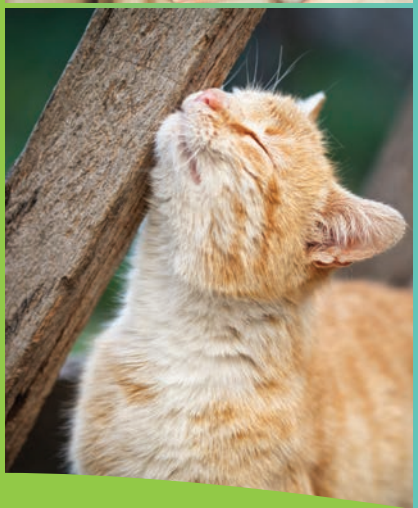
Your Cat's Environmental Needs

Practical Tips for Pet Owners



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Your Cat's Environmental Needs

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Addressing your cat's physical and emotional needs enhances its health and quality of life.

Behavior problems are a leading cause of pets being surrendered or euthanized. These problems often occur in cats because their needs have not been fully met. Cats need resources to perform their natural behaviors and have control over their social interactions. As owners, we can enhance our cats' health and wellbeing by ensuring all their needs are met in the home environment. You might ask: "What can be stressful for a beloved cat with food, water, and a roof over its head?" Read on to find out.

WHAT ARE ENVIRONMENTAL NEEDS?

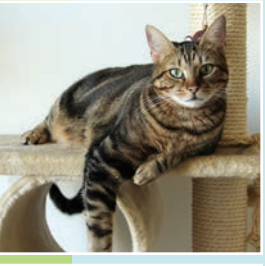
Environmental needs include a cat's physical surroundings – indoors, outdoors, or both – as well as their social interactions with humans and other pets. Cats often do not express obvious signs of stress, pain, or sickness that we can easily recognize. If we are proactive and meet appropriate environmental needs throughout a cat's life, we can potentially avoid environmental stressors that can cause unwanted behaviors and even impact medical health.

UNDERSTANDING THE NEEDS OF YOUR CAT AND THEIR BEHAVIOR

The needs of today's cats have changed little from those of their wild ancestor, Felis lybica, the African wildcat.

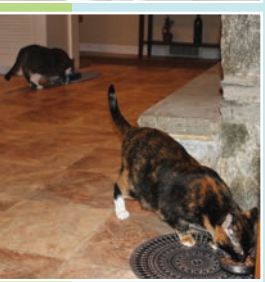
- Cats are solitary hunters, spending much of their day searching the environment for hunting opportunities. They need to protect themselves from perceived dangers, which include unfamiliar individuals or environment.
- Cats are territorial animals. They feel threatened when their territory is disturbed, either by another animal or physically.
- Cats use scent, posturing, and vocalizations to communicate their unhappiness if they feel threatened.
- Cats have a superior sense of smell and hearing. Stress can occur due to strong or strange smells or sounds, which are undetectable or insignificant to us.
- Cats are social animals, but their social structure differs from ours. Cats may be content as a single cat or living with other cats, preferably related cats such as siblings.

MEETING THE NEEDS OF YOUR CAT



1 Provide a safe place. Every cat needs a safe and secure place where it can retreat to so that it feels protected or which can be used as a resting area. The cat should have the ability to exit and enter the space from at least two sides if it feels threatened. Most cats prefer that the safe space is big enough to fit only themselves, has sides around it, and is raised off the ground.

Good examples of safe places are a cardboard box, a cat carrier, and a raised cat perch. There should be at least as many safe places, sized to hold a single cat, as there are cats in a household. Safe places should be located away from each other, so that cats can choose to be on their own.



2 Provide multiple and separated key environmental resources. Key resources include food, water, toileting areas, scratching areas, play areas, and resting or sleeping areas. These resources should be separated from each other so that cats have free access without being challenged by other cats or other potential threats. Separation of resources not only reduces the risk of competition (which may result in one cat being physically prevented access to resources by another cat), stress, and stress-associated diseases.

3 Provide opportunity for play and predatory behavior. Play and predatory behaviors allow cats to fulfill their natural need to hunt. Play can be stimulated with the use of interactive toys that mimic prey, such as a toy mouse that is pulled across a floor or feathers on a wand that is waved through the air. Cats need to be able to capture the "prey", at least intermittently, to prevent frustration. Early in a cat's life introduce interactive play so they learn to avoid going after your hands and feet for play. Using food puzzles or food balls can mimic the action of hunting for prey, and provides more natural eating behavior. You can encourage your cat's interactive play by rotating your cat's toys so they do not get bored and rewarding with treats to provide positive reinforcement for appropriate play. If you have more than one cat, remember to play with them individually.

4 Provide positive, consistent, and predictable human–cat social interaction. Cats' individual preferences determine how much they like human interactions such as petting, grooming, being played with or talked to, being picked up, and sitting or lying on a person's lap. To a large extent this depends on whether, as kittens, they were introduced to and socialized with humans during their period of socialization from 2–7 weeks of age. It is important to remember that every cat interacts differently and to respect the cat's individual preferences. Remember to remind guests and all household members not to force interaction and instead let the cat initiate, choose, and control the type of human contact.

5 Provide an environment that respects the importance of the cat's sense of smell. Unlike humans, cats use their sense of smell to evaluate their surroundings. Cats mark their scent by rubbing their face and body, which deposits natural pheromones to establish boundaries within which they feel safe and secure. Avoid cleaning their scent off these areas, especially when a new cat is introduced into the home or there are other changes with pets, people, or the environment of the home. The use of synthetic facial pheromones, such as Feliway®, can mimic a cat's natural pheromones and provide a calming effect in a stressful or unfamiliar situation. Some smells can be threatening to cats, such as the scent of unfamiliar animals or the use of scented products, cleaners, or detergents. Threatening smells and the inability to rub their scent can sometimes lead to problematic behaviors such as passing urine or stools outside the litter box, spraying, and scratching in undesirable areas. In some cases, stress-related illness may develop. If any of these problems occur, contact your veterinarian right away.

Addressing environmental needs is essential for the optimum wellbeing of your cat. Most behavior concerns, such as inappropriate elimination, aggression, scratching, and others, can be caused by one of the following:

- not providing cats with the resources they need
- not understanding the cat's social relationships with other cats or people
- an underlying medical problem

Discuss the specific environmental needs of your cat with your veterinarian at each routine check-up. If you think your cat may have a behavior problem, schedule an appointment with your veterinarian to speak about possible solutions or potential underlying medical issues that cause certain behavior changes. Your veterinarian will be able to provide you with additional information or an appropriate referral.

By understanding and providing for your cat's environmental needs, you can help your cat to live a long and happy life.

You are an important member of your cat's healthcare team. You can be instrumental in helping with the success of treatments and improved healthcare.

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