

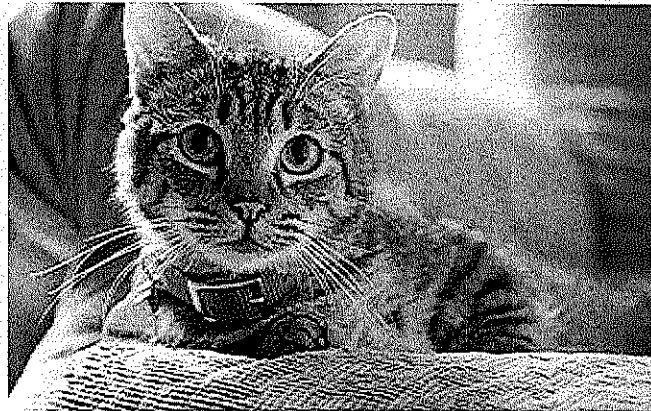
General Cat Care Tips

5 Tips to Create Your Cat's Ideal Home Environment

Imagine you're on assignment to learn about indoor cats, with pop culture as your resource. What would you find? Well, Garfield spits out sarcastic comments while lounging around the living room eating lasagna; meanwhile, Tom chases the mouse Jerry around the house until Tom invariably crashes into a mouse hole or a mallet falls on his head.

We all know those scenarios are not real, but it is true that indoor cats often lead pampered, easy lifestyles -- toys, litter boxes, regular food and water and loving humans. Spoiled, maybe, but easy? Not always. You'd think a cozy home and regular meals indoors would be a cat's dream, but if you consider the fact that most cats were outdoor animals up until around the 1970s, the house cat is still a fairly new concept.

By nature, cats are predators and explorers, they love high places, climbing and balancing. They are self-reliant but can be social as well. We bring them in our home to give them a better life but often, we repress some of these natural instincts -- keeping them indoors full-time rather than allowing them to roam the yard, hunting for small prey; ignoring them as they lie on the living room rug, instead of engaging them in play. According to Tony Buffington, Doctor of Veterinary Medicine and professor at Ohio State University, this can make for unhappy and unhealthy cats. But, with a little knowledge, you can make your indoor environment as healthy and natural for a cat as the great outdoors.



Get Creative with Food and Water

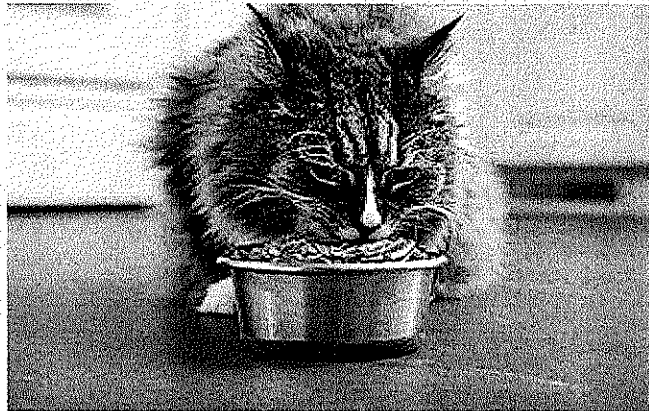
Unlike humans, cats should be encouraged to play with their food. A great way to do this is to take yogurt containers (the kind with a reusable lid) and cut out small holes. Put pellets of dry food in the covered container and let the cat play with it, rattling and batting it until he's finally able to make the food drop out.

Back in the day, cats foraged for food anywhere from five to six hours a day. A cat might have eaten 10 mice a day, so he worked hard to capture those meals. Hunting kept the cat active and his predatory instincts sharp. Portion sizes stayed small and the cat ate several times a day.

Contrast this with the bowl of food you put out for your cat. If you eliminate hunting, you also eliminate exercise, causing obesity and poor health. After all, if you could eat whenever you wanted with minimal activity, wouldn't you be overweight? That's one reason obesity levels among people are so high!

A cat's need for water is also complex. By nature, it's an either-or situation; either the cat looks for food or for water but not both. After all, if you're trapping a mouse, can you stop for a drink? A full bowl of water next to your cat's food can lead to dehydration because the cat might continually choose food over water.

So, get creative. Instead of overflowing bowls of water and food side by side, set smaller bowls throughout the house, in high and low places to encourage exploration and climbing. A good rule of thumb? For each cat, place one food bowl and one water bowl in separate areas, plus a few extras to encourage exploration and roaming. Make food contraptions using boxes, small containers or paper bags so the cat has to work or play to get the food. These simple steps encourage exercise, agility and hunting, challenges that a cat loves and needs.

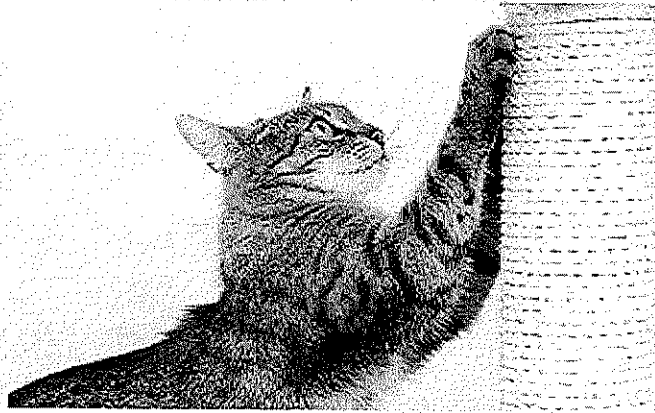


Give Them Something to Scratch

When your favorite feline scratches your antique dresser, it's not because he hates you. Cats scratch because it's an instinct, satisfying several needs:

- Scratching helps a cat sharpen claws and shed the outside layer of claw. This helps a cat's defensive abilities, even if it's an indoor cat, fighting no more than his shadow. It also is good for his claws.
- By scratching, a cat marks his territory. It's not just the actual mark; the bottom of a cat's foot has scent glands allowing the cat to mark areas by smell as well.
- Scratching is also stretching, helping the cat to flex his back and leg muscles. Like humans, cats often sit or lie for long periods of time, so they need to stretch.

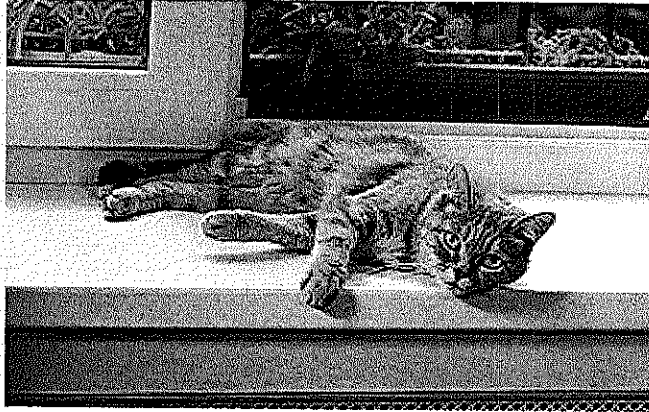
Now that you know why cats scratch, your job is to make it easy for them. Without scratching posts, the cat will choose his own areas, creating many headaches for the humans in the household. For this reason, you want to place posts wherever the cat goes -- sleeping areas, his route to food, and in doorways. Ideally, scratching posts should be tall to allow a cat to reach up and stretch. Of course, some cats like horizontal posts, so it's good if you can have more than one post. And don't despair if you live in a smaller home; attach the post to the wall and your cat will have a place to scratch, and also get some climbing or leaping exercise in the process.



Give Them "Me" Time

On any given day, I wish I could retreat for a bit of "me" time, be it curled up with a book, taking a little nap, or just zoning out from the stress of the day. Well, I should have been a cat. Unlike dogs who can spend most of their day playing or basking in their human's gaze, cats need to get away -- from their humans, noise and other cats and household pets. A cat refuge is anywhere the cat is comfortable or surrounded by "his" things, food or water, a litter box, toys, a scratching post or rest area. So, a household rule of thumb -- if the cat retreats, let him.

On that topic, a good refuge for a cat is a high perch or observation area. While curiosity may have never actually killed a cat, it is part of a cat's nature to observe. A high resting spot allows the cat to escape while still keeping a paw on the pulse of the household. Window sills, stairs, even the back of the sofa are great areas for the cat to have private, observation time. If you're in a one-story home, your cat may get more creative and find a spot on tops of cabinets or shelves; you can even purchase a multi-level kitty condo or play structure from a pet store. This will give your cat a play area, scratching post and area of refuge, all in one stop.



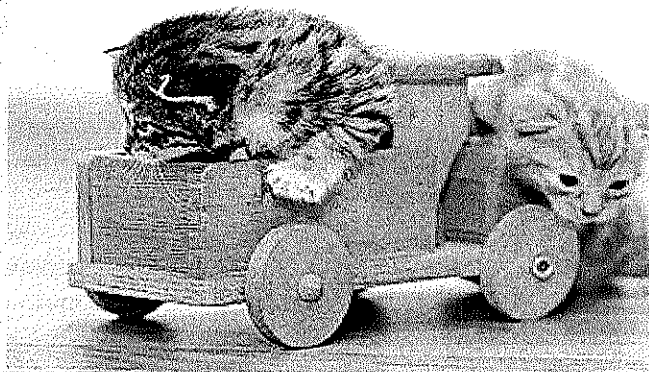
Give Them Something to Do

Pets are often like children -- if you don't give them something to do, they will find something on their own, and you may not be pleased with the outcome. Not to say you need to be with your cat 24 hours a day, but they need stimulation to keep them happy and healthy.

Toys are important. Cats like predatory games, so feathers attached to a stick, furry mice or any game where he gets to find, pounce on or retrieve items is usually a big hit. This keeps your cat active and his instincts keen. And while cats will play by themselves, it's great if you can be involved in playtime with kitty; most cats do enjoy time with their humans, and playtime is one of the most enjoyable. It's a good idea to put a majority of the toys away after play so that they'll remain interesting to your cat.

Despite their reputation as being somewhat aloof, cats are social creatures when they want to be. Many houses have more than one cat so the felines have company while humans are out. Cats may also be a faithful friend to the family dog, though somewhat of a tease.

Hanging out with the humans is another important social scenario, be it cuddling, being petted or groomed. However, don't forget the "me time" factor; cats like things on their own terms so if a cat doesn't want to be petted, you won't have much luck coercing him.



Give Them Rest

This is where being a cat gets really appealing. Cats typically sleep two-thirds of the day, so even if you are providing stimulation and exciting activities, the time will come when your cat needs to slip away for some shut-eye. Let them, because there's a very good chance that your cat was up at dawn, instinctively awake and moving around during what would be hunting time for an outdoor cat. Additionally, cats tend to be very active at dusk, another typical hunting window.

Cats need multiple resting places throughout the home, so if you're someone who likes to be able to nap on the couch, your easy chair, or in your bedroom, you understand. As a cat owner, make sure that your cat has comfortable areas to sleep. Pet stores boast lovely, expensive cat beds, but often all your cat wants is the arm of the sofa, a pillow or the top of your stairs. As long as it works, let them enjoy it; often spending the money on the fancy cat bed is a waste.

Again, remember to let your cat escape when he needs alone time. However, if your cat sleeps too much, they may be sleeping out of boredom. Ensure they have the social and physical stimulation that they need.

Cats were not always domesticated animals, so when you make one a part of your home, just remember what their inner cat needs.

