

Letting the Cat Out...Or Not

A LOOK AT INDOOR/OUTDOOR ISSUES

Thanks to the creation and marketing of cat litter since the mid 1940s, more and more cats are staying in – becoming indoors-only pets, that is. As such, cats are generally leading longer, healthier lives. The average indoor cat lives to be ten to twelve years old, and many of us know felines who are older than twenty. Conversely, outdoor-only cats survive for an average of two years in that situation. Our homes offer a safer, healthier environment than life on the street. Just think, no ticks and fleas unless the 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 pseudo-trees; interactive toys become hunted birds, bugs and field mice. A rotating array of cat playthings provides excitement, variety 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 ways to minimize the risks. While vaccinations are important to indoor cats, they are essential to the health of cats allowed outside. The soil of a garden or yard can harbor diseases spread by stray, unvaccinated cats for many months. And rabies has spread over much of the country, transmitted mainly through altercations with wildlife such as foxes, raccoons and bats.

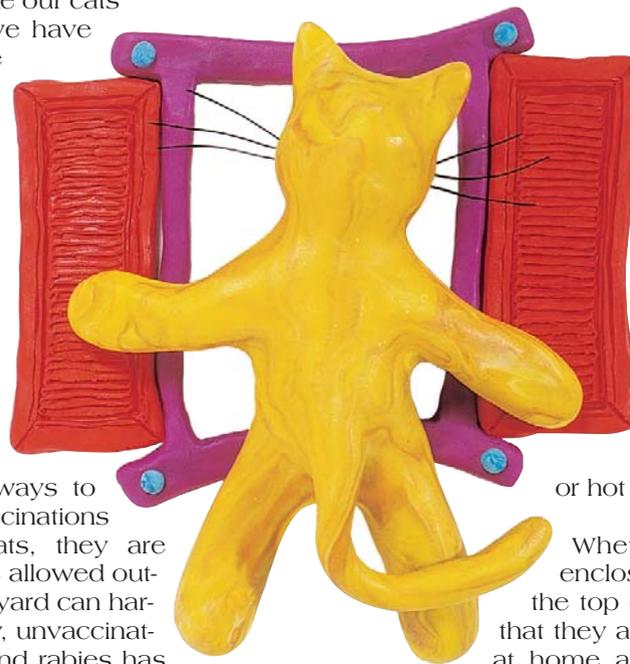
The safest ways to allow your cat to enjoy some time outdoors is to either harness-train him or her and go for walks together or to provide a screened-in enclosure or fenced-in yard topped with cat-proof netting.

Hold the Line

Harness training, like many things, is easiest taught during kittenhood. But some adult cats can acclimate to it. Choose a figure-8 or H-type harness 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, preferably just before mealtime or during play so that the cat associates it with something positive. Repeat this sev-

eral times a day. When the cat begins to ignore the harness, attach the leash and let him or her 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 the cat around the house. This will allow the cat to get used to a human following behind, prior to providing gentle guidance with 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 who could put Tabby in danger or give her a scare.



Hey, Fence Me In!

Since outdoor enclosures can be homemade or commercially constructed, they come in all shapes and sizes. For durability, chain link, chicken wire or wire mesh hardware cloth – secured around a simple wood frame – is preferable to ordinary window screening. Roofing is a necessity since cats are exceptional climbers. The most successful structures include climbing and resting furniture inside.

A shaded area complete with a water bowl is required for warm or hot weather usage.

Whether you choose an outdoor enclosure or add cat-proof netting to the top of traditional fencing, remember that they are best used only when you are at home and outdoors with your cats or able to check on them often. Pet theft only takes a few moments, whether perpetrated by pesky neighborhood kids or an organized group rounding up animals to sell to research facilities. Don't forget, a microchip, tattoo or ID tag is the very thing to reunite you and your family feline if all precautions fail.

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