

Indoor/Outdoor Cats

The indoor/outdoor cat debate is very controversial. Unlike in most European countries, where the majority of cats spend their days outdoors, North Americans are increasingly keeping their cats permanently indoors. Approximately 63 percent of cat caretakers in the U.S. keep their cats strictly indoors (Foreman-Worsley et al., 2021). As people continue to move into the cities, life in highrise apartments is making it difficult for more cats to access the outdoors. Hazards in a busy city are also greater than those in the suburbs or out in the country.

Up until the 1950s, caretakers didn't have much of a choice in the matter, as they had to allow a cat out to go to the bathroom. Thanks to the invention of cat litter, caretakers now have the ability to restrict their cat's outdoor activities.



Maggie Funkhouser

Mama Cat, who lives solely outdoors and has made this garden her home base.

Most cats living in England have access to the outside via a cat flap (cat door). If an individual wants to adopt a cat and keep her strictly indoors, the shelter won't refuse the adoption; however, most shelters prefer that cats have access to a garden. In

the U.S., it is the opposite situation; most shelters will *refuse* a home unless the cat is to be kept strictly indoors.

INDOOR-ONLY CAT ISSUES

- boredom can cause behavioral issues
- indoor cats can become overweight due to lack of exercise
- bored cats can become overly dependent
- escape from home — accidents like this happen when someone leaves a door open; the indoor cat then has no experience with the outdoors
- consuming poisons in the house
- eating poisonous house plants

Risks for Cats Who Live Strictly Indoors

Cat caretakers must take into consideration that indoor cats can be vulnerable to developing psychological and behavioral problems. Dr. Nicholas Dodman of Tufts University School of Veterinary Medicine and Roger Tabor both note that American cats sometimes have higher rates of anxiety-related problems, which may be related to cats living indoors with little effort being made to find outlets for their natural instincts (Tufts University School of Veterinary Medicine, October 1995; Tabor, 1997). Author Patricia Curtis makes a similar note in her 1997 book, "The Indoor Cat:"

The indoor cat of an uninformed and

negligent owner may be neurotic, extremely unhappy, and in poor health. Some owners have unrealistic expectations of their cats; some are just indifferent. It is known that among zoo animals confinement can be a powerful stress factor. A domestic cat confined to a house or apartment will, in certain circumstances, develop stress symptoms. The kitty may chew up houseplants as cats eat grass outdoors, sharpen claws on furniture for lack of tree bark, or leap to the top shelf of a cabinet of breakable treasures to achieve the lofty vantage point cats enjoy.

Sadly, behavioral issues are some of the most common reasons caretakers relinquish cats to shelters; that is why it is so important to provide a stimulating environment for indoor-only cats.

VCA Animal Hospitals writes, “If you decide to keep your cat as an indoor pet, you will need to be very aware of the extra responsibility that an indoor cat brings. You must take the time and trouble to ensure that the indoor environment offers the cat the opportunity to express as many of its natural behaviors as possible” (“Cat Behavior and Training - Enrichment for Indoor Cats,” accessed 2023).

Alley Cat Rescue's Position

We do not believe that everyone should open their doors and allow their cats to roam around outside, especially in areas where outdoor living is unsafe! We do believe that cats, if given a stimulating environment, live quite contentedly indoors. For caretakers who want to allow their cats outdoors, ACR strongly advises the use of specialized fencing designed for confining cats, and we promote outdoor cat enclosures or “catios.” This way cats have a nice balance of indoor and outdoor living with-

out safety risks.

A wide variety of fencing products are available today that make it safe and convenient for cats to access the outdoors, yet still remain confined. There's cat fencing that connects to the top of an existing fence, and there are fencing systems that can be installed for entire yards. You can buy several different types of cat enclosures, or you can build your own. Most porches and patios can easily be enclosed by using screen material. (Refer to the Helpful Resources chapter for companies that sell cat fencing.)

Leashed walks are another option for some cats. It may take some practice and coaxing, but with time (and treats) some cats will get used to and enjoy being outdoors while on a leash.



Maggie Funkhouser

Tiger and Squeezy enjoy their outdoor catio.

Whether a cat is secured in an enclosure, walked on a leash, or in a community where she can roam freely, any cat who has access to the outdoors should also have access to a covered shelter, especially during cold winter months. (Refer to “Winterizing Feral Cat Colonies” for more information.)

ACR has difficulty accepting policies that would rather euthanize feral cats than allow them to live good lives under responsi-

ble care in an outdoor home. One of the major reasons that nonlethal control of feral cat colonies is so contentious in the U.S. is because of the prevailing attitudes towards outdoor cats. While the public has mostly embraced the outdoor life of feral cats, some shelters still find it difficult to accept *any* cats being outdoors. Their general belief is that outdoor cats live hard, shortened lives of only about two years. However, as we discussed earlier, the average lifespan of a sterilized outdoor cat who is properly cared for is comparable to that of an indoor cat.

Feral cats are wild animals and they are already living in their home — outdoors. Most adult feral cats would be very unhappy living inside houses. Some can adjust and become comfortable sharing space with their caretaker(s); however, others will spend their entire lives hiding under beds and couches because they are too stressed by being confined. With the massive number of feral cats living in colonies throughout the country, it would simply be impossible to find enough homes or sanctuaries for all of them.

Authorities must begin to accept outdoor feral cats as part of the urban landscape, so the millions of volunteers willing to feed and care for feral cats can quickly sterilize the feral cat population. This, consequently, would help make the cats healthier and safer. As policies progress to support TNR efforts for outdoor cats, the needless killing of healthy cats in our nation's shelters will dramatically be reduced, along with the associated wasteful spending of taxpayer's money.

Whether they were born to a feral mother cat, became lost, or were abandoned, these cats are accustomed to living outdoors and their natural, wild instincts help them survive. Felines have been living on this planet, as part of the landscape, for millions of years as solitary hunters high on the food chain. Feral cats have been found living in a variety of climates and environments, including some of the harshest places on the planet.

However, though feral cats are capable of living without human support, they live much better lives with some assistance. As people have domesticated cats, we are morally obligated to care for them. We created the domestic species over thousands of years, as well as the problem of overpopulation within man-made environments, so it is our responsibility to ensure their populations are managed in a humane manner. TNR not only reduces the number of cats by stopping the breeding cycle, it also improves the cats' health and quality of life because dedicated caretakers look after their safety.



Atticus and Leo lived as porch cats for many years.