

# Indoor Cats vs. Outdoor Cats

Like many cat lovers, you may have thought about letting your cat go outside. A lot of cat owners feel guilty about keeping their cat inside, and worry that they are depriving their cat of natural instincts or fresh air and sunshine. If you have experienced some of these feelings, American Humane appreciates your concern for your feline friend and would like to help you make an educated decision. Let's look at the issues surrounding indoor vs. outdoor cats:

## HEALTH CONCERNS

### Disease:

The American Feral Cat Coalition estimates that there are approximately 60 million feral and homeless stray cats living in the U.S. Many of these cats may carry diseases that can be passed on to your cat if he or she comes into contact with them. A number of these diseases can be serious or potentially fatal. Common examples include:

- Feline leukemia (FeLV)
- Feline AIDS (FIV)
- FIP (feline infectious peritonitis)
- Feline distemper (panleukopenia)
- Upper respiratory infections (or URI).

### Parasites:

While usually not life-threatening for cats, several common parasites can be picked up by your kitty when venturing outdoors, including:

- Fleas
- Ticks
- Ear mites
- Intestinal worms
- Ringworm (a fungal infection)

These parasites can cause a variety of moderate to severe symptoms, such as scratching, skin infections, vomiting and diarrhea. In addition, these creepy crawlies can hitch a ride into your home and infect your family. Parasites can be very difficult to eradicate from your pet, from humans and from your home.

## IF YOU DECIDE TO LET YOUR CAT OUTSIDE:

- Protect your kitty from other cats. Keep her on a leash or secured in a cage or other confined space where she can't get out (and other cats can't get in).
- Make sure an adult supervises your kitty's outdoor time to ensure strays cannot come into contact with her.

- Take her to the veterinarian at least once every year for **lifesaving vaccines**, as well as parasite screening and treatment.

## SAFETY CONCERNS

A major consideration for cat lovers thinking about letting their cat venture outdoors is safety. In addition to the risks posed by fellow cats, other potential hazards that can seriously threaten your cat's well-being — and even her life — include:

### **Cars:**

Contrary to popular belief, cats do not have the innate instinct to avoid busy streets, and they frequently get hit by cars.

### **Animal cruelty:**

Roaming cats may be at risk for animal cruelty. Sadly, some people have been known to shoot cats with BB guns or arrows, while some cats end up being trapped, abused and killed in the name of “sport” or “for fun.”

### **Loose dogs and wild animals:**

We may think of our feisty felines as good hunters who are capable of taking care of themselves with sharp teeth and claws. Unfortunately, cats may be good hunters, but they also often wind up being hunted. Cats are commonly attacked by loose dogs and wild animals, such as coyotes, raccoons, foxes and even alligators (depending on where they live). Injuries from wild animal and stray dog attacks are very serious and often fatal.

**Toxins and poisons:** Outside cats also face danger from coming into contact with toxins, such as antifreeze, that are often ingested because they have a pleasant taste. Cats may also end up accidentally exposed to rodent poisons when they hunt and eat rodents that have recently ingested poison bait.

**Trees:** Trees can be a source of some danger for cats who climb to a place where they are afraid or unable to climb down. In some cases, they may be up in a tree for days until they become so severely dehydrated and weak that they fall and suffer severe, serious or fatal injuries.

## ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS

### **Killing birds and small animals:**

A cat's prey drive is so strong that even well-fed cats may naturally enjoy hunting birds or other small animals. Although the impact made by one cat might not seem like a big deal, it is important to think about the total impact of all the cats who are allowed outside. Loose cats are estimated to kill hundreds of millions of birds each year, yet birds are believed to be only 20 percent of the wildlife stray cats kill.<sup>1</sup> Birds are especially at risk around homes with feeders and birdbaths.<sup>1</sup>

## KEEPING INDOOR CATS HAPPY

Here are some great ways to ensure that your cat enjoys a happy, healthy life inside your home:

### **A Companion for Your Cat**

Many cats enjoy the **company of other cats** or in some cases, **dogs**! Playing, chasing and mutual grooming and snuggling can fulfill your indoor cat's need for exercise, companionship and affection while you are at work or away from home.

### **Interactive Toys**

Provide your indoor cat with a variety of different **interactive toys** to keep them physically and mentally stimulated.

- While cats have individual preferences for favorite types of toys, most enjoy the thrill of getting any new toy. However, just like children, they may get bored with it after a few days. This does not mean you have to buy your cat new toys constantly. Try putting some of the toys away while you leave others out, and then rotate them every few days to give your kitty the “new toy” excitement without the expense.
- A great way to stimulate a cat's hunting instinct is to provide your cat with a prey-like toy, such as a laser toy or kitty fishing pole. Enjoying these types of toys with your cat for several minutes each day is an ideal way to interact with your cat and provide much-needed exercise and playtime, while allowing an appropriate outlet for her natural prey drive.

### **Scratching Posts**

Indoor cats should be provided with appropriate surfaces on which to exercise their **natural instinct to scratch**. Cats have individual preferences, and many prefer to have a variety of scratching posts and surfaces, so be sure to offer your cat several types in multiple locations around your house.

### **Creating a Purr-fect Indoor Environment**

- *Climbing places:* Your house may already provide climbing opportunities on furniture, shelves or cabinets, but you may also want to have climbing areas specifically for your cat, such as a cat tree. You can buy cat trees at most pet supply stores, or research online how to make your own.
- *Cat perches:* Cats are natural-born sun worshippers. Giving your cat access to several windows will give her the opportunity to both sunbathe and watch the world from the safety of your home. If you have narrow windowsills, consider installing a cat perch on several windows so your kitty has a place to stretch out and enjoy the view. Shelves made especially for this purpose can be purchased at most pet supply stores, or you can research online how to build your own.
- *“Cat TV”:* Provide entertainment for your cat by placing a bird feeder or birdbath in your yard within view of the windows. If you decide to provide feeders and baths, please keep our winged friends safe by keeping your cats inside at all times. A screened-in porch can also be a safe, enjoyable place for your cat to enjoy the sun and a view of nature; just be sure that the screens are secure to prevent escape.
- *Hiding places:* Most cats love to hide. Providing your feline friend with fun hiding places is easy and does not have to cost a dime! Most cats will be thrilled to have a cardboard box or paper grocery bag to hide in. If you prefer, you can purchase a kitty tent, condo or tunnel at a pet supply store, or figure out how to make one at home.

### **References**

<sup>1</sup> Kress, Steve (2008). *Audubon Living: Cats*. Audubon Magazine, November-December.