



VETERINARY HOSPITAL & HOTEL

9151 Ustick Road · Boise, ID 83704 · (208) 327-7706 · Fax (208) 327-0676 · www.catdr.com

How To Keep Your Cat Healthy-Emotionally and Physically

We all want what is absolutely best for our cats. This is exactly why many of us have chosen to keep our cats mostly indoors. This does ensure their safety by reducing the chance of injury and disease, but there are also health risks associated with this lifestyle.

Cats in the wild are very active day to day and are mentally stimulated on a continual basis by their surroundings. This is very different from how the typical indoor cat lives. Lack of exercise and minimal mental stimulation causes physical and emotional stress. Science has found a connection between chronic stress and disease in humans as well as in pets.

The typical indoor, well-loved cat may not seem to be under stress...or are they? Chronic stress is thought to play a role in some of the common inflammatory diseases of cats such as interstitial cystitis (sterile inflammation of the bladder) and inflammatory bowel disease (chronic vomiting or diarrhea). We recommend that you enrich the home environment of your cat. These positive changes will help replace the stimulation, activity, complexity, and choices that outdoor cats enjoy day to day.

There are 5 categories of basic life needs that all cats have:

1. Territory
2. Food/Water
3. Sleeping Area
4. Entertainment/exercise
5. Litter box

1. **Territory** is of utmost importance to most cats, especially if they share the house with other pets. Even though some cats are very social, they are independent creatures by nature and need a space of their own where they feel safe. Competition among cats in the same house is one of the most common causes for behavioral problems such as urine spraying, defecating or urinating outside the litter box, hair pulling, destructive scratching, eating or chewing on abnormal items, etc.

Each cat should have his or her own space, complete with a separate litter box, separate feeding station, and a separate space to spend time or sleep. Even though some cats may be ok with sharing space, you still need to provide this option.

In multiple cat households, the use of Feliway can help reduce stress, as can the holistic calming product, Rescue Remedy. Feliway is a facial pheromone (scent molecule) that is considered to be a 'friendly' scent to cats. It comes in a spray and plug-in unit. Rescue Remedy is a flower extract that can be added to drinking water or used directly on your cat.

www.feliway.com, www.rescueremedy.com/pets

2. Cats in the wild hunt for their **food**. This is where they get most of their exercise as well as their water requirements. By keeping cats indoors, we have created a situation where they must only walk into the next room to eat. They no longer have to work for their food and are much more sedentary than their outside counterparts. They tend to consume too many calories for their activity level. This can be from the overfeeding of treats, free choice feeding (bowl is never empty), boredom, eating high carbohydrate foods (most common brands), competition for food resources, or all of these. Cats in the wild may eat up to 20 small meals in a day. But they watch, listen, stalk, jump, chase, and pounce for every meal. We currently recommend a diet of mainly canned food to help ensure they get enough moisture and protein. Of course, having fresh water available at all times is still critical. Many cats prefer moving water. This can be offered in the form of a fountain or fish tank bubbler placed in a bowl. Most dry foods are very high in carbohydrates (grains), which are not the ideal nutrient source for cats. You can read more about the recommendations for feeding cats at www.catinfo.org.

3. Cats need a **sleeping space** that is quiet and safe. Many cats like to be alone when they sleep, either curled up in or under something or often up high where they are safe and can watch their surroundings. Providing a choice of sleeping areas is ideal. Let your cat choose. If your cat chooses somewhere to sleep, there is probably a reason...try to be accommodating if at all possible. Sometimes this means having cat beds as part of the décor. Cats have a sleep and wake cycle that constantly fluctuates. In the wild, cats hunt several times daily. Thus, to maintain this activity level, they must nap often. It is ideal to provide a number of suitable and attractive napping spots. This will help keep them happy.

4. **Many indoor cats are lacking in exercise and entertainment.** It is not only important in maintaining physical health, but staying active is healthy for their emotional state as well. Luckily, this is easy to encourage. Scratching posts or climbing areas are desirable to most cats for several reasons. They need a place to scratch. Scratching not only helps remove old nail but it provides for full body stretches, muscle flexing, and is a means of physical marking as well as scent marking. It is important to offer your cat a variety of scratching options. Try both horizontal and vertical scratching toys as well as different substrates such as sisal rope, carpet, cardboard, and wood.

The marking cats do while scratching is important to understand. It is a normal behavior. They mark trees in the wild to let other cats know the boundaries of their territory. If you have a scratching post in the spare bedroom, your cat won't be as apt to use it regularly. It needs to become part of the décor in the busy part of the house. Cats like to scratch and stretch as soon as they wake up, so placing a scratching post near their favorite sleeping spot can increase compliance.

Multiple perches near windows will encourage more jumping and movement during the day. Provide access to shelving or bookcases if possible. Cats have a natural tendency to want to watch their surroundings while feeling safe and hidden at the same time. Plant some flowers that attract bees and butterflies outside windows or install a planter box. Consider a bird feeder, birdbath, or squirrel feeder also.

You can feed your cat up off the ground to encourage jumping to get to it's meal. If your cat has arthritis, make sure it can still comfortably reach the bowl. Changing the location of the food dish on a regular basis will help keep them active and it forces them to "hunt". If feasible, try to hide small portions of your cat's food around the home on a daily basis. A play-n-treat feeding ball is a fun toy that cats must chase and knock about in order for kibble to be released. It can increase your cat's activity level and stimulate the mind.

Playing with your cat is the best form of exercise and **will stimulate** them mentally. There are videos you can play during the day that are designed just for cats. Play some soothing music while you are away. Cats get bored with toys easily, so make sure you rotate the toys every 1-2 weeks. Don't offer the whole collection at once. Some easy and cost effective toys to add to the rotation would be: paper grocery bags to play in, large cardboard boxes filled with crumpled paper to hide in, rolled up paper or tinfoil or tape, plastic milk rings, paper q-tips, catnip stuffed socks. Interactive things that involve both play and exercise include dragging a long shoelace on the floor, laser light pointers (never point at eyes), hang a toy from the doorknob(s), throw dry kibble across the floor as a treat, toss a ball across a hard floor surface, treat balls, playing hide-n-seek with your cat, a ping pong ball in the bathtub, or non-toxic cat bubbles.

Many cats like to chew on grass or houseplants. Offering a source of greens to chew on can help with this natural desire and is safe. Catnip, catmint, or wheat grass can all be purchased or grown indoors. We recommend organic to reduce the exposure to pesticides. Remember that greens are not a nutritional requirement and may make some cats vomit.

Some people introduce their cats to a harness, which allows them to be outdoors in the fresh air but under supervision and safe. Remember to consider flea control during the summer months if needed.

You may want to consider adopting a companion cat if you have only one. This can help provide company and a playmate. Slow introduction is important to make the new addition work.

5. In the wild, cats void in a new, clean spot every time. The **litter boxes** we provide are not at all like what they would choose outdoors in their natural environment. The goal is to make sure the cat box is the most attractive place so they will not be tempted to go somewhere else in the house. Attractiveness to a cat includes cleanliness, safety, and convenience. There are some basic rules to follow to help keep your cat happy. Following these will help prevent behavioral issues such as urine marking or defecating outside the box.

- a. Have a minimum of one box per cat and at least one box per level of house.
- b. Place the boxes in separate locations around the house to provide options
- c. Use unscented, scoopable litter, preferably low dust.
- d. Don't place the box near noisy appliances or air ducts
- e. Scoop the box at least 1x daily and clean the entire box every 1-2 weeks with unscented soap and water, not disinfectants or cleaning products.
- f. Litter box covers trap odors inside and may make your cat feel trapped so remove them.
- g. Offer the largest boxes possible. We prefer plastic storage containers to actual cat boxes.