

Cat Toys



Although they're much safer inside from disease and danger, most housecats tend to be overweight and underactive. Cats, like people and dogs, benefit from keeping fit and active, both mentally and physically. Exercise is essential for your cat's mental and physical health because it relieves stress and boredom, improves circulation, builds muscle tone and can prevent or reduce behavioral problems.

So, we need to get our cats up and moving, and there's no better way to coax out their natural instincts to stalk and chase prey than by engaging them with toys.

Types of Toys for Fun and Games

Wand Toys

A wand toy can be as simple as a stick with a thin piece of fabric or soft ribbon tied to it. You can wave, twitch, flutter and circle the wand around randomly so that the ribbon moves enticingly like an insect or bird or other prey. A key added benefit of the wand toy is that it lets you keep some distance between your cat's claws and your skin.

There are hundreds of variations of the wand toy, and most are relatively inexpensive. The wand itself can be wire, wood or plastic. Anything pliable but firm will do. Many objects can be attached to the wand to attract your cat's attention: feathers, strings or small stuffed toys. These objects can be accented with bells or electronic noises, or with catnip scent or fur that smells good to your cat. Feathers from peacocks or other large birds can be used as wand toys themselves.

It's best to put the wand toy away after playtime for three reasons:

1. This toy should be available to your cat only when you're playing with her, so you can build on your relationship with her.
2. When you put the toy away after a play session, it's a good idea to make sure it's still safe. Watch for pieces of string or other components that might fall off the toy and get swallowed by your cat. If you notice any loose toy parts, it's probably time to retire the old toy and get a new one.
3. How many times have you seen mice or birds just hanging around a cat? By putting the toy away after playtime, it remains attractive and interesting when you begin the next play session.

Some wand toys you might like to try:

- The Cat Dancer®
- Da Bird
- "Fishing pole" type toys
- Peacock feathers from a craft store

Ball Toys

Balls are also very attractive to many cats. Their movement along the floor mimics the movement of scampering mice or other prey animals, which will entice cats to chase. You can insert treats or catnip into some balls to make playing with them more rewarding and exciting for your cat. Other balls have bells or other small objects inside them that make noise to attract your cat's attention. The only downside to ball toys is that they often end up under the couch or other furniture!

Some ball toys you might like to try:

- Wadded-up paper (experiment with different textures and sizes)
- Mylar balls (crinkly and shiny)
- Ping-pong balls (watch for wear)
- Sponge balls (nice and quiet)

Food-Dispensing Toys

Many people allow their cats free access to food at all times. This can be convenient for pet parents, but it often leads to cats eating more than they should. Instead of free feeding, try using a food toy to "deliver" your cat's food. She'll have to work a bit for her meals, which will engage her mind and satisfy her natural instincts to hunt. Food-dispensing toys can also slow down cats who eat too quickly and encourage more activity throughout the day.

Start with a hungry cat and some of your cat's favorite treats. Open the food toy and make it extremely easy for your cat to get a treat out of the toy. This process will remove any fear your cat might have of the toy itself, and it will help her learn the association between the toy and eating. As soon as your cat is happy to eat out of the toy, make the situation a little more challenging. Close the toy, or reduce the size of the opening so that your cat has to interact with the toy (touching, pawing or nosing it) to get the treat to come out. Over time, begin to mix your cat's kibble with the treats. Over time you can gradually fade out the treats until you're using only kibble. Finally, set out a couple of the toys in different places in your house, and feed your cat only with the toys. No more boring food bowls!

Some food-dispensing toys you might like to try:

- Ball of the Wild™ by OurPet's
- Twist 'n Treat™
- Tricky Treat Ball™

Catnip Toys

The majority of cats in the U.S. find catnip stimulating. Adding this herb to play time can greatly increase your cat's enjoyment! Catnip can be stuffed into toys or packed into balls. Try sprinkling it onto a fresh piece of newspaper or into a paper grocery bag or cardboard box to invite your cat to play. It's safe for your cat to ingest catnip, especially if you choose an organically grown brand without any additives.

One caution about catnip: Some cats become very excited when smelling or eating it, so be careful about petting or rubbing your cat until you know how she responds. When cats get overexcited, they can sometimes bite.

Some catnip toys you might like to try:

- El Gato catnip stuffed cigar toy
- Bonkers™ catnip mice, stuffed pillows and tubs of dried catnip

Toys Made of Attractive Materials

Similar to using catnip to attract cats to toys, toy makers combine materials that cats like in one toy:

- Feel: wool, fur, fleece

- Sound: crinkly materials, bells, electronic chirps
- Sight: fluttery, feathery materials, lights, moving parts
- Smell and taste: fur, added flavoring (fish, fowl, beef, catnip, honeysuckle, etc.)

Check out OurPet's Play-N-Squeak® toys, which are made of interesting materials and make exciting sounds.

Guidelines for Play

To satisfy your cat's natural instincts, think of each play session as a mock hunt for prey. Start enticing your cat by moving the toy in a way that her prey might move. Once you have your cat's attention, remember that prey moves away from the hunter, so make the toy flee from your cat in short bursts to activate the chase. Eventually, let your cat win by allowing her to catch the toy and "kill" it. Your cat might grab the toy with her front legs, bite it and make little kicks with her back feet. Letting your cat "finish the kill" is very rewarding to her. Some cat experts recommend ending the game with a small treat.

For maximum enjoyment, keep these additional guidelines in mind when you play with your cat:

- Go at your cat's pace. Offer several types of toys to find out which are her favorites and what style of game your cat prefers.
- Your cat's instincts motivate her to bite toys while you're playing. This is normal behavior—but be sure you don't encourage her to bite your fingers or hands as well. Rough play in a small kitten can be cute, but it becomes painful and dangerous when the kitten matures into an adult cat. For this reason, avoid gloves or mittens with toys attached. They might teach your cat that it's okay to scratch and bite human hands.
- If your cat gets overexcited, she might redirect some of her energy at your hands and feet or at other animals. Encourage play, but take a break if things get too rough. Let your cat rest a bit, and start back up when she's calmer.
- Avoid using laser lights during play, because some cats and dogs become frustrated or obsessed with chasing a light that they can never catch. Instead, use something your cat can catch and bite.
- Try scheduling play time with your cat both in the morning and in the evening on different days throughout the week to find out when she's most receptive and inclined to play. Some cats enjoy a stimulating game right before bedtime. Other cats enjoy playing just before meal times. If you play with your cat before feeding her, you mimic a natural sequence of cat behaviors: she gets to "hunt" and eat, and then she'll likely groom herself and end with a nice nap.
- Choose a place to play where your cat feels safe and distractions are minimized.
- Give all of your cats a chance to play. You might need to separate them in different rooms and play with them individually if one tends to dominate play time.
- Avoid allowing your cat to play with sharp objects, Christmas tree icicles, curling ribbon and any small items she could accidentally swallow. Don't allow your cat to play with rubber bands, paper clips or plastic bags. All of these things could be dangerous to her.
- Finally, keep in mind that it's always wise to supervise!