

Cats: Indoors or Outdoors?

“Should my cat be an indoor cat or an outdoor cat?” This question plagues cat owners across the United States. The conflict arises when owners want to ensure the happiness of their feline friends, but are concerned about their safety outside of the house. Statistics show that indoor cats lead longer, healthier lives than outdoor cats. Indoor cats live on average 10-15 years, while outdoor cats live on average 2-5 years. This handout is intended to help you sort out the pros and cons associated with each lifestyle so you can rest assured your cat will have both an enriched life and protection from environmental hazards.

Following are some of the reasons for and against choosing to keep your cat indoors:

Here are some reasons to keep your cat inside:

1. Be hit by vehicles
2. Become injured from other cats, or attacked by other dogs or predators
3. Contract deadly infectious diseases from other cats
4. Get lost and/or picked up by Animal Control
5. Poisoned by toxins, such as antifreeze or rat bait
6. Contract parasites, such as fleas and ticks (and the diseases they can carry)
7. Contact with environmental hazards, such as foxtails or other objects
8. Hunt native wildlife, some of them species of conservation concern
9. Unhappy neighbors may try to trap cats found littering their yards
10. Theft, injury, or death from people with cruel intentions

Addressing the myths:

1. *Indoor cats don't get the exercise they need, which can lead to a weight problem.*

You can help your cat get more exercise and stay fit by enriching your household. A cat tree will give your cat a place to climb as well as sharpen their claws. A supply of toys, such as toy mice, corks from bottles, or wand-type toys, can trigger your cat's natural instinct to hunt and pounce. Even something as simple as an old box or a paper bag can become a play toy, indulging a cat's love of hiding. Some cats need a little more prompting to become active. Making some time to play with your cat daily can give your cat more stimulation and exercise as well as being a bonding activity.

2. *Cats are not completely domesticated and love the outdoors, fresh air and sunshine of their natural environment.*

Many indoor cats get just as much enjoyment from sitting on a windowsill, smelling the breeze and chattering at the birds. In fact, one study shows that cats use windows and sunlight less than many owners expect. However, there are ways to give your cat outdoor time while minimizing the associated risks. A screened in porch or an outdoor cat enclosure can allow your cat to feel like he is outside, without exposing him to the dangers listed above. Enclosures can be homemade or bought from specialized cat enclosure companies. If an enclosure isn't your style, you can train your cat to walk with a harness. It takes a little time and effort, but it is quite possible. Talk to your veterinarian for tips on how to do this in a way that will be enjoyable for both you and your cat.

3. *Cats are more likely to urinate in the house if they are not let outside.*

Most indoor cats have no trouble becoming litterbox trained. If they do start to urinate outside of the box, it doesn't necessarily mean they need to go outside. Cats will often go outside the box when their box is dirty, as one example. There also may be a medical issue to cause this problem. Contact your veterinarian for further details.

4. *Cats are more likely to scratch furniture if they are not let outside.*

Cats have a natural instinct to keep their claws sharp, and they do this by scratching. Keeping their nails trimmed can minimize the damage, but not eliminate this behavior. Provide your cat with a cat tree to scratch. Different cats prefer different materials to scratch on. If your cat doesn't use your cat tree, carefully observe what surfaces he prefers to scratch, and get a cat tree covered in that material. You can also spray the cat tree with interesting scents such as catnip to attract your cat to the tree. Please see the handout on Inappropriate Scratching.

5. *Cats are unhygienic in the home because of their habits of walking on high surfaces.*

Cats like to be on high surfaces. You can provide them with appropriate places to sit such as perches near windowsills or a tall cat tree. It is also possible to train them not to jump on surfaces such as your kitchen table or counters. Cats are very clean by nature; they spend a good portion of time every day bathing themselves. Outdoor cats are actually much more likely to track contaminants or parasites onto your surfaces than indoor cats.

6. *Cats can infect pregnant women with Toxoplasmosis.*

Pregnant women can become infected with Toxoplasmosis from cat feces. However, they are more likely to contract this disease from undercooked meat. Pregnant women should make sure to wear gloves whenever handling cat feces, and scoop the litterbox daily so that the feces don't have time to sit. The cat itself is not infectious and should pose no danger to the pregnant woman.¹

In Summary...

After weighing the costs and benefits of having an indoor or outdoor cat, we recommend keeping your cat indoors for your pet's health and safety. As discussed above, there are numerous hazards your cat may encounter while roaming unsupervised outside. If you think your cat is bored indoors, there are many ways to enrich his/her environment and give your cat a fulfilled life. For further information, contact your veterinarian.

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Clinical Animal Behavior Service

<http://behavior.vetmed.ucdavis.edu>

Some resources for outside cat enclosures:

Cat Fence-in ®: www.catfencein.com

Purrfect Fence ®: www.purrfectfence.com

Habitat Haven ®: <http://habithaven.com/cat-enclosures.html>