

Indoor and outdoor cats

cats.org.uk



Just like people, cats are all individuals. Some cats love going outside, some barely put a paw through the cat flap and others can't go out at all. Wherever your cat spends their time, make sure they're safe and happy. This guide will help you consider what is best for your cat and suggest ways to ensure they enjoy a good quality of life in their home environment.

Whether your cat lives indoors only or has access to outdoors too, Cats Protection recommends that your cat is microchipped, neutered, vaccinated and provided with flea and worming treatment. By law all pet cats in England must be microchipped. You can speak to your vet for more information and guidance about your specific cat's needs.

The great outdoors

Ideally all cats would be allowed access to outdoors to express their natural behaviour. In the UK, the majority of people let their cats go outside. However, in built-up areas, there can be a large number of cats, meaning each has a dwindling territory size and many people are choosing to keep their cats inside. Occasionally, it is recommended that some cats are kept indoors for their own benefit such as those with disabilities or special health care needs. Cats have a natural tendency to explore so allowing them access to the outside world gives them mental stimulation and reduces stress. If they are kept solely indoors, additional considerations for their home are necessary. For more information see cats.org.uk/outdoor-cats

Outdoor benefits

- **Bigger territory.** Allowing your cat outdoor access not only increases the space available to them, but also the variety of surroundings
- **Natural behaviour.** Cats with outdoor access are better able to express their natural behaviour and can do so in a setting that is more 'acceptable' to the owner. For example, scratching and spraying are normal behaviours for cats and these traits often go unnoticed by owners of cats that have outdoor access

- **Rodent control.** Cats can help to keep unwanted rodents at bay. Hunting is an important natural cat behaviour. The hunting sequence of stalking and catching prey releases endorphins or ‘happy hormones’ in the cat’s brain. Hunting behaviour is not influenced by hunger, many cats with ample food will still want to hunt

- **An interesting environment.** The outdoor environment is a complex mix of different smells, sights, sounds, tastes and textures that is constantly changing. It is particularly stimulating and interesting for the cat’s extraordinary senses and provides them with an important mental workout

- **Exercise.** Cats with outdoor access are able to exercise more readily, either through hunting, climbing trees and fences or simply by having the extra space to use. Cats have great agility and engaging in a variety of different types of exercise helps to keep their muscles toned. Active cats are much less likely to become obese and suffer from associated health problems

- **Enables escape from the household if necessary.** There are occasions when cats need personal space and the ability to escape from anything that they perceive as stressful, or a threat.

This could include a conflict with other cats or other pets in the household, building work in the home, or unfamiliar visitors in the house. Unrestricted access to outdoors, such as via a cat flap, provides an escape route. Microchip or magnetic cat flaps help to provide your cat with security so that neighbouring cats do not enter your house

Outdoor risks and how to minimise them

- **Roads.** Many cats are injured or killed on the road each year. Often these cats are young, under a year old, and some studies show that more road traffic injuries happen at night. Keep your cat indoors at night to protect them from the hazards of the roads.

- It is not just busy roads that can cause cats to be injured or killed. Quiet country roads that only have a few cars passing through can catch a cat off guard. It is thought cats may cope better with consistently busy roads than those that are only used at rush hour

- A reflective or fluorescent quick-release collar may help them be seen, particularly in the winter months when it gets dark earlier. However, collars themselves are not without risk, so ensure it fits properly on a regular basis.

Two fingers should fit snugly between the collar and your cat's neck. It should have a quick-release fitting to prevent your cat becoming ensnared or getting their leg trapped

- **Fights.** In the UK, cats have no natural predators. They can, however, become injured through contact with other cats, dogs and humans. Fighting can be reduced by neutering (which also reduces roaming), but cat fights may still occur, often when a new cat moves into the area. Many cats sharing territories learn to 'time share' so that one will use the area in the morning and another in the afternoon
- **Disease.** Cats can contract infectious diseases through contact and fighting with other cats, as well as from the outdoor environment. Regularly treat your cat for fleas and worms and ensure they are up to date with their vaccinations
- **Parasites.** Cats can pick up parasites such as fleas, ticks and a variety of internal worms. Speak to your vet to find out how to prevent and treat parasites. Bear in mind indoor cats can also be susceptible if not treated regularly

- **Loss.** Cats can go missing for a variety of reasons, such as becoming lost, or trapped in a garden shed or garage, or sometimes moving in with someone else. Cats are sometimes fed by people mistaking them for strays or are handed in to animal charities

- Microchipping your cat is important and helps to reunite you with your cat in the event that they ever go missing. Speak to your vet for more information if your cat is not microchipped already

- Whether you have a new cat in your house, or you have both moved to a new house, before you let them outside for the first time, make sure they have fully adapted to their new home.

For more information see

cats.org.uk/moving-house

- Collars with tags do not provide a permanent means of identification. Collar-fitted tracker devices are a popular idea to keep track of your cat, but the welfare implications must be considered such as the size, weight, and any risk of entrapment and/or impeding the quick-release collar. Also consider how practical or useful they may be such as battery life, geographical range, how tracking data is sourced as well as the fact they are not permanent

• **Outdoor poisons.** If you suspect your cat may have eaten poison, seek veterinary advice urgently. Don't wait for signs of ill health as delays of even an hour can cost lives. Outdoor chemicals should be stored out of reach. Common poisons that cats can come into contact with include:

- slug pellets
- garden chemicals
- anti-freeze
- rodent control poisons (including eating poisoned prey)
- toxic garden plants

Bear in mind there are also indoor chemicals and plants which can pose a risk. For more information see cats.org.uk/keeping-your-cat-safe

If you are concerned about your cat going outside, you could consider enclosing your garden to provide a safe area for your cat to enjoy some fresh air.

Cats and wildlife

Cats' hunting behaviour varies between individuals, some cats are prolific hunters while others catch nothing at all. There is no evidence that cats are having an impact on the bird population, as they usually catch sick or weak birds.

Here are some steps you can take to help minimise your cat preying on birds in the garden:

- you can still feed birds by using a high bird table or feeder away from any platforms which a cat could use to pounce on them. Research indicates that feeding birds can actually reduce the number caught by cats. The more birds that are present, the more chance there is of a cat being spotted and the birds calling a warning
- place an uncomfortable surface around the base of bird tables to stop cats sitting underneath them
- make bird table stands slippery to prevent cats from climbing them, a metal post is a good option
- position nest boxes where cats cannot reach them
- if possible, keep your cat indoors during the early morning and evening when birds are at their most active
- feed a high protein diet to your cat, this has been shown to reduce hunting wildlife
- appropriate play sessions with your cat reduce hunting wildlife

Allowing your cat to enjoy their outdoor environment

It can be hard to keep your cat to the confines of your garden, but you'll want to encourage your cat to stay close to home to keep them safe. Providing a cat-friendly garden may help.

Providing an inviting toilet area

Cats like somewhere soft to bury their poo and will be drawn to newly-dug soil, sand or gravel. To prevent them messing up your neighbour's flower beds, you could try the following:

- provide them with a litter tray in the house
- provide them with their own toilet area in your garden, in a secluded, sheltered area of well-dug, fine soil. Ensure it is somewhere private where they feel safe. You could add some cat litter to encourage them to toilet there. Make sure it's dug over regularly so it remains hygienic and the soiled material is allowed to decompose naturally

Fencing

Cats are great climbers and jump over most fences. However, a two-metre high, close-boarded fence, together with a hedge parallel to the fence, will encourage your cat to remain within your garden.

Angled trellis, netting, taut wire or string could be put on top of the fence as a further deterrent, but make sure your cat cannot become ensnared or injured.

Planting

You can also dedicate a corner in your garden specifically for your cat away from your wildlife feeding or nesting areas. In this space you could plant all those 'cat-friendly' plants such as catnip, cat thyme and buddleia. A patch of longer grass can provide a soft bed and cats may also nibble on it to help bring up hairballs. Plants, without thorns, can be placed to give your cat a shady spot to lie in during those hot and sunny days. Logs provide excellent outdoor scratching posts. Many cats can feel threatened in exposed spaces, so ensure your cat has plenty of hiding and resting areas in the garden.

Eating grass

Many cats like to eat grass, though it isn't completely understood why. It's thought it may help to clear hairballs and other substances that are difficult to digest from their stomachs.

Watch outs:

- ensure all grass in your home and garden is free of herbicides or pesticides
- if your cat suddenly sneezes excessively get them checked out by your vet. Sometimes a blade of grass can be accidentally inhaled and become stuck in the nasal passage
- grass seeds can get stuck in your cat's ears, nose, eyes, fur and paws

If your cat can't go outside, cat grass can be grown indoors. Seeds are readily available from garden centres and pet shops. Check that these are cat safe. If no grass is provided, your cat may try to eat other household plants which may pose a risk.

For more information see

cats.org.uk/keeping-your-cat-safe

Other cats

If your cat is nervous about going outside, place some plant pots or other objects just outside the cat flap to provide hiding places they can use to survey the area. A magnetic or microchip cat flap can keep neighbours' cats out of your home. Try to discourage other cats from coming into or overlooking your garden, as this can be very threatening for anxious cats. There are lots of cat-kind ways to keep cats out of your garden.

Find out more at cats.org.uk/keeping-cats-out

Indoor life

Ideally all cats would be allowed access to the outdoors to express their natural behaviour.

However, some cats can adapt to living indoors, particularly if they are used to it from a young age.

Some cats need to be confined indoors due to medical conditions and others prefer an indoor life.

Indoor benefits

- Your cat will be protected from loss or outdoor hazards, such as road accidents, physical attacks from other animals and outdoor poisons, if they are kept solely indoors
- Your cat may be less likely to contract parasites or infectious disease through not having direct contact with other cats or the environment used by cats or other animals
- Your cat won't hunt if kept solely indoors (assuming your house is rodent-proof) however, opportunities to play and express hunting behaviour must still be given

Indoor risks and how to minimise them

- If they are not allowed outdoor access, your cat may suffer from frustration if they are unable to exhibit their natural behaviours. This may lead to various behavioural issues, depending on a number

of factors, including the home environment, relationship with and number of other cats in the home, and the character of the cat. Examples of behavioural problems include scratching furniture, spraying, overgrooming, aggression, house soiling and depression

- Your cat will be unable to hunt if kept solely indoors and will lose this mental stimulation. It may be more difficult for a cat to adjust to life indoors if they were once a prolific hunter or enjoyed being outside
- If they don't have outside access, your cat may not be able to escape from disruption such as building works, visitors or other pets in the household. While cats in multi-cat households with outdoor access can get some personal space, indoor-only cats may be stressed from living together in a restricted territory. For more information see cats.org.uk/other-cats
- Cats confined indoors are not necessarily free from the risk of stress caused by other cats in the neighbourhood. A cat that can see another through a window can still be stressed by the presence of the cat within their territory and develop behavioural issues

- Other hazards to be aware of for both indoor and outdoor cats:

- **indoor hazards.** It's important to remember to keep cupboards, washing machines and tumble driers closed. Toilet lids should be kept down to avoid any risk of drowning. Balconies and windows should be safely fenced over with strong wire mesh or screens, making sure there are no gaps that your cat could fall through

- **houseplants.** Some plants and flowers, particularly lilies, can be toxic to cats. It's best to ensure you don't have plants that are dangerous to cats in your home, and certainly not within your cats' reach

- **household products.** Cats are very susceptible to poisoning. A number of everyday household items can pose a danger to cats and should be kept safely away. For more information see cats.org.uk/keeping-your-cat-safe

- **Inactivity and obesity.** Indoor cats need to be provided with opportunities to exercise to avoid them getting overweight or inactive which can lead to other health issues

- **Over-dependence.** A solitary indoor cat will rely on their owner to provide stimulation, companionship and exercise and can become over-dependent

- **Escape.** Keeping windows and doors shut to prevent an indoor cat escaping can be difficult in busy households. If the cat does get out, they'll be highly stressed and disorientated as they'll have no experience of the outdoor environment. Your cat should be microchipped even if they live indoors to increase the chance of them being reunited with you if they go missing

Making the best indoor environment for all cats

Cats should be provided with a stimulating and safe indoor environment, whether they go outside or not. If your cat is solely kept indoors, then this is particularly essential. If you have more than one cat, offer enough essential items such as food bowls, water bowls, litter trays, scratching posts, beds and hiding areas in different locations throughout the home so they don't have to share. For more information see cats.org.uk/other-cats

If a cat does not have outdoor access they still need to be able to express their natural behaviours in other ways for a good quality of life. Lack of mental and physical stimulation may develop into behaviour problems so there are a number of ways to keep your cat happy indoors:

Play and exercise

It's important that all cats, especially indoor cats, are given frequent opportunities to play, to allow them to engage in hunting activity and keep them mentally stimulated. Indoor cats aren't able to play outside, so it is important to provide them with toys and activities to keep them occupied. Cats with outdoor access should still be provided with opportunities to play when in the house.

Toys

Keeping your cat amused with toys can help to keep them happy. It also provides good exercise and strengthens your bond with your cat.

Older cats will love playing three or four times a day but the type of play may need to be adapted to suit their needs and level of mobility. For more information see cats.org.uk/elderly-cats

Younger cats will be happy to play 10 times a day or more. Very short games of one to two minutes are fine, cats use their energy in short bursts when hunting, so try to mimic this.

- A cardboard box with holes cut in it provides a fun hiding place
- A ball of tin foil (ensure your cat can't swallow it) is fun to chase and catch

- Play is more fun if you get involved too. Fishing rod toys with feathers on a string can mimic cats' prey. Allow them to catch and 'kill' the toy occasionally to avoid frustration
- Swap toys around regularly to keep them interesting
- Don't leave your cat unattended with toys which could be shredded and eaten or that your cat can become tangled in
- Check toys regularly for signs of wear, replacing them when appropriate

Puzzle feeders

Using puzzle feeders is a great way to mentally stimulate cats and has many benefits. This is a way of providing your cat's daily food in a more challenging way, rather than out of a bowl. This has similar benefits to play where it releases feel-good hormones. It can also slow down eating as they have to work for their food. This taps into their natural hunting instincts so is great for indoor and outdoor cats. Be sure to start with easy puzzles to avoid causing frustration.

A stable and predictable environment is important for cats to feel secure. However, play and puzzle feeders need to be kept novel to encourage engagement and keep your cat interested.

This can be done by frequently rotating the toys and puzzle feeders available to your cat, rather than all toys being out at once or using the same feeder every day.

For more information see cats.org.uk/cats-and-play

Feeding and drinking

Cats like to eat and drink away from their litter tray, as understandably, it's more hygienic. However, many people don't realise that cats also like to have each of their food and water bowls in separate places too. This stems back to the cat's evolutionary past, when they would eat in a different area to avoid contaminating their drinking source with the remains of their prey.

Eating and drinking can be vulnerable activities for a cat. Try placing bowls slightly away from the wall, so that the cat can sit with their back to the wall and view their surroundings. Cats are all individuals and therefore have difference preferences for types of bowls, for example plastic, ceramic or metal bowls.

Somewhere to hide

It is important to always provide your cat with an easily accessible place to hide which will help to

make them feel safe and secure. A hiding place can be something as simple as a cardboard box on its side, or upside down with large holes for access. Alternatively, you could purchase an igloo-style cat bed or offer space under the bed or in a wardrobe with the door left ajar. Your cat shouldn't be disturbed while they are hiding.

Somewhere to get up high

Cats feel safer if they can view their surroundings from a height and this also increases their territory by providing extra vertical space that they can use. This is a common coping mechanism for cats that feel anxious or fearful. You could place a cosy blanket on top of a wardrobe and provide access by placing a stool or similar item next to it. Cats also love to sit on windowsills and shelves. Extra consideration should be given to elderly cats.

For more information see cats.org.uk/elderly-cats

Sleeping

On average, cats spend about 16 hours a day sleeping. Cats generally rest or sleep intermittently throughout the day and will prefer a warm, comfortable and safe place. There is a large range of cat beds available, including igloo beds, or hammocks for the radiator. A simple cardboard box with a blanket inside will also do the trick.

Scratching and climbing

A scratching post will provide exercise, claw maintenance and a focal point for your cat to express this natural behaviour, it will help protect your furniture too. Cats like to stretch and scratch after they wake up, so try placing the scratching post near where they sleep. A good scratching post has the following features:

- a strong sturdy base so the cat can lean against the post without it wobbling
- tall enough that the cat can stretch fully
- a vertical thread that allows the cat to scratch downwards

Toileting

Cats need one litter tray per cat, plus one extra, especially if your cats are kept indoors. Place the litter trays in different quiet areas of the house, away from the food and water bowls. Cats don't like using dirty or soiled trays so make sure the litter tray is cleaned at least once a day. This helps to prevent accidents as well as being more hygienic. Cats generally prefer at least 3cm depth of litter and a litter of a sandy texture. Make any changes to the tray, the litter or its location very gradually to avoid accidents.

The following vet-approved guides are available to download from cats.org.uk/information-leaflets

Essential guides

- Behaviour: Understanding your cat's behaviour** W84009
- Behaviour: Managing your cat's behaviour** W84010
- Bringing your cat home** W84002
- Caring for your cat** W84001
- Caring for your kitten** W84015
- Cats and people** W84014
- Cats living together** W84011
- Elderly cats** W84016
- End-of-life, grief and loss** W84007
- Feeding and obesity** W84004
- Feral cats** W84017
- Indoor and outdoor cats** W84012
- Keeping your cat safe** W84005
- Microchipping** W84008
- Moving home** W84003
- Neutering** W84006
- Pregnant cats, birth and care of young kittens** W84018

Veterinary guides

- Arthritis** W83201
- Cat flu** W83216
- Digestive disorders: vomiting and diarrhoea** W83218
- Feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV) and feline leukaemia virus (FeLV)** W83209
- Feline lower urinary tract disease (FLUTD)** W83202
- Fleas and other parasites** W83215
- Heart murmurs and heart disease** W83211
- Hyperthyroidism** W83212
- Infectious disease and vaccination** W83217
- Kidney or renal disease** W83206
- Skin disorders** W83204
- Teeth and oral health** W83214

Please see cats.org.uk for more information on:

- Cats and pregnant women: toxoplasmosis**
- Cats and the law**
- Cats with disabilities**
- Diabetes**
- Feline asthma**
- Feline coronavirus (FCoV) and feline infectious peritonitis (FIP)**
- Feline parvovirus (FPV)**
- Hypertension**
- You and your vet**

For more information about Cats Protection or to find out how you can support us, go to **cats.org.uk**



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