

Paws for Pets

Keep Your Cat Safe At Home: HSUS's Safe Cats Campaign

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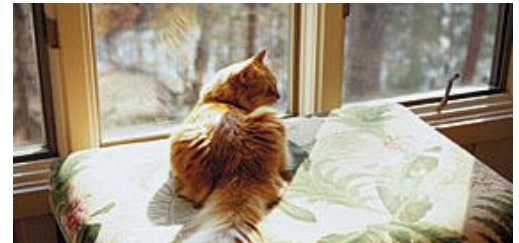
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Cats are America's most popular pets, but they are also the pets most likely to die prematurely from diseases, poisons, attacks by other animals, abuse by humans, or speeding vehicles. The reason is simple: Owners often don't realize that allowing their cat to roam outdoors can be a one-way ticket to trouble.

Millions of cats suffer and die because their owners give them free reign to roam the neighborhood. The vast majority of these owners aren't cruel or thoughtless; many love their animals as much as the rest of us. They just believe that cats are happiest outdoors. In fact, many cat caregivers acquired their felines by "taking in" or caring for someone's cat who was allowed to stray.

A Dangerous Tradeoff

When cats are left outside unsupervised, their freedom to roam comes at a cost because they have a vastly increased chance of being injured, becoming ill, or even dying. The estimated average life span of a free-roaming cat is less than three years—compared to 15-18 years for the average indoor-only cat. Even the cat who only occasionally ventures outdoors unsupervised can fall victim to automobiles, predators, disease, and other hazards. In fact, two out of three veterinarians recommend keeping cats indoors, most often citing dangers from vehicles and disease.



Even cats in "safe" suburban neighborhoods can meet untimely fates and never return home. Fewer than 5% of "found" cats taken in by animal shelters are reunited with their families. That's why many shelters now require potential adopters to commit to keeping their cats safely confined and strongly recommend that cats wear collars and ID tags, and even be implanted with an identifying microchip. Some communities are adopting ordinances aimed at encouraging owners to confine their cats—just as they do their dogs.

Home Is the Best Habitat

So what is best for your cat? The HSUS's Safe Cats campaign was created to help you keep your cat safe and happy by making the great indoors both interesting and comfortable. The campaign can teach you how to "bring the outdoors in" and enrich the life of your cat. There are lots of things that you and your cat can do together for fun—and you will have longer to enjoy one another if you keep your cat safely confined in his natural habitat: the home you share.

Bringing An Outside Cat In

Most cats who are kept indoors from the start show no inclination to go outdoors. In fact, they may become frightened if they accidentally wander out the door.

But what if your cat is already used to being allowed outside? Transforming a free-roaming cat into a safe cat can be done, but it does require planning, persistence, and patience. The key is to make the change from outdoors to indoors gradually, until the new way of life becomes old hat. Many cats will adjust with minimal effort while others will be miserable—and let you know it. They may scratch at doors, claw at windows, yowl, and try to dash through open doors.

If your cat has never used a scratching post or a litter box, introduce both items well in advance of transitioning your cat to a life inside. If you're feeding your cat outdoors, begin feeding him indoors.

Then, instead of letting the cat back outside as soon as he's finished eating, keep him inside for gradually longer periods of time.



Other members of the household may have to be "retrained" to close

doors quickly and provide more stimulation for their feline friend. Playing with the cat is a great way to keep both his mind and his body in shape. Some former free-roamers will appreciate your providing "kitty greens" for them to munch on instead of your houseplants: Try planting grass, alfalfa, catnip, wheat, or oat grass (sold in pet supply stores) in indoor pots for this purpose.

If you live in a climate that has cold winters, that season may be the perfect time to help your cat make the transition to a life indoors. Your cat is likely to appreciate a warm, dry bed in which to snuggle. After the weather warms up and you've checked that screens are

secure, open the window and let your cat feel and sniff the fresh air. Or, if your cat is docile enough, take him outside in your arms or on a leash attached to a harness.

If you're having trouble slowly transitioning your cat to a happy life indoors, it may be better to go "cold turkey." Letting your cat outdoors occasionally may only reinforce his pestering behaviors. Your veterinarian may prescribe short-term drug or homeopathic therapy to help your cat through the transition period.

If you have an indoor cat who is scratching your couch or not using the litter box, think twice before you put your cat outdoors. Consult your veterinarian to rule out any medical problems that could be contributing to problem behaviors. If your cat gets a clean bill of health, work with your veterinarian, a trainer, or animal behavior specialist who uses positive training techniques. There is always a reason, from your cat's point of view, for behavior that you consider to be inappropriate. He is not acting out of spite or revenge. Patience and persistence, not punishment, are the best way to get your cat back to his good habits.

If allergies or pregnancy make you think about putting your cat outside or even giving up the cat, consult your physician and learn how to manage those conditions while keeping your cat safe.

By providing for your indoor cat's physical and emotional needs, you can create a safe and stimulating environment. Although domesticated several thousand years ago, cats still retain many behaviors of their wild ancestors. These delightful behaviors can be played out in the great indoors. A paper grocery bag, a cat's vivid imagination, and your caring attitude will go a long way toward keeping you and your cat young at heart.

Keeping Your Cat Happy Indoors

While many cats enjoy being outside where they can hunt prey and explore their surroundings, it's a myth that going outside is a requirement for feline happiness. Playing regularly with a cat easily satisfies her stalking instinct, keeps her stimulated, and provides the exercise she needs to stay healthy and happy. In fact, the indoor cat who gets lots of attention and playtime is likely happier than the indoor-outdoor cat who is generally ignored by her human companions.

Here are some tips for safely confining your cat and making the great indoors an interesting, feline-friendly environment that meets all of your cat's needs.

- Start young. Kittens who are kept indoors usually show no desire to venture outside when they grow up.
- Provide a screened porch or other safe way for your cat to experience the outdoors. Consider building or purchasing a "cat fence" or similar enclosure. Such an enclosure can allow your cat to experience all the pleasures of the great outdoors without the risks. However, a fence may not prevent animals from entering your yard, so you should always be present when you allow your cat outside. And be sure to cat-proof the yard by checking that the fence has no escape routes and by making toxic plants, garden chemicals, and other dangerous objects inaccessible.
- If you live in a peaceful neighborhood in which you can walk without encountering loose dogs, consider buying a harness and training your cat to walk on a leash.



This training takes time and patience, for both you and the cat, and it's easiest when your cat is young. Some cats can even be trained to sit on your lap while you

are on the deck or patio, or harnessed and tied to a stationary object to enjoy the outdoors

while you are gardening nearby (but be sure to never leave your cat alone while she is tied to a stationary object).

- Install a perch near a sunny window; padded perches can be purchased at many pet supply stores or through catalog retailers. Another option is an enclosure that sits in a window frame (much like an air conditioning unit) and provides a secure space in which your kitty can "hang out." Larger options are available that attach to the side of a house or ground-floor apartment patio. It's best to allow your cat access to these when someone is home to supervise.
- Buy a ready-made cat tree (often called a "kitty condo"), or make your own. A cat tree may stretch from floor-to-ceiling or be shorter. It provides great climbing opportunities and, in multi-cat households, creates more play and rest areas by taking advantage of vertical space.
- Play with your cat each day. Try different types of toys that recreate "fishing," "chasing," and "flying" prey. And leave "toys" such as paper bags and cardboard boxes out when you are not home.
- Give your cat a feline friend—they can provide one another with companionship and entertainment.
- Plant cat grass (available from pet supply stores) in indoor pots so your feline can graze.
- Clean the litter box regularly.

Even cats who are protected from roaming free should still be outfitted with a collar and visible identification. The occasional open window (make sure your windows have secure screens) or door offers a tempting opportunity for your cat to explore the outdoors. And your cat may become frightened and make her way outside if strangers come to work on your house or if there is a fire or similar disaster. The collar and visible ID could help someone get your pet back to you. For extra insurance, consider having your cat micro-chipped. If you do lose your cat, contact your local animal shelter immediately to file a report. Shelter workers can give you tips on getting your pet back home safely. Also read our tips for finding a lost pet.

Choosing a Pet Sitter

Pet sitters do much more than provide your pet with food and water while you're away from home. A good pet sitter also spends quality time with your pet, gives him exercise, and knows how to tell if your pet needs veterinary attention. What's more, pet sitters typically offer additional services, such as bringing in mail and newspapers, watering plants, turning lights on and off, and providing homes with a lived-in look to deter crime.

But just because someone calls herself a pet sitter doesn't mean she's qualified to do the job. This information will help you find the best pet sitter for you and your pet.

Why hire a pet sitter?

When you must be away from home—say for travel or an emergency—and don't want to leave your pet in a boarding kennel, who takes care of your pet? If you're like many pet owners, you ask a friend or neighbor to stop in and pour some kibble and water in your pet's bowls. But is this what's best for your pet? There's a good chance that your friends and neighbors lack proper pet-care experience and have even forgotten to show up. They may also resent frequent requests to look after your pet while you're gone. So what is the solution? Consider hiring a "pet sitter"—a professional, qualified individual paid to care for your pet.

A pet sitter offers both you and your pet many benefits.

Your pet gets:

- the environment he knows best.
- his same diet and routine.
- relief from traveling to and staying in an unfamiliar place with other animals (such as a boarding kennel).
- attention while you're away.

You get:

- happier friends and neighbors, who aren't burdened with caring for your pet.
- the peace of mind that comes from knowing that your pet is being cared for by a professional.
- someone to bring in your newspaper and mail so potential burglars don't know you're away.
- someone who will come to your home so you don't have to drive your pet to a boarding kennel.
- other services provided by most pet sitters, such as plant watering and pet grooming.

Where do I find a pet sitter?



Start with a recommendation from a friend, neighbor, veterinarian, humane society, or dog trainer. Check the Yellow Pages under "Pet Sitting Services." You can also contact the National Association of Professional Pet Sitters (800-296-PETS) or Pet Sitters International (336-983-9222) for a referral. Both organizations offer pet-sitter accreditation to those who demonstrate professional experience, complete pet-care-related home study courses, attend professional conferences, and abide by a code of ethics set by the organizations.

What should I look for?

It's important to learn all you can about prospective pet sitters' qualifications and services. Before selecting a pet sitter, interview the candidates over the phone or at your home. Find out the following:

- Can the pet sitter provide written proof that she has commercial liability insurance (to cover accidents and negligence) and is bonded (to protect against theft by a pet sitter or her employees)?
- What training has the pet sitter received?
- Will the pet sitter record notes about your pet, such as his likes, dislikes, fears, habits, medical conditions, medications, and routines?
- Is the pet sitter associated with a veterinarian who can provide emergency services?
- What will happen if the pet sitter experiences car trouble or becomes ill? Does she have a backup?
- Will the pet sitter provide related services such as in-home grooming, dog walking, dog training, and play time?
- Will the pet sitter provide a written service contract spelling out services and fees?
- If the pet sitter provides live-in services, what are the specific times she agrees to be with your pet? Is this detailed in the contract?
- How does your pet sitter make sure that you have returned home?
- Will the pet sitter provide you with the phone numbers of other clients who have agreed to serve as references?

Choosing a Pet Sitter (cont.)

Even if you like what you hear from the pet sitter and from her references, it's important to have the prospective pet sitter come to your home to meet your pet before actually hiring her for a pet-sitting job. Watch how she interacts with your pet—does your pet seem comfortable with the person? If this visit goes well, start by hiring the pet sitter to care for your pet during a short trip, such as a weekend excursion. That way, you can work out any problems before leaving your beloved pet in the pet sitter's care for longer periods.

How can I help the pet sitter and my pet?

Of course, even the most trustworthy, experienced pet sitter will have trouble if you haven't also kept your end of the bargain. Here are your responsibilities:

- Make reservations with your pet sitter early, especially during holidays.
- Ensure your pet is well socialized and allows strangers to handle him.
- Affix current identification tags to your pet's collar.
- Maintain current vaccinations for your pet.

- Leave clear instructions detailing specific pet-care responsibilities and emergency contact information, including how to reach you and your veterinarian.
- Leave pet food and supplies in one place.
- Buy extra pet supplies in case you're away longer than planned.
- Leave a key with a trustworthy neighbor as a backup, and give him and your pet sitter each other's phone numbers. Be sure those extra keys work before giving them out.
- Show the pet sitter your home's important safety features such as the circuit breaker and security system.

Finally, have a safe and fun trip. And remember to bring your pet sitter's phone number in case your plans change—or you just want to find out how Fluffy and Fido are doing.