.

See TassieCat's *Common Cat Behavioural Issues and How to Solve Them* booklet for more information.





TassieCat

For more info visit:
www.tassiecat.com

Credits:

Thanks to Dr Katrina Ward (Animal Behaviour Consultant), Safe Cat (safecat.org.au) and Good Cat (goodcatsa.com) for the great information on how to transition your cat to a happy and safer life at home.

