



# ALLEY CAT RESCUE

AN ALLIANCE FOR CAT PROTECTION

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## **Indoor/Outdoor Cats**

The indoor/outdoor cat debate is very controversial among animal caretakers and humane societies. Unlike most European countries where the majority of cats spend their days outdoors, Americans are increasingly keeping their cats permanently indoors. In 2008, 65% of survey participants said they keep their cats strictly indoors (Rowan, 2012). As we continue to move into the cities, life in high rise apartments makes it difficult for cats to access the outdoors. There's also an increased concern for a cat's safety living in a busy city as compared to living in the suburbs or out in the country. However, confining cats to a strictly indoor lifestyle also poses its challenges.

### **Benefits for cats who live strictly indoors**

Many animal guardians choose to keep their cats indoors for a variety of reasons. Indoor cats are protected from potential hazards such as predation, cars, diseases, fleas, ticks and cruel humans. Further, even street smart cats can get lost and end up in a shelter where they could be euthanized. It is estimated that only 2-5% of lost cats will be reunited with their guardian. Keeping a cat indoor significantly reduces the risk that the cat gets lost in the first place.

### **Risks for cats who live strictly indoors**

Cat caretakers must take into consideration that indoor cats can sometimes suffer psychologically and develop behavioral problems. Dr. Nicholas Dodman of Tufts University School of Veterinary Medicine and Roger Tabor, British biologist and cat expert, both note that American cats sometimes have higher rates of anxiety-related problems, urinary tract problems, vomiting, weight issues and stress-related problems, which can be attributed to the indoor-only existence (Hamilton, 2010). Sadly, behavioral issues is a main reason why caretakers relinquish cats to shelters; that's why it is so important to provide entertainment and proper stimulation for indoor-only cats.

## There are pros and cons for both Indoor and Outdoor environments

INDOOR ISSUES	OUTDOOR ISSUES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• boredom can cause behavioral and/or psychological issues</li><li>• indoor cats can become overweight (can lead to other health conditions) due to lack of exercise</li><li>• bored cats can become overly dependent</li><li>• escape from home—accidents like this happen when someone leaves a door open; the indoor cat then has no experience with the outdoors</li><li>• consuming poisons in the house</li><li>• eating poisonous house plants</li><li>• getting stuck in the washing machine or dryer, crawl spaces</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• attacks from stray dogs, coyotes, foxes, owls</li><li>• risk of attack from cruel humans/kids</li><li>• diseases from other cats</li><li>• eating poisoned rats (can happen to indoor cats as well)</li><li>• fleas, ticks, worms</li><li>• traffic—some outdoor cats do become “street smart” but some cats do get hit by cars</li><li>• risk of becoming lost</li><li>• risk of being taken to a shelter; risk of euthanasia</li><li>• become accidentally trapped in sheds</li></ul>

### Alley Cat Rescue’s position

Our position at Alley Cat Rescue is not that everyone should open their doors and allow their cats out to roam around outside! We do believe that many cats, especially if given a stimulating environment, can live quite contentedly and healthy indoors, especially in areas where outdoor living is unsafe. 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 without risk.

As for feral cats or cats who live strictly outdoors, the general message out there is they only live for about two years, which is based on folk wisdom. In actuality, the lifespan of a feral (outdoor) cat is comparable to that of an indoor cat. A study performed on a Florida college campus over the course of 11 years, reported that more than 80% of the cats had been residents for more than 6 years; which is comparable to the mean lifespan of 7.1 years for household cats (Levy et al., 2003).

ACR does, however, reject public policies that would rather euthanize feral cats than allow them to live a good life under responsible care in an outdoor home, and policies that do not allow non-lethal control of feral cats on the basis of “no-outdoor-cats.” One of the major reasons that non-lethal control of feral cat colonies is so contentious in the U.S. is because of the prevailing attitudes towards outdoor cats. While the public is embracing the outdoor life of feral cats, most shelters still find it difficult to accept any cats being outdoors, even feral cats.

Feral cats are not meant to live indoors. They are wild animals and they are already living in their home—outdoors. Most adult feral cats are very unhappy living in homes. Some do 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 from being confined. These cats are impossible to medicate and trips to the veterinarian are difficult, if you are even able to catch the cat. This is no way for any animal to live. Not to mention, with the sheer

number of feral cats living in colonies, it would simply be impossible to find enough indoor homes or sanctuaries for all of them.

Yes, it can be dangerous living outdoors and yes, some feral cats get hit by cars or attacked by dogs or other animals; but to kill millions of outdoor cats, as many authorities advocate for, in order to “protect” them from the possibility of experiencing something bad—when so many thousands of outdoor cats live in managed, safe colonies for many years—is just too extreme a measure to be ethically acceptable. The same thing could be said of you, your children, or any other animal. Any one of us could get hit by a bus or sustain an injury simply by conducting our daily routines, but that is not a reason to avoid venturing outdoors. And it is certainly not a reason to advocate for the killing of healthy, sentient beings.

## **Conclusion**

When it comes to deciding whether or not to allow a cat access to the outdoors, please take some time to weigh all the pros and cons. The benefits of keeping a cat away from possible dangers outdoors have to be weighed against the effects on a cat’s behavior. Obviously safety is a main concern for any caretaker, but one must also think about a cat’s natural behaviors. If a cat is kept strictly indoors, it is imperative that the caretaker provide adequate stimulation to help the cat express her energy and instinctual activities, so that she does not develop mental and/or behavioral issues.

Again, if one does choose to allow a cat outdoors, there are countless fencing and enclosure options available that permit cats the freedom of outdoor living while keeping them safely confined. And some cats, like dogs, enjoy taking walks on a leash. It may take some practice and coaxing, but with time (and treats) some cats will get used to being outdoors while on a leash.

Also, when adopting a new cat, it is always best to keep her indoors at first. She will need time to get used to her new family, as well as her new surroundings. Once she has settled in, you can gauge if she seems interested in going outdoors. Some cats are perfectly content with not venturing outside and some are downright terrified of being outdoors. Either way, it is much easier to go from an indoor to outdoor cat than to go from an outdoor to indoor cat. Once cats have had that first taste of freedom, it’s tough to convince them to go back inside. And always make sure cats who have access to the outdoors are up-to-date on all vaccinations and parasite prevention, and it’s a good idea to bring an outdoor cat indoors at night.

As for feral cats, they are already living in their home. Whether they were born to a feral mother cat or became lost or 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.

And even though feral cats are capable of living without human support, as we began domesticating cats thousands of years ago, so, too, came the obligation to care for them. We created their current situation, so it is our responsibility to ensure their populations are managed in a humane manner. Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) not only reduces the number of cats by stopping the breeding cycle, but it also improves the cats’ health because dedicated caretakers look after their safety.

## References

Hamilton, Donald. *Homeopathic Care for Cats and Dogs, Revised Edition: Small Doses for Small Animals*. Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2010.

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