

Top Tips for a Cat Friendly Home

Your cat's happiness is greatly influenced by you and the lifestyle you offer. As the cat is a territorial creature, the environment is everything!

It is very important to provide the right cat-related equipment and facilities. This is particularly important if you keep your cat exclusively indoors or give it restricted access outside.

Even if you have not made the conscious decision to have an indoor cat, you may have to confine it to the house due to ill health or you may have a cat that chooses to stay inside because it is either nervous or getting old.

However, there is no reason why the following suggestions for a **Cat Friendly Home** should not apply to all pet cats, even those with free access to outdoors!

Think Cat!

Cats are independent creatures. They enjoy their own company, insist on making their own decisions, have no concept of patience and do not understand the idea of sharing!

Our cat's ability to choose, based on personal likes and dislikes, could be compromised when we are in sole charge of making the decisions.

eg where your cat feeds, sleeps or goes to the toilet.

If we base those decisions purely on human considerations (or on what we perceive to be important to our cat) then our cat's life may be a little less than purrrfect ☺

Specific Needs

We know that cats have very specific needs. It may not be enough to simply provide food, shelter and love. Whilst these basics are of course vital, it is the quality and quantity of each that makes the difference. There are many practical challenges to ponder:

What sort of cat bed should you provide?

Where should you locate the scratching post?

What sort of litter facilities would your cat choose?

The Environment

A **Cat Friendly Home** takes into consideration the needs of the cat as a very different species to man. It provides an environment that is both **safe and stimulating**.

This may mean a few compromises, so that the environment suits you both.

If your home has a modern, minimal feel to it, you may have to adjust more than most, to provide everything your cat needs. Remember Contemporary, open plan living spaces couldn't be further removed from your cat's natural habitat.

Although the domestic cat is highly adaptable to most settings, it still requires hiding places. It is very hard for a cat to feel safe in an empty room! The slightly more cluttered home will offer more options of places to disappear from view.

There is no formula for the recommended number of cats per household but common sense should prevail. Keeping seven cats in a two-bedroom flat for example is asking for trouble!

Townhouses may represent a uniquely challenging environment for cats, with narrow staircases leading to each floor becoming areas where conflict could occur.

You may have heard of the phrase "**environmental enrichment**". This essentially means providing a setting that stimulates and challenges you cat, enabling it to perform **natural feline behaviour**.

Living indoors deprives a cat of the ability to behave naturally and experience the challenge and frustration that occurs outside. Indoor cats will adapt to their environment but can fall victim to a number of physical or emotional problems associated with boredom and lack of activity. In the absence of hunting and exploring, cats may fill the void with activities that are readily available, such as sleeping, grooming and eating.

It is no coincidence that indoor cats can develop physical problems associated with a sedentary lifestyle

eg **urinary tract disease, over-grooming and eating disorders**

The Cat Flap

This is probably the greatest challenge to the cat's perception of security in the home. If cats have access to the outdoors, it may be via a cat flap. Cats often see the flap as a vulnerable point in the defence of their home where any invader could potentially gain access.

This can lead to a state of constant vigilance and unease. If your cat has restricted access outside or chooses to venture out only in your presence, it may be preferable to dispense with the "old style" cat flap altogether and use the door and/or ensure that all **Important Resources** are placed well away from it.

However the **Sureflap microchip cat flap** is a wonderful innovation for cats and prevents unwanted feline intruders.

The FIVE Essential Resources

In order to provide a **Cat Friendly Home**, it is important to understand the provisions that your cat considers essential. These '**resources**' should be available in sufficient number and type to appeal to even the most discerning individual. '**Resources**' within the home represent all those things that provide nourishment, entertainment, stimulation and security for your cat.

1) Food

Some of the essential provisions are often taken for granted but even food can be offered in a cat-friendly way.

Cats prefer to eat from ceramic or glass food bowls as plastic ones scratch easily and can give off a slight odour that cats do not like. The bowl size or shape is dependent on your own personal taste but many cats can be messy if eating from a flat plate and prefer to push food around a bowl that contains the food better.

The only exception to the plate rule is the Persian or any breed with a flat face that may prefer theirs as shallow as possible 😊

Cats would naturally spend up to six hours a day foraging, stalking, catching and consuming prey. They would eat ten or more mice a day, probably involving about thirty attempts at capture. Therefore offering food twice a day in a bowl in the kitchen does not represent any kind of challenge and leaves the average pet cat with several hours that it would need to fill with other activities.

There are some great feeding toys which help cats to spend more time playing and exercising whilst feeding:

eg the **Catmosphere** and the **Aikiou**.

2) **Water**

We tend to provide water in the same location as the food bowl. Cats naturally hunt for food and search for water on separate occasions to satisfy either hunger or thirst. The presence of water near the food can actually deter some cats from drinking sufficient fluid, particularly if they are on a dry diet.

Finding water elsewhere can be extremely rewarding. Try to provide water in various locations away from food. The water bowl should ideally be glass, china or stainless steel (again not plastic) and large enough that your cat can drink without touching it's whiskers against the sides. Cats like the water to be fresh daily and full to the brim, so that they can lap without putting their heads down too low.

Some cats object to the chemical smell of tap water so filtered or boiled water may be preferred. Rain water or a dripping tap may also be enjoyed!

The Drinkwell Water Fountain provides excellent stimulation and even glass tumblers are popular with some cats.

3) **Hiding places**

Cats are natural climbers and it is important for your cat to be able to rest and observe it's surroundings from high places. It is hard to beat a staircase in a home as this gives access to a 'high place' and perceived safety. If your property is single storey then your cat's instinctive need to jump up high when in danger could be fulfilled with shelving, cupboards or other possible platforms. Any high resting places provided should be located in such a position that the cat is able to get down again safely - it is always easier to climb up!

- Tall scratching posts are available as modular units and they are often floor to ceiling structures. Many provide platforms and enclosures for resting and represent a fun and challenging climb.
- Free standing cupboards and wardrobes have large areas where a cat can rest or hide in a high place. It may be necessary to place furniture nearby to give the cat a halfway platform for ease of access.
- Shelves can be constructed specifically for the cat's use. It is important to provide a non-slip surface as many wooden shelves are extremely slippery. Bookshelves can also provide sanctuary, if a small area is cleared for your cat's use. Keeping expensive, breakable ornaments on these shelves is obviously not advisable!

4) **Beds**

Cats spend a large part of their time asleep, so it makes sense to focus on what provisions you are making for your cat's rest and relaxation. Cats favour warm places to sleep and many prefer them to have a strong familiar scent of their owners, giving a sense of safety and security. Not all cats need the reassurance of their owner's smell when they are resting so they may have several sleeping locations that rotate according to the position of the sun. An assortment of beds should therefore be provided in warm, sunny, quiet or communal areas. These do not have to be special beds designed for the purpose as the average cat is perfectly content with its owner's furniture. Make sure any cat bedding provided is washable but don't clean it too frequently, as cats gravitate towards surfaces with a familiar scent.

Radiator hammocks are great for those heat-seeking cats. These hook onto a radiator to enable the cat to gain the maximum benefit from the heat but do remember to keep the radiator on a fairly low setting!

If you want to purchase a cat bed then positioning it appropriately may be the key to its appeal. Place it in a raised position (many cats feel a little vulnerable sleeping on the floor) near a source of heat or an area in sunlight. If your cat likes its own space then ensure beds are provided in quiet areas away from thoroughfares. Those with three high sides that surround the cat will keep draughts away and give a sense of camouflage to avoid attracting attention (even a cardboard box with some thick bedding would be appreciated).

Your bed is potentially the ultimate delight for your cat - with the warmth of a duvet and a strong smell of you! This provides a tremendous sense of security and enables your cat to sleep deeply in the knowledge that it is safe. If your bedroom does become an important resource however it can also be a place of conflict if you have a multi-cat household, as individuals compete for the best spot. Providing heated pads or raised cat beds in other bedrooms may go some way to finding a sensible compromise.

5) Litter trays

Litter trays are a necessary evil, absolutely essential if your cat is housebound or has limited access outdoors and highly recommended even if your cat is free to roam.

The position of the litter tray is very important. It should be located in a discreet corner, away from food and water, full-length windows and busy walk ways. Cats may see external doors and cat flaps as potentially dangerous places, so locating them as far away as possible from these stressful areas would be ideal.

If possible **one tray for every cat in your household, plus one extra**. This does not mean that each cat will automatically choose their own tray but it will give a general sense that there is plenty of choice. These trays can be covered or open or a selection of both.

A regular cleaning regime is essential, removing faeces and urine soiled litter at least once a day and cleaning the entire tray weekly. Try to avoid litter deodorants or strong smelling disinfectants though, as the tray needs to retain it's appeal as a toilet. Some cats find polythene tray liners unpleasant, as whilst scratching, they can get their claws caught in the liner. Any change of litter should be introduced very slowly over a 1-2 week period. If your cat is used to toileting outside try sprinkling soil into the tray initially.

Other Enrichment Suggestions

Privacy

Taking “**time out**” from social demands is an essential part of everyday life for a cat, so secret hideaways are an important facility. These can be created by making space available under the bed, inside cupboards or wardrobes or behind the sofa. Your cat should never be disturbed while using a private area unless you have reason to believe that it may not be well.

If you make your cat’s private place a warm one too, like the bottom of the airing cupboard, you will be providing five-star cat accommodation!

Scratching posts

Cats need to scratch to maintain their claws and mark their territory. If provisions are not made for this then cats will scratch items of furniture. Scratching posts should be as tall as possible to allow your cat to scratch vertically at full stretch. Panels can be attached to walls at the appropriate height if space is at a premium. Some cats prefer to scratch horizontal surfaces, so a variety of scratching areas should be provided.

Vegetation

A source of grass is essential for the house cat to act as a natural way to clear hair from the gut that has been ingested during grooming. Some cats may vomit after eating grass but this is perfectly normal. Pots of grass and herbs can be grown specifically for this purpose.

Care is required with some house plants or cut flowers eg lilies which are extremely toxic to cats.

Predatory Play

Every cat is an individual but most prefer toys and games that are as close to the natural hunting experience as possible. Interactive toys that move randomly are great: eg fishing toys, Kongs and the Undercover Mouse. Those that are motionless and left lying around will soon become predictable and boring.

Toys made from fur material or feathers that are of a similar size to prey animals are popular, as are those impregnated with catnip - a herb that cats can find particularly attractive.

All should be stored away and brought out from time to time to maintain their novelty. Many cats enjoy retrieval games and this can represent an opportunity for social contact as well as play.

Social Contact

Some cats enjoy the company of their own species, under the right circumstances and some sources of advice encourage owners to acquire more than one cat when keeping them indoors. However problems can arise when the individuals reach social maturity (usually between the ages of 18 months and 4 years) and find themselves competing for limited resources within a territory that is relatively small.

These problems can potentially be minimised by providing plentiful **resources** (food, water, beds, litter trays) in the home and keeping the appropriate number of cats for the size of property. A commonly quoted formula for this is '**one per cat in the household plus one extra, placed in different locations**'.

Social contact with humans is important but the level will vary according to the personality of the cat. It is best to allow your cat to dictate the level of interaction and to initiate most of the contact. Owners that are constantly approaching their cats for petting can cause irritation or occasionally, distress.

Predatory play, grooming and verbal communication represent important social contact between owner and cat and are often better received than 'kissing and cuddling'.

Some cats enjoy interaction with dogs too, so company can come in different forms!

Scent Stimulation

About two-thirds of cats respond to the smell of catnip (dried catmint *Nepeta cataria*) which can produce a temporary euphoric state in cats. Used sparingly, it is a fun distraction. Catnip toys can easily be made at home and used to good advantage for short sessions of play. Bags of dried catnip can be purchased which tend to be more potent than catnip sprays or treats.

Novel/Challenging Items

It is good for house cats to be exposed to new things every now and then, otherwise a constant, unchanging environment can become predictable and some may find new experiences or situations stressful.

New items can be brought into the home on a regular basis to challenge your cat's sense of smell and desire to explore novel things. Wood, stone, plants, cardboard boxes or paper bags, can be placed in various locations and left for your cat to decide whether or not they are worth exploring. Stimulating your cat's senses is extremely important and this also includes novel sounds but beware playing loud music - a cat's hearing is extremely sensitive and this could be distressing.

Windows to the Outside World

Windows are a significant viewing point for the great outdoors but cats usually prefer smaller windows in darker rooms, if given the choice. Large expanses of glass appear to be confusing to cats. They see the garden or the street outside and all the potential dangers but may fail to grasp that they are safely indoors.

It all comes down to camouflage. Glass does not give your cat any opportunity for concealment while it checks out the territory and the ultimate horror may occur when your cat comes face to face with next door's tomcat on the other side.

If you think this could be a problem for your cat, you may wish to consider attaching sheets of decorative static film to the lower portion of the glass that blur the view but still enable the room to remain light. To your cat this will appear a much more solid defence. A high perch somewhere near the window, from which your cat can view the outdoors from a position of comparative safety, may also be appreciated.

Strategically positioned potted house plants may provide enough camouflage for your cat to feel a little safer.

Fresh Air

Don't underestimate the value of fresh air! Grills over your windows, either home-made or purchased specifically for the purpose, will allow fresh air to enter your home. This alone will carry challenging and interesting smells from outside and can be a focus of attention for a bored house cat.

Synthetic Pheromones

Feline pheromones (part way between a smell and a taste) are a cat's first line of communication. Some of these important signals of familiarity and security are secreted naturally from glands in a cat's face.

Feliway is a synthetic version of this and promotes a feeling of relaxation and calmness. It is available in a spray and 'plug-in' diffuser form.

Feliway has been proven to have a valuable comforting effect on your cat at times of stress eg a house move, building work, decorating, new furniture or carpet, visitors, a vet appointment or if you consider introducing a new cat or puppy !

The presence of a **Feliway** diffuser may even relax your cat sufficiently to promote play and so can be a beneficial tool in dieting too.

'Cat TV'

Some television programmes can be interesting to your cat but they may not necessarily enjoy all your favourites! A recent study found that cats' attention to television was at its greatest when small prey animals or other cats in friendly situations were shown.

While cats certainly watch the screen and often appear very interested in the squeaks and tweets of wildlife documentaries, it may cause frustration if they are unable to catch the prey that they have spotted. Dedicated cat DVDs have been produced that put together a sequence of all the sights and sounds that attract cats but more evidence is needed to confirm that they are genuinely enriching and they shouldn't be relied upon as a sole source of entertainment.

The ways that an environment can be enriched for your cat are many and varied based on the principles described above.

You are limited only by your imagination!

I hope that you have found this booklet useful and that an understanding of the provisions necessary for a Cat Friendly Home will ensure that your cat remains as happy and healthy as possible.

Recommended items available from the surgery/our Webshop

Feliway diffusers/sprays

Sureflap microchip cat flap

Catmosphere feeder

Aikiou feeder

Drinkwell water fountain

many more interactive toys..... 😊