



Feline Fundamentals for Cat Owners

All cats have basic fundamental needs that cat owners must meet in order to have a fulfilled feline. When these needs are not being met, sometimes a health issue can pop up or even an unwanted behavior. When we invite a kitty to be a part of our family, it's important to have an understanding of both their needs and our ability to meet them.

Diet

Obviously, a cat has to eat! Cats have evolved from being very successful hunters. Their domestic nutritional requirements should somewhat reflect their primitive diet. Today, the common diet for cats has been dry food which has a lot of carbohydrates, little moisture, and doesn't do such a great job of mimicking the diet they have evolved from! We recommend a canned food-based diet that is low in carbs, low in fat, and high in moisture. This helps maintain a healthy weight and keeps common health issues at bay, including obesity, diabetes, and urinary issues. Talk to your vet about specific diets that might be most beneficial for your kitty.

Enjoying the Meal

Now we know that our feline family members are inclined to do better with a canned food diet, where should they eat? It's important to note that cats are historically territorial and unlike their domestic counterparts, dogs, they are not pack animals. Eating, as well as using the litter box and resting, are three activities that require a cat to let their guard down. They are unable to do these things while also keeping watch out for possible threats. Make sure you are feeding your cat in an area that is quiet, has low traffic, and is a space where they feel safe enough to not be on watch. On a side note regarding hygiene, it is typically preferred to use a stainless steel feeding bowl over plastic since plastic can harbor bacteria and irritate skin or cause "kitty acne."

Litterbox

Our cats are solitary animals that communicate through scent. Many litterbox problems that pop up can be prevented or fixed! The first step is making sure that the litterbox is enticing for your cat. Keep the following in mind:

- Hygiene. Ensure that the box is clean. Cats communicate through scent, so even if you can't smell the odor, your cat sure can! Good ol' dish soap and a scrub brush will make your box smell (and look) like new!
- Box Type and Size. We humans often opt for covered litterboxes for our kitties. Because who wants to see it?! Unfortunately, covered boxes tend to do two things: They magnify all the odor for the cat that is using the box; and, secondly, the cat needs to put itself in a vulnerable place, which is a small enclosed space with only one exit. Especially in a multi-cat household, this can lead to a lot of issues. Cats prefer large and uncovered boxes. The recommendation is a box that is 1.5 times the length of your cat. This provides them with enough space to

fully move in the box and bury their scent. Cats also prefer fine, sandy litter. Remember, not all cats are the same. So you might need to try a few different things to find out what your cat prefers!

- Location! This is a biggie. Cat owners usually have their litter boxes stowed away out of sight, maybe in the noisy laundry room or in an area that is harder to get to. In order to use the litter box, cats must take down their guard. So their box needs to be in a location where they feel safe to relax.
- Number of boxes. Do you have a multi-level house? Do you have more than one cat? If so, chances are you need more than one litterbox. We would recommend you place a box on each level of your home in a quiet, safe space. For multi-cat homes, you should have one box per cat plus one. So if you have 3 cats, you should have 4 litter boxes.

Scratching

Please read our “Understanding Scratching” article for detailed information on cats and their need to scratch. The main idea is that your kitty is biologically driven to scratch, and we need to meet that need. Just like we give Fido a bone and various chew toys, our kitty friends need the same understanding. So, why do cats scratch?

- Scratching provides cats with the ability to fully stretch their body, especially their backs.
- Cats communicate through scent and have glands on their paws. Scratching is a common way that a cat simply communicates.
- Scratching properly maintains their claws as they shed.

Most cats prefer vertical sisal scratching posts that are at least 4 feet tall. The length is important so they can fully stretch their bodies. Since cats typically like to communicate through scratching, a scratching post in the unused guest bedroom is not going to get very much use. It might be a fashion faux pas, but your cat will appreciate having something to scratch in an area that gets a lot of traffic and use. Know that your cat will have preferences, and you should provide her with choices and let her communicate to you what she likes.

Tree vs Bush Dweller

Have you ever found your cat in a cabinet? Or maybe you caught her on top of the refrigerator? Your cat is meeting an important need either as a tree or a bush dweller. If these habits are causing frustration for you and your family, it's important to provide an alternative for your cat that is less frustrating. Remember that when a cat's needs are not being met by us humans, they can start to have “behavior problems.” (I put that in quotations, because we are apt to quickly label a cat as being a “bad” cat when she is often just trying really hard to be a cat in an environment where her needs are being ignored or not understood.) A cat tree is an easy and wonderful way to provide a place for your cat to have their needs met because it provides something to scratch, something to climb, and something to hide in.

Rest, Relaxation, and Safety

A cat tree is also a great way for your cat to have what can be called a refuge. It's the safe, cozy space where they can take their guard down to fully sleep, groom, and relax. Imagine that after a long stressful day at work, your couch didn't have cushions, and your bed was way too small. You would never be able to fully relax and rest. In order to create a kitty refuge, you will need to observe if your cat is more of a tree dweller or tends to like hiding spaces like a bush dweller.

Most cat trees have areas for both types of feline personalities, but you can always cater specifically to your cat. If your cat doesn't have a safe space, it can cause unnecessary stress which affects cats more than we might think. Urinary issues, upper respiratory infections, over grooming, hair loss--these are all medical issues that can be rooted in stress. By providing a refuge for your cat, you are helping them be a fulfilled, healthy feline.

Playtime!

What is playtime for a cat? The short answer is: “pretend hunting.” The best toys for kitties are those that help them mimic the act of hunting. It is important to acknowledge that your feline family member has the need to stalk, hunt, kill, and eat. This is a primal instinct that still needs to be met in a domesticated environment. A lot of behavior issues that surface, especially in younger cats, can stem from the lack of structured playtime. Just like dogs, cats can have pent up energy that can turn into behavior problems if they are not given an appropriate release for that energy.

There are a lot of different toys that you can get for your cat, but toys that need your participation are often the biggest hits! You will also want to cycle toys, as your cat’s favorite toy today is going to lose its novelty value by the end of the week.

Enrichment feeding is an avenue that really meets that primal hunt, kill, eat cycle. Toys that need to be batted around with a treat or food that spills out in the process is an excellent way for your kitty to feel like the excellent hunter that she was built to be.

Obesity is the leading health issue that your domestic friend faces. Playtime as exercise is a great way to protect your kitty from diabetes!

A VERY important fundamental rule: NEVER USE YOUR HANDS OR BODY AS A TOY! You should never encourage your cat to bite or scratch you--this is inappropriate behavior for both dogs and cats.

Now that you are a professional cat owner in training, you have the fundamentals to ensure you and your kitty are fulfilled. If you would like more information or need help with your cat, please email us!

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