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## KEEPING YOUR CAT SAFE AND HAPPY AT HOME

For cats, the great outdoors is anything but great. Whether they live in the city, in the suburbs or in the country, outdoor cats face a multitude of risks. They are exposed to contagious diseases, most of which are fatal. Traffic takes a huge toll on free-roaming cats, and while many people believe their pets are street-wise, no cat looks both ways when being chased by another animal. Further dangers include poisons, traps, pet theft and inhumane treatment by cruel people.

Outdoor cats cause problems too. They dig and defecate in neighbors' yards, and as predators, they injure and kill a significant number of wild animals. Cats cannot be trained to ignore their natural hunting instincts. The only sure way to safeguard wildlife is to keep cats inside.

### What does your indoor cat miss?

Getting hit by a car, feline leukaemia, attacks by dogs, poisoned toad, pesticides, cat fights, fleas, ticks, worms, abscesses, getting lost, getting stolen, getting trapped, human cruelty, gunshot wounds, puncture wounds, wild animal attacks and cold, rainy weather.

### Benefits of life indoors

The average life span of an outdoor cat is 3 to 4 years, whereas an indoor-only cat can live 15 to 20 years. Indoor cats are usually healthier, too, which saves on veterinary bills or treatment of contagious diseases, parasites and abscesses from fights with other animals. While it is true that cats enjoy sunshine, fresh air and exercise, they do not need to go outside to be satisfied. Some creative planning on the part of their human guardians can help indoor cats lead full lives.

Obviously, it is best to keep a cat in from the beginning, especially if you are starting with a kitten or young adult. Most cats who grow up inside show no inclination to leave the safety of home. Other cats who are accustomed to going out can make life miserable for the entire household by clawing at windows, yowling and trying to bolt through open doors. But while the transition may take some time and patience, even the most confirmed outdoor cat can eventually be convinced of indoor comforts.

### Tips for making the transition

Many cat behaviorists suggest a gradual approach to bringing an outdoor cat into the house. If your cat is outdoors most of the day, bring her in for increasingly longer visits. You might time this transition period as the weather gets colder. Most cats prefer warm, dry places, and by the end of the winter, yours could be converted to life indoors.

If you want your cat to have safe, limited access to the outdoors, consider building an outside enclosure or run. These can be accessible from a window or pet door, and are most entertaining to cats when furnished with tree limbs, perching platforms, boxes and toys.

Cats can be leashed-trained so that they may enjoy the outdoors on supervised walks. All you need is a leash and a sturdy figure eight or figure-R style harness from which the cat cannot escape. Never hook the leash to the cat's collar, but make sure the cat is always wearing a safety collar with I. D. tags. Your cat may resist wearing a harness at first, so let her become accustomed to it gradually. Put it on for brief periods indoors, and later, attach the leash and walk her around the house. When she becomes comfortable with that, venture outdoors for short trips. Do not tie a cat out on a leash or leave her unsupervised, even for a few minutes.

If your cat remains determined to get outside, you may have to "just say no" to going outdoors. Suzanne Hetts, behavior consultant for the Denver Dumb Friends League, emphasizes, "For particularly persistent cats, it's better to go cold turkey than to occasionally let the cat outside. Letting the cat out when it wants reinforces the pestering behavior. "

Remind family members, housemates and visitors not to let the cat outside. Post signs near all doors, and if you live with children, teach them to close the door behind them. Be especially cautious with screen doors that may not latch tightly.

### **Enriching indoor environments**

As your cat makes the transition to the great indoors, you can transform your living quarters into a veritable cat paradise. The more you give your cat to do, the happier she will be inside.

Double the space, double the cat's pleasure. If your floor space is limited, you can expand upward with kitty condos or climbing trees. The taller models, especially those with multiple perches, make the most of vertical space and appeal to cats' natural interest in heights.

Cats love to sun themselves and enjoy looking outdoors. Install perches or shelves to provide your cat with more windows of opportunity.

When the weather allows, leave windows open so your cat can get fresh air. Make sure that each window is securely screened so that the cat cannot fall or jump out.

Many cats enjoy chewing on grass and other plants. Garden centers and pet stores sell wheat or oat grass seeds to be planted in small pots for indoor cats. Make sure the seed has not been treated with chemicals, and remove all potentially toxic plants from your cat's environment.

### **Cats in Toyland**

Outdoor cats have plenty of opportunity for exercise, but it can be a challenge to keep an indoor cat active and fit. The best way to get your cat moving is through interactive play. By encouraging her to pounce, leap, and run laps around the house, you can help your feline couch potato become an indoor athlete.

Often the best toys are the simplest. Cats love to chase catnip toys, ribbons or strips of fabric, and feathers dangled in front of them on wands or short poles.

Don't discount the most available toys around the house. Most cats love to explore paper bags, boxes and baskets. They often find their own sources of amusement. So don't be surprised if your cat ignores an expensive toy in favor of a plastic milk jug ring, crumpled paper or an old sock. The key is variety. Rotate favorites in and out of your cat's toy-box and try hiding toys around the house for your cat to find over time.

### **A last word on making the switch**

Despite their owners' best efforts, some cats will still have a tough time adjusting to life indoors. If your cat shows signs of extreme stress, you and your veterinarian might consider short-term drug therapy to relax the cat during the transition. Another option is to explore homeopathic remedies, which can be effective calming agents in many animals. Consult a holistic veterinarian for specific treatments