



The Importance of Exercise By Vicki Craig

THE WHOLE CAT JOURNAL · December 2001

*Indoor cats especially need regular play for their health and happiness.
Behavior problems can also be helped with the benefit of regular exercise.*

We all know that regular exercise and a healthy diet will keep us fit. But many of us don't realize that the same goes for our cats. When I told my family and friends that I was working on a story about the importance of exercising cats, I was met with some pretty strange looks. "Exercise your cat? Is that possible?" my mother asked.

Maybe I'm using the wrong terminology. I don't mean for you to put Kitty on a treadmill or make her lift tiny barbells, but rather get her to exercise through what she sees as play. Whatever you prefer to call it, both holistic and traditional veterinarians agree that most clients don't really understand the importance of regular, daily activity for their cats.

Why Exercise?

Indoor cats live substantially longer and healthier lives than their outdoor counterparts. As cats become indoor pets, they tend to lead more sedentary lifestyles, increasing the risk of certain diseases and behavioral problems. For the health of our cats, both physical and mental, we need to make a conscientious effort to keep them moving.

Robert Marrazzo, DVM, owner of The Cat Hospital at Pal Harbor in Palm Harbor, Florida, stresses the importance of exercise for cats and his clients. "Exercise should be fun for the cat and for their human," says Dr. Marrazzo. "Setting aside some time each day can be to everyone's benefit. Everybody wins when you play with your cat!"

Holistic veterinarians like Nancy Keller, DVM of Healing Heart Holistic Care in Lake Worth, Florida, also believe that regular exercise is a crucial tool for preventing disease and behavior issues. "Play with cats on a regular basis, and you can see their circulation moving, their eyes brighten and coat get shinier," says Keller. Movement increases metabolism, heart rate and circulation, three positive actions for health maintenance.

As exercise improves Kitty's physical condition, it also prevents obesity and many behavioral problems. Cats are naturally inquisitive, playful and social creatures. When they don't get the regular exercise they need, they tend to get bored and lethargic. This lack of physical and mental stimulation can lead to weight gain, poor health and even aggression.

Obesity: a National Epidemic?

According to a recent survey, 40% of America's household pets are overweight. Veterinarians agree that a combination of exercise and a good diet is needed for cats to lose excess pounds. Without one of these components, Kitty will remain obese, and may develop related health problems as she ages.

When asked how much a cat should weigh, Dr. Keller replied, "It's hard to say a normal weight for a cat because of so many factors and breeds. Some cats are genetically heavier than others." She explains that you can easily tell if a cat is overweight by feeling her ribs. If you can feel or see them easily, the cat is underweight; if you can't feel the ribs at all, she needs to lose weight. A good weight allows you to feel a healthy layer of muscle over the ribs.



Ideally, Kitty can avoid diets by not becoming obese in the first place. Dr. Marrazzo points out that, just like humans, starting regular exercise early on in life can lead to regular exercise throughout life." He also notes that it's never too late to start playing with your cat.

"Getting a sedentary, obese cat to exercise can be difficult, but it is not impossible. If your cat has been couch potato for years, easing her into a daily exercise routine will meet with greater acceptance than starting off strong." He adds that, "many older cats are just itching of an excuse to become playful rascals."

Disease Prevention

Obesity and a sedentary lifestyle can be directly linked to diseases such as diabetes, fatty liver syndrome, heart disease and arthritis. Respiratory difficulties, constipation and skin conditions can also be attributed to overweight cats. Through exercise and weight management, you can dramatically reduce Kitty's chances of acquiring one or more of these health problems as she ages.

Exercise also provides energy while strengthening the immune system, lungs and heart. Lethargy makes cats more susceptible to illness, while regular exercise may help conditions improve. Dr. Marrazzo has treated diabetic cats who have lost their need for insulin because of weight loss and proper nutrition. In addition, research has shown that some cats can overcome heart problems with moderate exercise.

Digestion is another important process that can be aided by daily activity. Exercise boosts liver function, metabolism, digestive performance, kidney function, and intestinal movements, which in turn alleviate constipation by helping stool pass efficiently.

Dr. Keller relates cats to older people who don't get enough exercise. Poor circulation caused by less movement leads joint and ambulatory problems for both humans and cats. In a sense, we all need to "use it or lose it." If we don't keep our cats moving, they can become stiff, less mobile and eventually may suffer from arthritis.

Even if your cat already has joint problems, exercise can alleviate pain by generating natural lubricating fluids that flow throughout the body, and by producing endorphins that are helpful in reducing pain. With regular exercise, Kitty can improve her physical condition while maintaining a healthy weight for good circulation, limber joints and a sharp mind. It's a good opportunity to bond with your cat, as well.

Creating Good Behavior

Just like humans, cats need to keep their mind alert and occupied. Daily diversions can help keep Kitty active while enabling her to constructively release any pent up physical and mental energy instead of taking it out on your new furniture or, worse yet, herself. Self-mutilation, excessive licking, marking, compulsive vocalization and hyperactivity are all signs of stress that may result from too little play and interaction.

Dr. Keller remembers the behavior of a kitten when she was pet sitting for a friend, "If the kitten didn't get to play, she would do anything try and get attention, knocking over stuff just to play." Kittens that are full of energy will blatantly tell you that they want to play. Older cats, however, may be less forward, choosing unwanted and damaging behavior for attention.

For the past two decades behavior problems in cats have been on the rise. Some researchers and veterinarians believe that behavior problems are directly related to boredom, depression and stress. All of these symptoms can be helped through regular exercise and play.



Creating "Play Time"

While it's true that cats really enjoy sleeping for the better part of the day, their natural instinct also dictates that they hunt, play and interact socially. An indoor cat that eats her food from a well-deserved china plate still misses the natural thrill of the hunt. That's where we come into the picture, helping Kitty to track down her "prey," in other words, her favorite toy.

It doesn't matter what age, size or breed; all cats will join in play if you take the time to find out what they like. Dr. Keller believes that persistence is the key to seeing results and notes that, "The more consistent you are with play, the more the cat will play and the healthier she will become."

But what will get your cat to move? Experimentation is the best way to find out. "Vary the activities to try to learn what your cat prefers," suggests Marrazzo. Toys and furniture that mimic the types of activity that cats have in the wild such as jumping, climbing and chasing are a good place to start.

Wand toys, strings and even crumpled pieces of paper allow Kitty to be the natural huntress she is. Cat furniture is not only good for climbing and scratching; it's also great for spying through windows. From the smallest ant to a group of pigeons, diverse sights and sounds will keep Kitty alert and entertained. And, for more daring cats and humans, you can take Kitty out for a walk on a harness leash.

All of these activities provide Kitty with a great physical and mental work out while giving you both a chance to bond. It only takes about 20 minutes once or twice a day for Kitty to become as healthy as she can be and to create (a) special bond between the two of you that is well worth your time and effort.

If you have further questions, please contact The SF/SPCA Cat Behavior Helpline :
(415) 554-3075



Play for Good Health

- Regular exercise is as important for your cat's health as is good nutrition.
- Keeping your cat from becoming fat in the first place is easier than putting her on a diet.
- Regular play will keep your cat's body and mind stimulated, which will improve her behavior as well.