



Exercising with Your Cat: A How-To Guide

Do you worry that your indoor cat is not getting enough exercise? Cats have the evolutionary advantage of a high metabolism that works even as they lounge around, they still need physical activity to keep them happy, healthy, and fit.

Unlike dogs, cats cannot easily be leashed for a walk around the block (some can, but they need to be trained young), but you can still find ways to encourage your cat to be more active.

Why Should Your Cat Exercise?

Activity is good for pets. Being active helps maintain a healthy body weight, keeps the muscles toned and strong, and keeps the mind alert and active. Exercise is also fun and can offer opportunities to bond with your pet. There are many ways to play with your cat, and they don't have to take much time or money!

Depending on your cat's age, weight, temperament, and interests, you may be able to set up an area where your cat can romp around and climb. Cat trees and scratching posts are ideal for this kind of activity. You can build your own cat jungle gym, or purchase one at your local pet supply store or online.

How Much Time Should Your Cat Exercise?

You should try to spend about 10-15 minutes a few times each day engaging your cat in some form of activity. Young cats and kittens will usually take the initiative, or they will find their own entertainment. Young cats are also easily amused and may want to continue playing long after you've tired of the game!

Older and overweight cats can be harder to engage. They may not have the endurance or interest but will still benefit from short activities throughout the day. Try starting with a few minutes at a time, a few times a day. Once you have found something that engages your cat's interest, try different variations and gradually increase the time you spend playing.

Tips for Creative Activity

Activities that stimulate a cat's natural hunting instincts are often the best bet. Small motorized remote controlled and battery powered furry mice are great for getting a cat's attention. Even the economical non-motorized mice are appealing; you will just have to do all the mock mouse movements using a string that is attached to the mouse. Along the same line, feather toys are good bird replicas, and are often attached to the end of a stick or string so that you can mimic the movements of a wounded bird, one of a cat's favorite objects for stalking. And everyone knows how much kittens love a simple length of yarn. A piece of thick ribbon, shoelace or yarn can be wiggled across the floor or beneath a closed door (with you on one side of the door and the cat on the other) just out of the cat's reach.

A lot of cats will grow out of this fascination with string as they age, but not all of them do. It wouldn't hurt to try with your older cat. Just remember to put the string and ribbons away after the games. Many an emergency intestinal blockage could have been avoided if the string had not been left out for the cat to swallow.

Another favorite is the beam of light. If you already have a smallish flashlight, you can try to get your cat to chase it around. Laser pointers are even better, since the small beam of light appears to be a little bug, and cats love to chase bugs. Stay low with the light, or you may have your cat trying to climb the shelves to catch it and end up with broken knick-knacks on the floor. Also, be sure to avoid flashing the beam directly into your cat's eyes.

Keep the fun novel for your cat by trying stuff you already have around the house. Empty boxes with holes cut into them make great "caves" and scratching toys, and crumpled paper, especially the tissue type that makes lots of noise, is great for batting around. Paper bags are fun for crawling into, too, but avoid the plastic bags; you don't want to risk an accidental suffocation. Also: plastic rings, empty toilet paper and paper towel rolls, stuffed animals, etc. Just be careful none of the household "toys" can become choking hazards.

Scratching posts and cat trees entice cats to climb, which uses their muscles and naturally wears down the points of their claws. If you have the space, set up a cat obstacle course in your home so that your cat can jump from place to place to get to the next perch. There are pre-made shelving systems that you can find online, or you can build a system of your own, with shelves that go from the floor to the ceiling in a step pattern. Some people will add a wrap-around ceiling-high shelf so their cats can climb and jump all the way up to find a good spot where they can watch over their kitty kingdom. If you have a yard, you can build or buy an outdoor enclosure that allows your cat the advantage of being outside without the dangers of traffic and other animals.

Finally, if your cat really needs to lose some weight, there are exercise wheels -- like the wheels made for hamsters -- made just for cats. Exercise wheels do not take up much space, and they allow cats to run and run to their heart's content.

With some imagination and a commitment to spend at least a combined hour each day on your cat's activity, you will find that both you and your cat are enjoying a healthier and more joyful life.

SOURCE: PetMD.com