



## Cat Toys and Appropriate Play With Your Cat

Courtesy of Dumb Friends League

While pet owners would never consider withholding food or water from their cats, many forget to provide adequate exercise and stimulation. Yes, cats do sleep a lot, but play is an important component of any pet's health and well-being. The release of energy triggered by regular daily interactive play sessions can help alleviate stress and prevent behavior problems.

### Stress Reduction

The average indoor cat is subject to a variety of stressors, usually the result of perceived or real invasions of her territory. Seeing a roaming cat out the window that she can't chase away, having houseguests, adding a new resident (human or animal) or a trip to the veterinarian can cause your cat anxiety.

One response to stress for many cats is eliminating outside the litter box. Another response may be redirected aggression – where the cat takes out her frustration on another cat, the family dog or you. Over time, stress can cause chronic medical problems. Engaging your cat in regular play sessions can help alleviate her stress and help keep her mentally and physically healthy.

### Preventing Behavior Problems

Without appropriate outlets for their energy, cats may attack ankles, play too roughly, or interrupt their owner's sleep with nocturnal adventures. Several interactive play sessions per day, especially one timed shortly before bedtime, can help reduce or eliminate these behaviors.

### Structured Play Sessions

- Simulating the hunt: Create your play sessions to mimic the cat's natural hunting behavior. The top toy for most cats is a fishing-pole toy – one that imitates the noise of flapping bird wings is irresistible. Make the toy soar around the room and get your cat's attention. Or pretend to be a mouse by sliding the end of the toy around on the floor in quick, jerky movements. Allow the cat to pounce and catch the toy and bat it around, then start again. End the play session by allowing the cat to capture the toy. The capture of the toy is an important step in the play session. If you never allow your cat to catch the toy, it will only build up their frustration and either cause or worsen behavior issues. For this reason, laser toys are not recommended.
- After the play session: Sessions should be long enough for the cat to get tired – probably 15 - 20 minutes, usually split up into three bursts or high energy followed by some laying around and actively watching the toy. Just because your cat lays down does not mean she is done playing. Wait a few minutes and try enticing her

again. About five minutes after the end of the session, feed your cat some canned cat food, favorite treat, or even their morning or nighttime meal. This mimics what would happen at the end of a real hunt – the cat would eat her catch. Don't be surprised if your cat takes a long nap after a play session.

### **Other Toys and Activities**

- Provide perches with a view. A window with a view of bird activity or squirrels can provide hours of entertainment. Some cats enjoy watching videos made especially for cats. An aquarium also makes for interesting “cat TV.”
- Hide your cat's food so she has to hunt for it, instead of putting it in a bowl. Also, toys that may be stuffed with food are available at most pet stores.
- Provide a wide variety of toys around the house for your cat to play with while you are out. Change out the toys frequently to keep your cat's interest in them.

### **Safe Toys**

There are many factors that contribute to the safety or danger of a toy. Among them are your cat's size, activity level, and personal preference. Another is the environment in which your cat spends his time. Although we can't guarantee your cat's enthusiasm or his safety with any specific toy, we can offer the following guidelines:

### **Be Cautious**

- The things that are usually the most attractive to cats are often the very things that are the most dangerous. Cat-proof your home by checking for string, ribbon, yarn, rubber bands, plastic milk jug rings, paper clips, pins, needles and anything else that could be ingested. All of these items are dangerous, no matter how cute your cat may look when he's playing with them.
- Avoid or alter any toys that aren't cat-proof by removing ribbons, feathers, strings, plastic eyeballs or other small parts that could be chewed or ingested. Soft toys should be machine washable.
- Check labels for child safety. Look for a stuffed toy that is labeled as safe for children under 3 years old and that doesn't contain dangerous fillings. Problem fillings include things like nutshells and polystyrene beads. Also, rigid toys are not as attractive to cats.

### **Toys We Recommend**

#### Active Toys:

- Round plastic shower curtain rings. These are fun either as a single ring to bat around, hide or carry, or linked together and hung in an enticing spot.
- Plastic rolling balls, with or without bells inside.
- Ping-Pong balls and plastic practice golf balls with holes (the holes help cats carry them). Try putting one of these items in a dry bathtub, as the captive ball is much more fun than one that escapes under the sofa. You may want to remove the balls from the bathtub before bedtime, unless you can't hear the action from your bedroom. Two o'clock in the morning seems to be a favorite time for this game.

- Paper bags with any handles removed. Paper bags are good for pouncing, hiding and interactive play. They are also a great distraction if you need your cat to pay less attention to what you're trying to accomplish. Plastic bags are not a good idea, as many cats like to chew and ingest the plastic.
- Sisal-wrapped toys are very attractive to cats that tend to ignore soft toys.
- Empty cardboard rolls from toilet paper and paper towels are ideal cat toys, especially if you unwind a little cardboard to get them started.

#### Catnip:

- Catnip-filled soft toys are fun to kick, carry and rub.
- Plain catnip can be crushed and sprinkled on the carpet or on a towel placed on the floor, if you want to be able to remove all traces. The catnip oils will stay in the carpet, and although they're not visible to us, your cat will still be able to smell them.
- Not all cats are attracted to catnip. Some cats may become over-stimulated to the point of aggressive play and others may be slightly sedated.
- Catnip is not addictive and is safe for cats to roll in, rub in or eat.

#### Comfort Toys:

- Soft stuffed animals are good for several purposes. For some cats, the stuffed animal should be small enough to carry around. For cats that want to "kill" the toy, the stuffed animal should be about the same size as the cat. Toys with legs and a tail seem to be even more attractive to cats.
- Cardboard boxes are good hiding places, especially those a bit too small for the cat to really fit into or with small holes to spy through.

#### **Get the Most out of Toys**

- Rotate your cat's toys daily or weekly by making only four or five toys available at a time. Keep a variety of types easily accessible. If your cat has his very favorite, like a soft "baby" that he loves to cuddle, you should leave that one out all the time.
- Provide toys that offer a variety of uses—at least one toy to carry, one to "kill," one to roll, and one to "baby."
- "Hide and seek" is a fun game for cats to play. Found toys are often much more attractive than a toy that is overtly introduced.