



How do you exercise a cat?

Types of exercise:

- Self-play, i.e. playing alone
 - Such as running around as a solitary activity
 - Or with the use of objects such as toys
- Interactive play is social and categorised by type
 - Chase and play fighting games, with other cats/pets
 - Fetch games, wand toys and laser pointers, with humans
- Natural play; explore, search and forage

Cats are naturally neophilic (they are excited by new things!) whether it be food, toys or a cosy bed. As a result cats can often lose interest in things that have been around for a while. To prevent this from happening it is recommended that toys aren't left out; store them in a sealed receptacle and randomly present, rotating which is used to optimise appeal.

With any type of exercise/play it should be finished on a positive note and before the cat gets bored. Make sure to use a strong signal that the game has stopped such as a treat or meal and pack the toy away. This will prevent the cat continuing to the point that they will attack you and gives them closure on their 'hunt'!

How to encourage your cat to exercise

Where possible mimicking the cat's natural predatory behaviour will entice him/her to get involved.

Short bursts of activity at frequent intervals would provide the most benefit.

The environment where the exercise takes place is crucial, as cats are more likely to exercise if stimulated by the environment.

- Environmental factors to consider:
 - Things to scratch – scratching posts and trees
 - Places to hide – high and low levels
 - Toys – rotated use as mentioned above
 - Set aside play time
 - Keep feeding times to schedule

Exercise in kittens

With kittens it is vital to teach good manners for exercise and play, by gently discouraging from scratching clawing and biting. They should never be encouraged to play with hands or feet; instead use small feathers or toys dangling on the end of a rod to keep hands at a safe distance.

Young cats should play up to ten times per day in short intervals, especially when not going outside and getting extra exercise.

Exercise in older cats

Older cats still enjoy the stimulation and gentle exercise of a game that is adapted to suit their level of mobility. Even in games where the cat is laying down, the play will still benefit the cat both mentally and physically. Larger toys are useful to encourage elderly cats to lie on their side and grab the toy with front paws whilst kicking with back legs, this is great exercise for stiff hind limbs. The ideal kick toy is six to eight inches long, rectangle or cylindrical and made of a durable fabric such as drill cotton or towelling.

Exploration games are nice and gentle. Paper bags or cardboard boxes; on their side reduce need to jump or strain. Puzzle feeders are good for mental stimulation, but consumption should be monitored to ensure the extra effort doesn't reduce eating habits and vice versa, that doesn't result in weight gain

Senior cats should exercise up to 4 times a day.



Exercise in multi-cat households

In a harmonious multi-cat household, cats will play together; this can be encouraged by providing them with a stimulating environment. Cats enjoy the opportunity to play in environments where obstacles and varying levels allow camouflage, hiding opportunities and the chance to access high places for 'timeout'. It is important for cats to have escape places to diffuse more heated interactions.

Play with humans can be more complicated in a multi-cat household, especially where cats have different motivation levels or if any tension is present within the group. When cats are suffering stress due to conflict, they often avoid play as heightened vigilance is required. Monitoring the situation and factoring in time for individual play with each cat, in a separate area to others, is recommended.

Exercise and the indoor cat

These cats have less opportunity to display natural behaviour such as hunting and exploration. Boredom can result and this frustration can manifest as behaviour problems. It is vital that interactive play is scheduled throughout the day as well as self-play opportunities.

Controlled access to the outdoors is beneficial if available. Use a loose lead and a secure cat harness, so the cat has freedom of movement. Training with the harness is advised before the cats first visit outside as the stress from both factors may overwhelm them. The other option is provision of a "catio", a secure fenced-in enclosure allowing the cat to independently explore without the restriction of a harness and does not require constant monitoring.

Indoor play area essentials

Designated play areas should contain some or all of the following:

- Cardboard boxes with entry and exit holes
- Furniture at various heights
- Tables
- Cat activity centres
- Scratching posts to allow natural behaviours
- Hiding places

These should be positioned in a way that each cat can move around and approach from a variety of angles.

Types of toys/games

Exploration games can be provided through special cat furniture, cardboard boxes, paper bags (handles removed) and cupboards and wardrobes. The addition of catnip or treats can encourage more nervous individuals to interact with the objects.

Puzzle feeders are good as they provide physical and mental activity whilst combining food with exercise: they can be added into the cats' routine with minimal extra effort.

Chase games such as laser pens and feathers are good but can cause frustration if it does not allow for the catch/pounce behaviour. Uses only in short bursts before feeding times and always end on a positive note such as catching a toy.

Balls with bells or ping pong balls are good to chase or to play fetch with as the cats like the unpredictable movement.

Cat nip is widely available in a variety of toys and often adds an extra sensory aspect for the cat.

Cat exercise wheels are now readily available (although pricey) and allow indoor cats the chance to run,



however not all cats are motivated to use such a device.

Try not to encourage your cat into a frenzy!

If your cat is showing signs of over-stimulation (such as frantic, erratic movement or biting) stop the play and let the cat settle. In multi-cat groups it is especially important to avoid excessive excitement as this can lead to conflict or aggression.