

Improving the indoor environment for cats

Cats use and rely on their environment in a different way from other animals. The inside of the home should be considered the 'core' of the cat's territory. This is somewhere that the cat expects to feel safe and where it can eat, drink and rest in privacy away from potential enemies. Cats also make more use of three-dimensional space than people or dogs; they are keen to climb up high to vantage points where they feel safe.

It is important to provide cats with a home environment that meets their needs, especially in multi-cat households, residential areas that are overpopulated with cats or when cats do not have outdoor access. Otherwise there is a significant risk of frustration, stress and behavioural problems such as aggression, house soiling or urine marking.

In almost all cases it is preferable to give cats outdoor access but, when this is impossible some reason, it is even more important that the indoor environment provides all of the cat's needs.

Recognising indicators of stress

Stressed cats are often hard to spot because, in most cases, they become quiet and introverted when they are unhappy.

Typical signs of stress include:

Excessive grooming: This may result in bald or sore patches.

Lack of activity: Cats that stop playing become reluctant to move about or eat.

When in close proximity to each other, the cats may move very slowly, as they are frightened of being chased or attacked.

Hiding: The cat spends most of its time hiding in the same place and will not come out to feed or interact.

Ease of startle: The cat is very jumpy and will startle at sudden movements or sounds.

Wariness or fighting around resources: The cat seems hesitant to approach cat-doors, food and latrines. When they are in these locations they may seem very nervous. Hissing and spitting may be seen when other cats approach.

A household full of very passive cats that seem to spend all their time sitting still and watching each other probably indicates a high degree of stress.

The cat's basic needs are for:

- Space [including access to height].
- An abundance of resources [food, water, latrines, resting places].
- Opportunities to perform normal behaviour [hunting, clawing etc].
- Privacy.

Space

Cats should be provided with lots of opportunity to climb and explore. Provide shelves at different heights, cat furniture and clear the tops of cupboards and wardrobes so that the cats can gain access to them.

Resources

Cats need several places to eat, drink, and rest. This gives them choice and means that, if two cats do not get along, then they need not compete for the same toilet or food bowl. Enabling the cats to live separate lives actually increases the chances that they will get along.

Choice over resting places is particularly important because cats move from one place to another regularly to avoid their own parasites [such as fleas].

A common formula for the number of separate latrines needed in a multi-cat household is 1 per cat +1. This means 9 cat toilets for 8 cats! This is because cats do not share latrines in the wild and they like to have separate ones for urine and faeces. Fortunately, it is possible to provide really good outdoor toilets for cats so that the number of litter trays needed is reduced.

Cats also have a different thirst response from dogs or people which means that they may not consume enough water to maintain healthy kidneys and a healthy urinary system. Cats can be encouraged to drink more healthy amounts by providing them with a recirculating-type water fountain. These are available commercially and include a carbon filter to remove water impurities that cats don't like [such as chlorine]. This makes the water taste more appealing, like rainwater. The water movement and provision of a running water slope make it much easier for the cat to drink.

Opportunities to perform normal behaviour

Clawing is often a problem because it is destructive and annoying for owners. Further information about problem clawing is provided on another handout, but it is even more important to give cats opportunities to claw so that it does not become a problem in the first place.

Cats typically claw:

- To stretch back muscles after waking
- To mark boundaries of territory
- To sharpen claws
- To gain attention

Appropriate places to position clawing posts are therefore:

- Close to resting places.
- Near to cat doors and in the garden.
- In living rooms close to furniture [where the cat may claw for attention].

Cats have preferences for particular kinds of material to claw. Upholstered furniture is often used for claw sharpening and stretching. Soft wood is often used for marking boundaries. Experiment with providing the right surfaces to suit the cat's clawing needs. Encourage clawing by taking notice and praising when your cat claws on an object that you want to be used for clawing.

Hunting and play are important for cats, especially in the early morning and evening. These are times when it is important to encourage interactive games using fishing toys, laser pointers and lightweight toys rolled on the floor. Under no circumstances encourage play involving people's feet or hands because this can create problems of predatory aggression especially for cats that are kept indoors.

At other times, the cat should be provided with a continually-changing range of small lightweight toys to play with. Keep a selection of feathers, decorated ping pong balls, furry mouse toys and similar small items in a box. Scatter a selection around the house daily. Real fur toys are particularly good because they act as a focus for predatory behaviour.

Variety is important:

- Noise: Toys that twitter or squeak when touched.
- Movement: Toys that move rapidly and unpredictably when they roll.
- Texture, size and colour: Bright colours, feathers, parts that sparkle or dangle, or toys that mimic real prey.

Typically cats get bored with play after about 10 minutes. This means that play sessions must be brief but frequent. If your cat appears to be getting bored with a particular toy part way through a game, then switch to something else or move the toy in a different way to attract your cat's attention.

In the wild, cats spend 6 or more hours every day hunting for, catching and eating their prey. They may make 100+ attempts to catch prey and only succeed in perhaps 10% of instances. In the domestic environment, all of this activity may be absent, especially for indoor cats. It is also known that well-fed cats continue to hunt wildlife but when they catch a bird or mouse they will take more time to kill it. This means that the wild animal's suffering is prolonged. Activity feeding provides a partial solution because the cat has to work to get food.

Activity feeders include:

Delidome [available from online retailers]: An electronic cat feeder that throws out small balls full of food every 1-2 hours for the cat to play with.

Empty plastic drinks bottles: perforated with food-pellet sized holes and part filled with dried cat food. The food falls out as the toy rolls along.

Food bowls placed high on shelves for the cat to find.

Activity box: Fill a box with crumpled newspaper and small toys. Hide small dried food treats for the cat to rummage and find [freeze-dried prawns and smelly fish treats work well.

Indoor play and activity feeding are obviously essential for indoor-only cats, but they also reduce the outdoor cat's interest in predatory behaviour, thus saving wildlife from predation.

Privacy

Privacy is, in part, provided by giving cats choice. A multitude of resting and feeding places helps to enable cats to vary the amount of contact they have with each other according to their mood. Covered litter trays provide added privacy as do food bowls placed high on shelves.

Some cats, especially those which are elderly or infirm, also like to have ground-level hiding places where they can run in a hide. Commercial options are available but empty cat baskets or cardboard boxes are suitable alternatives.

The indoor part of the cat's territory is somewhere that the cat should feel secure. In the wild this 'core' part of the cat's territory is never invaded or overlooked by other cats because it is surrounded by a space that the cat patrols and leaves scent marks in to repel invading cats. Indoor-only cats are unable to do this and may feel very vulnerable if outside cats can look in at them through windows. Even cats that do have outdoor access may not be able to maintain a suitable buffer distance that keeps other cats away from their home.

It is important to block views from windows that are overlooked, perhaps close to places where your cat has urine marked or shown signs of aggression or fear in the past. This is easily achieved using 'glass etch spray' which is used to make bathroom windows opaque. Light still comes through but the cat cannot see clearly what is on the other side of the glass. Other cats tend to hang around less when there is no chance to threaten the indoor cat. Changes may also be made outdoors to deter other cats from lurking and menacing your cat [see handout on improving the outdoor environment for cats].

The indoor territory should only be available to your own cat. To avoid problems of other cats entering the home, which can cause urine spraying or aggression between your own cats, it is best to fit an electronic cat flap with personalised coded collar keys that allow only your cats to enter.

Giving indoor housed cats some fresh air

Harness and lead

Some cats can learn to walk on a leash and harness if this is introduced while they are young. However, cats should not be taken on walks in the same way as dogs because this can be terrifying and distressing for them. Walks should be confined to a garden within easy access of the house so that the cat can build up familiarity with the landscape and odour marks that are there. If the cat shows signs of fear or anxiety, walks should be stopped.

Outdoor pen

Indoor cats should ideally be given access to an enclosed outdoor area. Free access is via a cat flap so that the cat can choose when it goes in and out. A well-designed pen should mimic the outside world as closely as possible, providing a multitude of tree trunks, toys, scratching posts and high-up resting places. Introduction to the pen should be gradual, perhaps involving play or searches for food treats. The cat must always be able to return to the house voluntarily.

