

Henlow Veterinary Hospital

HAPPY CATS

How to set up your house for Happy Cats!

Why is it important to think about the home environment for our cats?

Domestic cats are descended from the North African Wildcat, a solitary hunting species of small cat. As a small cat species, they are prey in addition to being predators, and are used to surviving on their own. Although more domesticated than their ancestors, our pet cats today still retain a lot of their wild behaviours, including their reliance on having a safe home territory. Getting the home environment right can help to:

- Stop problem behaviours from developing e.g. toileting in unwanted places, scratching furniture, aggression between cats.
- Reduce the chance of stress-related illness from occurring.
- Reduce stress in multi-cat households.
- Improve relationships between cats and their owners.

Cats are socially flexible, so do have the ability to form bonds with other cats and other pets, but it very much depends on the individual cat, their temperament and their previous experiences. Even siblings who get on well as kittens can stop getting on well when they mature into adult cats. In order to have the best possible chance of a happy cat household, it is important to get the environment right, whether you have one cat or five!

The 5 Needs for a Healthy Feline Environment

A SAFE PLACE:

Cats need safe places to be able to retreat to in order to rest, or if they want to avoid a stressful situation (e.g. guests in the house, or other pets). Multiple safe places should be provided in different areas around the house. Cats prefer resting in raised places, as it helps them to feel more secure. Ideas for creating safe resting spaces include:

- Cat trees that have inbuilt beds.
- Putting a cat bed, box or blanket on top of bookshelves or wardrobes (as long as they can be reached by the cat).
- Boxes on window sills. These give cats an opportunity to look out of the window, whilst still being able to hide which can help them to feel more secure.
- Putting up cat shelves. This gives cats an opportunity to climb and also allows them high up spaces to escape to.
- Leaving their cat carrier out with comfy bedding inside. This will also help them to feel less stressed when travelling to the vets, if they are already comfortable resting in their carrier.
- Cardboard boxes in different areas of the house.



Multiple, Separate, Key Environmental Resources

'Key resources' refers to eating, drinking, scratching, toileting, play and resting areas.

These key resources should be available in separate areas around the house, and there should be multiple of each resource in households with more than one cat. Ideally, there should be one of each resource per cat, plus one extra. For example, a two-cat household should have three litter trays in different locations around the house. >>

- Litter trays should be located in quiet areas away from household appliances, floor length windows or doors and busy thoroughfares. Ideally, litter trays should be large enough that they measure 1.5 times the length of the cat when measured from the nose to the base of the tail. Cats tend to prefer unscented, fine grain cat litters. Litter tray liners should be avoided as they can catch on claws when the cat is digging in the litter. Clumping litters are the easiest to keep the tray clean as both urine and faeces are easily removed. Even cats that normally toilet outdoors should have at least one litter tray available in the house.
- Water bowls should be provided in different areas around the house. Some cats prefer to drink running water, in which case a water fountain could be considered. Water bowls should be cleaned and refreshed daily. Water bowls should not be located near food bowls or litter trays, as cats do not like to eat and drink in the same area, and would not naturally drink water near to where they toilet. Wide bowls are recommended as cats do not like their whiskers to touch the edge of bowls when they are eating or drinking. Ceramic, metal or glass bowls are best as plastic bowls can change the taste of water.
- Cats should not be fed from the same bowls or next to each other. Cats always prefer to eat apart from other cats and will only eat next to each other if this is the only choice they are given. Always feed cats at least several metres apart from each other, or most ideally in separate rooms. If your cats steal food from each other's bowls, it is worth considering investing in microchip feeders (e.g. Surepet Microchip Feeders), especially if your cats are eating different diets.
- A range of scratching furniture should be available in different locations around the house. Scratching posts need to be tall enough for your cat to fully stretch out to scratch them, and the base needs to be stable enough so that the post does not wobble when being used. Some cats prefer scratching on horizontal surfaces, in which case cardboard scratching boards would be a good option. Scratching is a normal behaviour for cats and if they are not provided with appropriate areas to do this they are more likely to scratch furniture and carpets. Never punish your cat for scratching in unwanted places (e.g. shouting at them, spraying them with water). They will not understand why you are doing this and therefore it may harm your relationship with your cat. If you are having problems with unwanted scratching behaviour and need more advice, please speak to our team.



Opportunity to Play & Predatory Behaviour

Cats are predators and need an outlet for this as it is a natural behaviour for them. Cats with outdoor access will have more opportunities to stalk prey, even if they are not successful hunters.

Outdoor cats should still have toys available and be given the opportunity for indoor play with their owners as it will help to strengthen the bond between owners and their cats, and can also help to reduce hunting behaviour outside. Indoor cats do not have a natural outlet for predatory behaviour therefore it is really important to provide them with mental stimulation indoors.

- Have a range of toys available for independent play. Toys that mimic prey species (mice and bird shaped toys with furry or feathery textures) are best. It is best to have a number of toys available but to rotate the ones that are out for independent play every few days, as cats become easily bored with the same toys.
- Wand toys/fishing rod toys are the best type to use for interactive play with owners, as they keep teeth and claws far away from our hands and therefore avoid any accidental injuries if the cat becomes overly excited.
 - It is best to try and mimic the way that prey moves when moving the toy around, as this will keep the cat most interested.
 - Try moving the toy quickly away from the cat with little jerky movements and even try moving it behind objects to mimic the movement of rodents.
 - Let your cat catch the toy to simulate catching prey. Always reward them with a treat at the end of the play session.
 - Even if your cat doesn't seem too fussed and is just watching, continue trying as this is still mental stimulation for them!

- Cats prefer short play sessions, 3-5 minutes of play time a couple of times a day is perfect.
- Avoid using laser pointers as cats can become very frustrated when playing with these, as there is nothing physical for them to 'catch' at the end of their hunt. If you do want to use this type of toy, always point the laser at a toy or a treat to finish the play session, to give your cat something physical to catch at the end of their hunt.
- Use puzzle feeders and feeding toys to feed dry food. This will help to stimulate the cats hunting instinct and will make meal times less boring for them. Some good puzzle feeders to try include the Trixie Cat Activity Fun Board, the Doc and Phoebe 'No Bowl Feeding System,' and Slimcat feeding balls.
- Try and split daily food allowances into several smaller meals a day rather than 1-2 larger meals as this better mimics how cats would naturally eat if hunting for themselves. The current recommendation is five meals a day!
- Do not punish cats who do hunt and bring home wildlife. It is a natural behaviour for them and they will not understand why they are being punished, therefore the only likely outcome will be to harm the relationship you have with your cat.
- Never use your hands and feet to play with cats, even when they are kittens. This can lead to accidental bite or scratch injuries, and your cat will not know that they have done anything wrong as they are just following through with natural play behaviour.

POSITIVE, PREDICTABLE & Consistent Human-Cat Interactions

Cats will vary in how much attention they enjoy, depending on how well they were socialised as kittens and their past experiences with people. For example, feral kittens that are rehomed to pet homes may never become 'lap cats,' but may still learn to enjoy spending time with people and have small amounts of physical contact.

Cats that are well socialised as kittens are more likely to enjoy and seek out human attention. It is important to always interact with your cat on their terms and follow their lead with how much attention they would like from people.



- Never force interaction with your cat. For example, if your cat struggles every time you pick them up for a cuddle, it is a sign they really don't like it, so it is best not to pick them up for this reason.
- Always let your cat initiate contact. It is best to lower yourself to the cat's level and give them time to sniff your hand. If your cat rubs its face against you, it is a sign that they are likely open to being stroked.
- Most cats prefer being stroked around their cheeks and forehead. Some cats will enjoy being stroked along their back or at the base of their tail, although some may find this overstimulating.
- The majority of cats will not enjoy having their stomach touched, as this is one of the most vulnerable areas of their body. If they roll over on the floor next to you it is a sign of relaxation, not an invitation for a tummy tickle! If this happens, it is best to stroke them around their face if they are receptive. Touching them on the stomach may cause them to bite or scratch you.
- Signs of a happy cat who is willing to interact with people include slow blinking, purring, rubbing their face or body against you and attempting to climb onto your lap.
- When your cat decides to end the interaction with you and walks away, do not attempt to pick them up or force them to continue interacting in any other way.

- Never leave young children unsupervised with cats. Children can make unpredictable loud noises and movements which can be scary for cats, or can handle them in ways that cats may find stressful, which has the potential to lead to bite or scratch injuries. The best way to ensure a good relationship between your cat and your children is to teach them to play with cats with fishing rod/wand toys (to keep small hands and feet away from teeth and claws) and to teach them that your cat will come to them if they want to have a cuddle. For more information on how to ensure safe interactions between your cat and young children, or how to introduce cats to babies, please ask our team.

RESPECT the Cat's Sense of Smell

Cats rely heavily on their sense of smell to recognise their surroundings and feel safe in their environment. They also use pheromones, a different type of chemical signal, to mark their territory.

They do this by rubbing their face on items in their territory and scratching. Introducing strong scents into the home or cleaning areas that cats have rubbed against can disrupt their feeling of safety in their environment and cause the cat to become stressed, leading to problem behaviours such as inappropriate urination and scratching in unwanted places.

- Avoid using strong smelling cleaners and detergents in the home.
- Do not use scented cat litter or scented sprays or powders for the litter tray.
- Leave shoes and shopping bags by the entrance of your house to avoid bringing outside smells into the home.
- Provide appropriate scratching furniture for your cat to use to mark their territory.
- Avoid cleaning areas that have been marked by face rubbing.
- Wash your cats bedding on rotation to avoid removing their scent from all resting areas at once.
- New items in the house can be artificially 'marked' with your cats scent by gently rubbing a clean, soft cloth on your cat's cheeks (as long as your cat allows this) and then rubbing it onto the new item. New furniture can also be sprayed with Feliway spray, which is a synthetic feline pheromone spray.
- Feliway plug-in diffusers can be used to help cats settle into new environments, feel generally safer in their home and help to alleviate stress. These diffusers do not affect people or other species of pet and do not smell.
- Cats returning from the veterinary clinic will likely smell different to other cats within the household. It is a good idea to keep the returning cat in a separate room to others for a short time until they are calm, before reintroducing them to other cats in the household. Feliway diffusers can be a useful tool to relieve tensions that may arise between cats during this time.

