

## Helping Your Indoor Cat Thrive<sup>1</sup>

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***I want to get a cat, but I live near a busy road so I am thinking of keeping it indoors. Is that cruel?*** No, it isn't! Cats can thrive indoors, and are less likely to suffer diseases and injuries due to cars, trains, predators (like dogs and humans), etc.). And cats living indoors live longer, safer lives than cats living outdoors. Keeping your cat indoors also stops her from killing wildlife, fouling neighbor's yards, or fighting with other cats.

***What do I need to do to make my indoor cat happy?*** Create a home that meets her needs. Cats need a secure home base, food, water, litter box, and warmth. She also needs to hunt (play), scratch, and climb to feel safe and in control. Meeting her needs can be easy and fun, it just takes a little time, thought, and effort on your part, and some coaching on our part! I briefly introduce the essentials below, there is (much!) more information here: <https://fearfreehappyhomes.com/> and here: <https://catfriendly.com/>

***What is a "home base"?*** Cats need a safe, warm, quiet resting place they can go to and not be disturbed, just like we do. We call this a home base. A great home base is her carrier, put in a quiet part of the house so it becomes her favorite resting place. This also makes it easier to take her out when you need to, like to visit her veterinarian. She also might like to have her home base put up off the floor.

***Why does my cat need to hunt? I feed her so well!*** Cats have a natural drive to stalk, chase, bite, and release prey, which we call hunting. Cats hunt when they see or hear prey, whether or not they feel hungry. While our indoor cats are not likely to come across natural prey, they will hunt anything that moves rapidly or squeaks.

You can meet your cat's hunting needs by playing with her regularly. Start by learning what kind(s) of "prey" your cat likes best; toys that "fly", toys that squeak or move rapidly and unpredictably? small toys? large toys? She also might prefer toys that mimic the size, texture and color of real prey.

Plan to play with your cat for five to ten minutes, two to four times each day. Start with shorter play times when your cat seems interested and willing to play, and stop as soon as she starts losing interest. Avoid doing anything that lets your cat "attack" your hands or ankles to keep you from getting hurt while playing with your cat!

***Should I feed my cat at specific times? Or should I leave food down in the bowl all of the time?*** Either of these can work for indoor cats, as long as they stay at a healthy weight. Just be sure to feed your cat in a safe, quiet place where she won't be threatened while she is eating. The best way to awaken the natural hunter in your cat is to offer food to her in a puzzle feeder. Cats need to work for the food in puzzle feeders, just like they work for prey in the wild. Feeders can either stay in one place or move, and do not need to be expensive. You can easily make one from an old muffin tin or plastic drink bottle. Some people also scatter food around the house in small containers so the cat can hunt for them. Many commercial toys that deliver food also are available. There is lots more information about food puzzles here: <http://foodpuzzlesforcats.com>

***What about the litter box?*** Give your cat a litter box that is big enough for her to feel comfortable in, at least as long as she is from the tip of her nose to the tip of her tail (at least 34 inches, if possible). Start with the type of litter most cats prefer, unscented clumping, and put enough in the box so she can scratch around without hitting the bottom of the box. Be sure to put the litter box away from her food, water and resting areas, in a safe, quiet place where she won't be threatened while she is using the box. Cats also like clean boxes, so scoop her waste every day, at least!

***Why do these all need to be in a safe place?*** Cats in the wild are prey for larger animals. They are at greatest risk from other animals when they are resting, eating, drinking, and peeing or pooping, so they try to do these in safe, secure places. When you put your cat's home base, food, water and litter box in safe quiet places out of household traffic and away from machinery (refrigerator, air vent, etc.), she will enjoy using them whenever the need arises.

***How do I ensure that my cat has enough to do to occupy her time?*** In addition to hunting, your cat needs places to climb and to scratch to get the activity she naturally gets outdoors. Climbing "trees" provide climbing, hiding and playing opportunities; you can purchase one or make one yourself. Be sure it is sturdy and safe enough for your cat, and that she has easy access to it from a number of different angles. If possible, put it in the middle of a room rather than in a corner or under the stairs; or next to a window she can look out of from the safety of her tree. If her tree doesn't have places for her to scratch, give her a scratching post so she can stretch and condition her claws. Be sure that the post is tall enough to allow her to get a good stretch on the scratching surface, and think about putting it near her home base so she can stretch after a nap. Some cats also like to scratch objects on the floor; if your cat does, you can also get "horizontal scratchers" for her to use.

***Does my cat need to climb?*** Yes! In the wild, cats are both hunters and hunted. High perches let your cat see her world from a place of safety; cats climb both to find prey, and not to be prey themselves. If a climbing tree doesn't work in your home, try to provide other places for her to climb to. Think about a shelf with good access in a closet, the top of a refrigerator, bookcase, couch or entertainment center, or installed on a wall. Just be sure no other pets can trap her on a perch by giving her at least two ways to get on and off of it.

***How can I give my cat some fresh air without turning her loose outside?*** How about a catio? Catios are safe spaces for cats to use outside. They can connect the inside of your home with the outside, or be put outside. Catios can be as small as a window box, or as large as an outdoor room. Some cats also learn to like walking with a harness and leash (for example: <https://ohmydogblog.com/2018/07/train-your-cat-to-walk-on-a-leash>), and some like riding in strollers.

***How do I know if this is working?*** Happy healthy cats enjoy exploring your home and playing with you; look for your cats to be doing this when they are not resting or seeing to their personal needs. Cats tend to hide when something is unfamiliar or scary to

them. Hiding may be a perfectly normal response for a cat that has recently been moved into a new home, or had some change in their familiar home. Hiding lets your cat try to figure out what is going on from a safe place, so let her hide while you work to make the home so appealing that she cannot resist the temptation to join in. But hiding can be a sign that all is not well if your cat that has been living in in your home for some time. If you can find the reason for her to hide, fix that first! Sometimes, no clear cause can be found and in these situations you need to resist the temptation to bring the cat out to face the world. If hiding persists, or if she stops eating, drinking, peeing or pooping, she might be sick. Consult your veterinarian for advice if you think this is the cause of her hiding.

So cats turn out to be a lot like us. They need safety, some basic resources, and the ability to express themselves as cats to thrive, pretty much like we do.

<sup>1</sup>I use female pronouns for cats in deference to Bastet, the ancient Egyptian goddess revered both for her hunting prowess *and* maternal nurturing skills <https://www.arce.org/resource/cats-bastet-and-worship-feline-gods>.