

Preventing Your Cat from Getting Outside



Cats kept exclusively indoors live longer, healthier lives than outdoor cats. If you allow your cat to go outside, he might come into contact with wild animals who carry parasites and disease, as well as other outdoor cats who may fight with him, greatly increasing his risk of getting feline leukemia virus (FeLV) and feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV). Your cat might encounter predators, like dogs, foxes and coyotes, who could seriously harm or even kill him. He might be hit by a motor vehicle. He might be exposed to poisonous substances like lawn chemicals, antifreeze and rat bait.

Because of these and other dangers awaiting the outdoor cat, it's estimated that a cat allowed outdoors in the United States lives an average of one quarter as long as a cat living exclusively indoors. Keeping your cat indoors is the best way to prolong his life. Of course, cats don't understand that they're safer staying indoors, and some cats will do everything in their power to escape. This is especially true of indoor cats with a history of going outside.

Your cat can learn to be happy indoors if you provide him with an enriched environment and give him opportunities to be by himself. However, if you have a cat who keeps trying to escape, it's vital to make sure he isn't successful! Cat-proofing your exits and deterring him from hanging around the doors are essential management steps for you to take.

Welfare

The Hunt

If you read our articles on [Cats Who Play Rough](#) and [Enriching Your Cat's Life](#), you'll find a common theme in the treatment or management of these behavior concerns: providing environmental enrichment that lets your cat engage in natural behaviors. Here are suggestions that can fulfill your cat's need to engage in predatory behavior:

- Provide toys that your cat can throw around himself and toys that require your participation, such as those you wiggle and dangle from a wand or stick. Move the toys in such a way that they mimic the movements of a rodent or bird.
- Provide your cat commercially available "cat videos." The most popular ones show close-ups of birds and small rodents.
- Position bird and squirrel feeders outside windows where your cat can observe animals coming and going during the day.

Please see our articles, [Enriching Your Cat's Life](#) and [Cat Toys](#) for more great ideas and information on keeping your cat busy and happy.

Social Concerns

Another need a cat has that can affect his welfare as an indoor cat—and affect whether he attempts to escape outside—is alone time. We recognize this need in ourselves but don't always consider it when thinking of our pets. But cats actually have a greater need for personal space and alone time than people do—it's their nature. Under natural (feral) conditions, they avoid each other for the most part. Cats' territories are large, and although they often overlap with other cats' territory, cats have sophisticated chemical social signals, called pheromones. They leave these as information for the other cats so that the cats can "time-share" certain areas—meaning they can use the same area, but at different times so that they don't run into each other. These signals help inform other cats about where and when the cat was in the area. Over time the signals can even tell cats when a cat will likely be back so that others can be sure to be gone by that time.

To meet an indoor cat's social needs, you'll want to provide him enough space to be comfortable and enough perching and hiding places to be alone. If you have more than one cat, you should also have multiple feeding areas, and at least one more litter box than the total number of cats you have. (In other words, if you have three cats, you should have at minimum of four litter boxes). The boxes should be in different areas rather than lined up next to each other. Your cats should also have enough high perches so that one is always available to everyone. Perches can be purchased as indoor cat "trees," but they can also easily be created by emptying spaces on book shelves and window shelves.

Lastly, use a pheromone diffuser in an area or areas where your cat frequents. Synthetic versions of cat pheromones that are released when cats rub their faces on things (like Feliway®) can reduce your cat's anxiety. If possible, use the diffuser until your cat's escape attempts diminish.

Creating a Secure Outdoor Enclosure

A secure outdoor enclosure allows your cat access to the exciting sights, sounds and smells outdoors, enlarging his home territory. Enclosures for cats should be completely enclosed, such as a screened-in porch, or constructed so the cat can't climb up the walls and jump out. Walls should be at least seven feet high and should not be accessible to trees or climbing vines. In addition, the top of the wall should be capped with a fence ledge that angles toward the interior at least one foot, as an added deterrent for jumping and climbing cats.

Cat Proofing Your Exits

Even if you do a great job providing enrichment for your cat, if your cat has been allowed loose outdoors in the past he'll likely try to get outdoors on his own again. See the resource entitled

“Keep Kitties Safely Indoors” for some great tools to help secure your home from the escape artist.

First Things First: Check Windows and Doors

Check the security of your windows and doors. Check that your doors latch securely and that the springs are taut so that the doors close quickly. Be sure your window and door screens are not tattered. Tattered screens invite cats to attempt escape.

Encourage the Family to Watch for Escape Attempts

Be certain that all family members watch for your cat and any attempts he could make to escape. However, remember that children are easily distracted by friends and activities and may not be able to always keep the cat from escaping. It’s helpful to practice with children and show them how to leave the house without allowing the cat out with them. Teach them to watch for the cat, to open the door slowly, and to turn back toward the house as they close the door behind them—with your cat inside!

Deterrents at Doorways

A cat who is given outlets for his natural behaviors through environmental enrichment will gradually accept and indeed enjoy his life inside his home. But before he adjusts to this lifestyle change, it can be helpful to set up humane deterrents to discourage him from trying to get out. (Keep in mind that using noise-making deterrents can be stressful for your cat.) Here are some suggestions:

- An automatic door closer that can be fastened to a screen door or the primary door to close automatically upon entering or leaving your home. This closer can be set to slam which will scare the cats away from the door.
- Noise maker. Keep a can, half full of pennies and properly sealed, in a convenient spot next to the doorway. Encourage family members to lift the can and shake it each time they leave the house regardless of where the cat may be. Your cat will learn to associate the unpleasant sound with people leaving, and so he’ll stay away from the door.
- Water spray bottle. Keep a spray bottle in a convenient spot next to the door. Have everyone pick it up before they open the door. When the door is open, if your cat approaches, squirt or mist him, whichever seems more unpleasant to him.
- A motion-activated sound alarm. Radio Shack sells a variety of motion-activated alarms. The downside of using one of these is that it will go off whenever anyone goes near the door, unless they make an effort to step over the infrared beam.
- SpraySentry™ Cat Deterrent System. This is a device that detects movement within several feet and delivers a short burst of compressed air to deter the cat. This, too, has the pitfall of activating whenever anyone goes near the door.
- ScatMat® A ScatMat delivers a startling but mild electric shock when touched. The mat can be set in front of the door as a deterrent. Many cats who have been allowed outdoors will learn to jump over the mat, so your vigilance is still necessary even when the mat is present. Placing two mats side-by-side may be more effective.