Outdoor Cats Face Many Hazards

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff

It is estimated that the average lifespan of a free-roaming cat is less than three years, compared to 12-15 years for the average indoor-only cat. Our own experience with caring for cats confirms these numbers. And we believe that the weight of these numbers are behind the trend among cat owners to make the safety, health, and happiness of their pet a priority by:

- Keeping their cats indoors
- Creating safe enclosures for unsupervised outdoor activity
- Enjoying the outdoors with their pet in shared activity

Virtually everything your cat needs - play, exercise, a good diet, rest, and companionship - can be had readily, indoors. Your cat does not have to go outside to feel complete, and you should not feel at all guilty if this is the lifestyle you choose for her. The notion that a cat must roam free to be happy is a myth that may end her life prematurely. She can get all of the fresh air and sunshine she needs safely under your supervision.

Outdoor hazards

Some of the most common dangers for outside cats include:

IT'S A DANGEROUS WORLD OUT THERE:

- **Accidents**
- **Injuries**
- **Predators**
- **Fights**
- **Cruelty**
- **Diseases**
- **Parasites**
- **Poisons**
- **Weather**
- **Getting Lost**

- Vehicles - An outside cat darting across the street is a perfect target for a moving vehicle, and cats that are hit by cars rarely survive.
- Unfriendly dogs - Dogs can inflict life-threatening injuries on cats, especially those who have learned to be trusting towards dogs.
- Predators such as coyotes and raccoons - In many areas, wild animals are also potential predators.
- Other cats - If your cat gets into a territorial fight with another cat and gets bitten, it could result in the spread of disease or a painful abscess, with a need for veterinary care. Always check your cat for painful lumps and bumps.
- Injury or cruelty - Not all people love cats. Cats have been known to have been injured by angry neighbors who dislike cats digging in their gardens or hunting birds.
- Diseases - Contact with wild animals and other cats can result in the transmission of life-threatening diseases such as feline leukemia or feline immunodeficiency virus.
- Parasites - The risk of infestations with fleas, ticks, intestinal worms, and other parasites increases in outdoor cats.
- Poisons - Although you may have "cat-proofed" your outdoor area, others may not have, and your cat could be exposed to toxic substances such as antifreeze or pesticides.
- Harsh weather: Weather conditions can change abruptly, and your cat could experience frostbite in the winter or dehydration in the summer.
- Getting lost: Your cat could be shut into a building, stolen, taken to an animal shelter, or adopted by others. Many cities have laws against stray animals, including cats. Make sure you keep identification on your cat at all times.

Making the indoors more appealing

There are many ways you can make the indoors more appealing to your cat and give her similar activities as she would have outdoors. These include:

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- Activity Centers - Cat trees and play furniture provide tall places for climbing and observation, and scratching posts and toys for stimulation. Available in a range of colors, styles, and options to fit your décor, and the needs of your cat.

- Treats - To keep her alert, break up your cat's routine. Stash delicious treats around your home to reward your pet for a good hunt. Provide an occasional catnip treat, for some energetic fun and excitement.

- Window Perches - Install a window perch to afford your cat a warm place to nap in the sun, and a "birds-eye" view of the outdoors.

- Toys - Find toys that appeal to your specific cat, and remember to rotate them on a weekly basis to prevent boredom. Simple things like cardboard boxes, paper bags, and rolls of paper can provide many distractions.

- Companions - Some cats will do much better with another pet in the house; another cat or a dog can provide companionship and many exercise activities.

- Videos - Special videos for cats will provide hours of mental stimulation.

Making the outdoors safer

If you do want to let your cat outside, there are ways you can make the experience safer.

- Identification - In preparation for any outdoor activity, make sure your cat has a harness or breakaway collar with identification. Microchipping is another alternative.

- Preventive health measures - If your cat will be outside, be sure he or she is fully vaccinated, and spayed or neutered. Talk to your veterinarian about an appropriate worming schedule.

- Runs and pens - Commercial mesh cat runs set up quickly and protect your cat, allowing her to enjoy fresh air, watch birds, and bask in the warm sunshine. Sections can be connected giving her more space to roam.

- Fences - Because cats are great leapers, erecting a fence tall enough to keep your pet in, and others out, can be challenging. Wire mesh, hung at a 45 degree angle along the top of the fence, can effectively limit escapes.

- Doors - Installing a cat door connected to a screened-in porch, fenced yard, or a run frees your cat to enjoy the outdoors as he desires, and provides a quick escape from predators.

- Leashes - Because most cats won't walk on a leash naturally, you must teach them. For your first walks, try starting in the late evening or early in the morning in a quiet area. Your cat is much more likely to venture out when there's no one else around. Most cats take a few days to adjust to the idea of leash walking. Because cats don't like to feel restricted, use a lightweight nylon leash that's about four to five feet long, or a retractable lead which will help eliminate tugging, pulling and straining, and enable your cat to roam up to 16 feet. For cats, it is best to use a harness instead of a collar.

- Carriers - You can carry your pet anytime, anywhere, and protect her from other animals, putting an end to impromptu "street fights." With adjustable shoulder and waist straps, many carriers are comfortable for you and your pet. They are also ideal transport for ailing or disabled pets.

- Environmental safety - Attach a bell to your cat's harness collar to prevent her from killing songbirds or small mammals and to alert people that she is around.

- Timing - If you do allow your cat outside unconfined, do so when you are home and preferably during the daytime and periods of low traffic to reduce the hazards he will be exposed to.

Please take the responsibility of being a cat owner seriously, and do what you can to give your pet a happy, long, and healthy life.

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