



Letting the Cat out or not

Thanks to the creation and marketing of cat litter since the mid 1940's, more and more cats are staying in – becoming indoors only pets, that is. As such, cats are generously leading longer lives. The average indoor cat lives to be 12-14 years old, although we've seen cats live to the ripe old age of 20! Unfortunately, outdoor-only cats survive for an average of only 2 years. Our homes offer a safer, healthier environment than life on the street. Just think – no tick and fleas – unless a family dog brings them in; no tangling with rabid raccoons, aromatic skunks or hungry coyotes, and no one-on-ones with moving vehicles. There's no doubt about it, indoors is safest. Yet when we choose to make our cats indoors-only companions, we have a responsibility to provide the stimulation that nature provides automatically. Scratching and climbing posts become trees; interactive toys become hunted birds, bugs and field mice. A rotating array of cat playthings provides excitement, unpredictability and exercise.

Taking them to the street

That said, many cat lovers still prefer to share the Great Outdoors with their feline friends. Happily, there are several ways to minimize the risks.

First, while vaccinations are important to indoor cats, they are critical to the health of cats allowed outside. The soil of a garden or yard can harbor diseases, for months or years, spread by strays. And rabies has spread to much of the country, transmitted mainly through altercations with wildlife such as foxes, raccoons and bats. The safest ways to allow your cat to enjoy some time outdoors is to either harness-train them and go for walks together or to provided a screened in enclosure or fenced in yard topped with a cat-proof netting.

Hold the Line

Harness training, like many things, is easiest taught during kittenhood, however, some adult cats can acclimate to it. Choose a figure 8 type harness (sold here) and make sure it fits well. (The fit is right if you can barely get your finger between the cat and the harness.) At first, put the harness on for a few minutes at a time inside, preferably just before mealtime so the cat associates it with something positive. Repeat this several times a day. When the cat begins to ignore the harness, attach the leash and let them drag it around for a few more short sessions; stay nearby in case the leash catches on something. The next step is to pick up the leash and follow them around the house. This will allow them to get used to a human following behind prior to providing direction with gentle pulling on the leash.

When your cat is comfortable taking light direction, proceed to a quiet area outdoors. Keep your first sessions short, frequent and upbeat; little food rewards come in handy. If you are leaving your property, keep your eyes peeled for off-leash dogs, in-line skaters or bicyclists that could give your cat a scare.

Hey, fence me in!

Since outdoor enclosures are usually homemade, they come in all shapes and sizes. For durability, chicken wire or wire hardware cloth, secured around a simple wood frame, is preferable to ordinary window screening. The most successful structures usually feature climbing and resting inside. A shaded area is necessary for warm or hot weather.

Whether you choose an outdoor enclosure or add cat proof netting to the top of traditional fencing, remember that they are safest used only when you are at home and outdoors with your cat(s) or ability to check on them often. Careful of pet theft, this only takes a few moments. Or even pesky neighborhood kids or an organized group rounding up animals to sell, the resulting heartache is the same. Also, wild animals can get into almost anything! Don't forget - a microchip or an ID tag may be the very thing to reunite you and your feline if precautions fail.