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Environment enrichment for indoor cats

While cats confined to an indoor environment generally live longer and are at less risk for contracting infectious diseases or injuries, they are at greater risk of a variety of behavioral problems. These problems include urinating and defecating outside the litter box, anxiety, eating disorders, attention seeking, aggression, self-injury and compulsive disorders like excessive grooming and scratching.

Providing your indoor cat with an enriched environment will increase activity and in turn, prevent many of these issues. It is especially important for indoor cats to have mental stimulation as it gives them the opportunity to create their own positive experiences in the enclosed space.

Here are some ideas to help keep your cat's environment enriched giving your cat a happy life.

1. Walking outside on a lead and harness

Take your indoor cat outside to enjoy the sunshine while you hang the washing out or for a bit of one-on-one time together. Ensure your cat is secured with a harness and lead so he/she does not run away or chase any wildlife. Your cat will love the fresh air while getting some exercise. Alternatively, allowing access to windows at different sides of the house provides your cat mental stimulation watching what is happening outside.

2. Vertical Exercise

Cats love to climb and hide at high levels. Climbing is a great form of exercise for your indoor cat and provides great stimulation. If you do not want your cat climbing over your furniture, give your cat some furniture of his/her own to climb about. A climbing tower or platforms will be thoroughly enjoyed by your cat. Hide food on the different levels to encourage climbing. Provide hiding spots for your cat on the levels and around the house also.



3. Outside cat aviary

Does your indoor cat attempt to slink out between your legs while the door is open to get outside? Cats are very inquisitive animals. Give your cat an area to enjoy the fresh air. An aviary with platforms and hammocks at different heights through the enclosure allows areas to climb and relax. A litter tray at the bottom and some toys will finish off the enclosure. You could even create a walkway from the house so he/she can access the outdoor aviary by himself/herself.

4. Make food time more fun

Cats are grazers and like to enjoy their bowl of food throughout the day just nibbling a few pieces here and there. You can make your cat's feeding time more interactive by hiding food around the house. Hide dry food and treats in corners, on elevated surfaces or behind furniture. This will allow your cat to 'hunt' for his/her food.

Food puzzles, food balls and interactive toys are great fun for your cat. There are many items available or you can make your own. Use a cardboard box or plastic bottle, put small holes in the side and fill with your cat's favourite food. The holes allow the kibble to fall out as your cat throws around and bats the item.

5. Scratching, training and games

Scratching is normal cat behaviour. Provide acceptable scratching materials for your cat, such as a carpeted post or a cardboard plank to help reduce the likelihood of him/her scratching your furniture. Encourage scratching by placing catnip, treats and toys near the post or cardboard and reward for with treats and praise.

If a dog can sit, drop or do a party trick, so can a cat. Training your cat will mentally stimulate him/her and will strengthen your bond together. Playing games with your cat such as fetching or hunting is very stimulating and fun. Items as simple as a ball of aluminum foil or a string with a ball of knots at one end can provide hours of entertainment. Remember to rotate the toys and activities to avoid getting use to or bored of it.

