keeping your cat SAFE AND happy AT HOME

RSPCA

for all creatures great & small

Introduction

Thank you for providing a loving home for your feline friend!

Whether you've just adopted a new cat or kitten, or are considering how best to care for your existing cat, this guide is for you. The idea that all cats need to roam outdoors has changed; many **owners now provide a safe and suitable environment for their cat at home all day, every day.**

Keeping your cat safe and happy at home means providing for all their needs, including many that may previously have been met by being outdoors. Meeting these needs in other ways requires forward thinking and a little imagination and commitment. But you needn't go it alone: **we're here to help** explain how you and your cat can live at home together in harmony .

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PART 1

SAFER AT HOME, DON'T LET ME ROAM

What is cat containment?

Containing your cat means completely preventing them roaming from your property at any time, day or night. This can be achieved by keeping your cat indoors, or a combination of indoors and having a secure outdoor enclosure, or cat-proof fencing around an outdoor area. In other words, keeping your cat safe at home and not letting them roam.

In some areas cats are required by law to be contained. Please check the requirements in your area with your local council.

Why should I keep my cat contained?

By keeping your cat safe at home you will be:

- reducing the risk of them getting sick, being hurt or dying in an accident
- enjoying more quality time together
- reducing the risk they will stray and be lost or impounded by the council
- minimising the risk they will harm or kill other animals
- preventing them from interacting with undesexed roaming cats
- avoiding problems with your neighbours
- giving them a better chance to enjoy a longer, healthier life.

Will my cat be happy staying at home?

Your newly adopted cat is more likely to settle in to a contained lifestyle if you keep them at home from the beginning. Kittens generally adapt well to an indoor lifestyle if they have been contained from an early age. Newly-adopted cats should always be contained during the settling-in period anyway, as they may run off or become lost if allowed outside.

If you have an existing cat who roams, then try to introduce them to being contained gradually (e.g. initially keep them inside at night, then gradually increase the time they are contained during the day). It is essential to provide lots of distractions like new hiding and resting areas in the house, a variety of toys, and extended play sessions every day.

THE RISKS OF ROAMING

Keeping your cat at home helps protect them from an increased risk of disease, injury or death from:

- being hit or run over by a car
- being attacked by a dog
- fighting with other neighbourhood cats
- acquiring a serious infection, such as Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV)
- eating toxic plants or poisons (e.g. toxic chemicals, poison baits intended for other animals such as rats or foxes, or eating rats or mice that have ingested poison baits).
- being stolen or abused
- picking up ticks or fleas and related problems such as flea allergy dermatitis or tick paralysis
- being bitten by a venomous snake.

How do I keep my cat at home?

There are three main options for keeping your cat contained:

1. Totally indoors

- This is often the easiest and cheapest option to physically set up, and can work well as long as you are able to provide for all your cat's needs within your home. That means providing enough space, lots of mental and physical enrichment for your cat, and different areas for toileting, sleeping, hiding, scratching and playing as well as access to food and water.
- To help your indoor cat benefit from exposure to outdoor sights, smells and sounds, you can install cat-proof fly screens so that windows and doors can be opened without your cat escaping.

2. Indoors with an outdoor enclosure

- Providing a secure outdoor area is a great way of expanding your cat's environment. This can be attached to your cat's indoor space via a window or cat flap, or you can build a free-standing enclosure. Make sure the enclosure is both escape-proof and animal-proof (to prevent other animals getting in).
- Having an outdoor run linked to the indoors means your cat can choose where they spend their time. They can retreat into the house if something outside scares them, and there is less risk of accidental escape than if you are moving them into a separate enclosure. If you have a balcony or veranda which can be made escape-proof, this is a great option for you.
- If you build a separate outdoor enclosure, remember your cat will need the same essential resources they have indoors. A variety of platforms at different heights, hiding places, scratching posts, food, water, more than one litter tray, and adequate protection from the weather (e.g. sun, rain, wind) and extremes of heat and cold will all make the enclosure a more attractive and comfortable place for your cat.
- The enclosure needs to be located somewhere safe, where dogs, other cats or predators will not be a threat. Your cat should be protected from seeing other animals that may scare them (e.g. over the next door fence) even if the other animal cannot actually get to your cat. Providing places for your cat to hide in the enclosure is essential as it will help them to feel safe and secure.

In an outdoor enclosure, make sure you include a variety of platforms at different heights, hiding places and scratching posts, food, water, adequate protection and shelter, and more than one litter tray.

3. Indoors with an outdoor space surrounded by an escape-proof fence

With this option your cat can truly get the best of indoor and outdoor living while still being safe. There are plenty of ideas and products available to help you make your yard or garden escape-proof.

LEFT: A cat-proof rolling bar attached to the an existing fence prevents cats from climbing over.

RIGHT: An existing fence, increased in height to more than two metres with a rolling attachment.

CAT-PROOFING A BACKYARD

- If you have an existing continuous solid fence around your backyard, you can modify the top of the fence to stop your cat gaining purchase and climbing over to escape. You can achieve this using rolling cylinders, smooth metal or plastic sheeting, or inward-inclined wire. Please note that inward-inclined wire or smooth sheeting just on the inside of your fence will not prevent other cats coming into your garden. To stop this, you will need to install rolling cylinders, or use inclined wire or smooth sheeting on both sides of the fence.
- Alternatively you can erect a new solid fence with an escape proof top or use netting to create a secure space.
- Don't forget to check for anything that might lead to an escape such as gaps in the fence, around gates, where the fence meets the building or overhanging trees and tree trunks near the property boundary. Check the escape proofing regularly to make sure that it remains safe and secure.
- If you have any trees close to the fence, a simple way to stop cats climbing them is to fix a smooth metal or plastic band around the trunk at least two metres off the ground.
- A cat contained in a backyard may still kill or injure wildlife if they enter the cat's space. You can reduce this risk by fitting a special predation deterrent collar on your cat and making sure the enclosed area does not contain plants, food or water sources that would attract wildlife.
- Note that you still need to be aware of and take steps to reduce risks that your cat might face in a cat-proofed garden, such as snakes, ticks, other predators and ill-intentioned people.

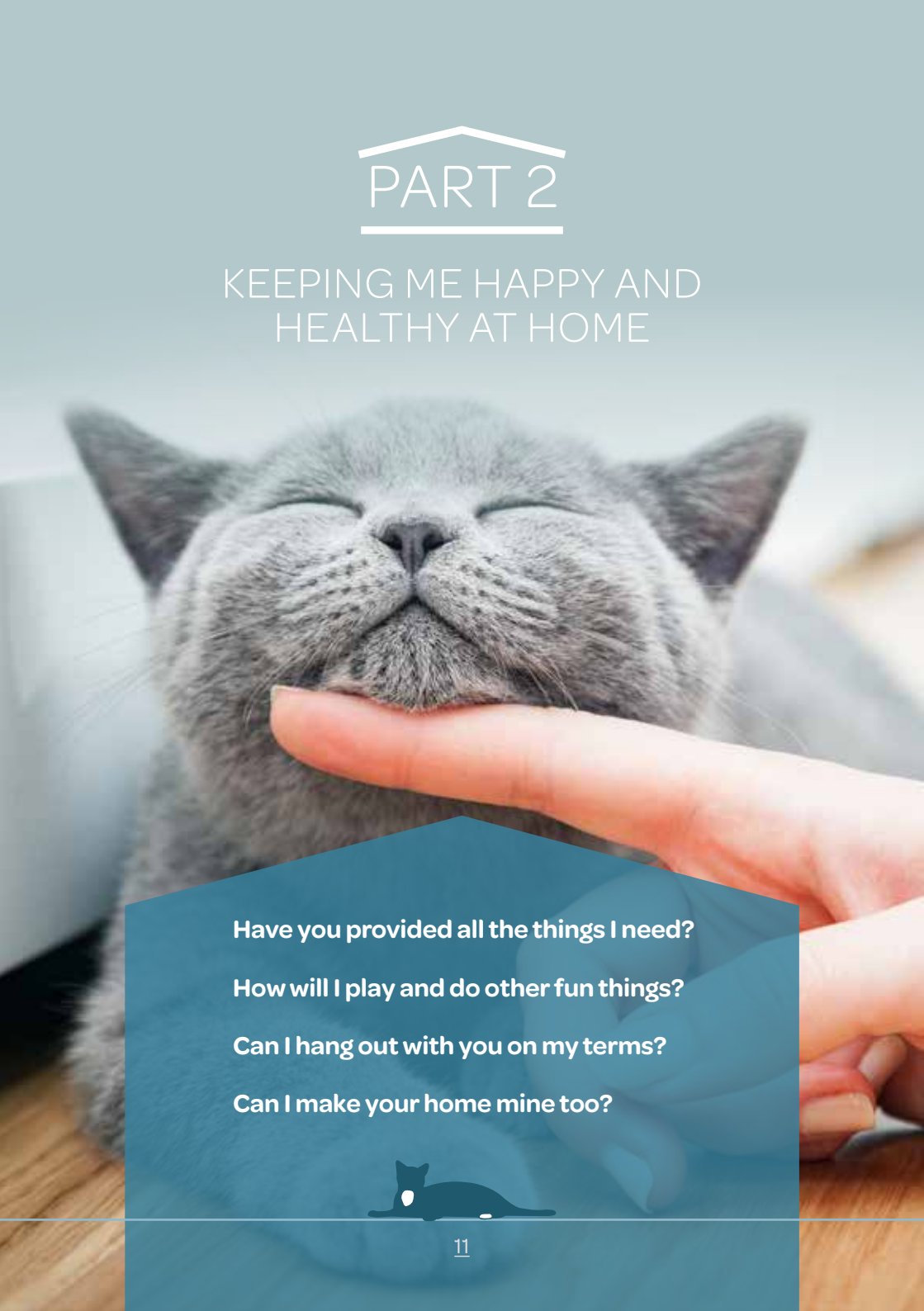
CAT-PROOFING A BALCONY OR VERANDAH

- Rigid netting can be used if the top of the balcony is cat-proofed or fully enclosed. Otherwise the netting should be floppy (but not stretchy) to discourage climbing.
- To avoid your cat getting their paws, claws or even their head caught in the net, the openings should be about 50mm wide. Young kittens should be kept away from netting until they are close to adult size.
- If a net extension is being added to an existing fence, the total height needs to be at least two metres or your cat may jump over it.
- Keep the net in good condition by reinforcing it along attachment points and making sure it can't be chewed, check it regularly to make sure that it remains safe and secure.

Cat-proofing a balcony or verandah allows access to fresh air, sunshine and all the sights and smells that interest your cat.

PART 2

KEEPING ME HAPPY AND HEALTHY AT HOME



Have you provided all the things I need?

How will I play and do other fun things?

Can I hang out with you on my terms?

Can I make your home mine too?

While there are many benefits to keeping your cat at home, it also means that you have complete responsibility for and control over their environment. So it's essential that the spaces you provide meet your cat's needs and encourage them to undertake activities that they enjoy and will promote their well-being. This includes ensuring that they have choice about where they rest, play and toilet, and opportunities to engage in normal behaviours such as stalking, pouncing, climbing, scratching and exploring.

It is vital to provide an appropriate environment, to maintain your cat's good physical and behavioural health.

Have you provided all the things I need?

My five basic needs

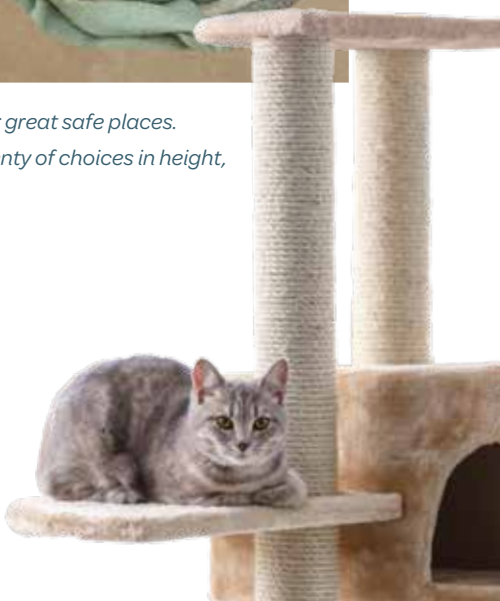
The main things your cat needs to keep them happy and healthy are choice and variety in these five basic resources.

1. **Resting and hiding places**
2. **Food**
3. **Water**
4. **Toileting areas (litter trays)**
5. **Places to scratch**

All you have to do is offer more than one choice for each resource, then let your cat decide for his or herself. As a guide, for one cat you will need two litter trays, two feed stations, two water bowls, three different types of scratching surfaces and three resting/hiding places in different locations. If you have several cats, you'll need to provide more resources in more locations as cats don't always like to share!

Resting and hiding places

Private, safe and quiet places – all cats need these to retreat to and to help them feel secure and happy. Cats love hiding in places like - shelves, cupboards, a bed or box on top of a chest of drawers or wardrobe, inside a wardrobe, or underneath a bed. Offering some elevated spots to encourage jumping and climbing will help keep your cat active and healthy. You can make DIY modifications to your house and furniture to create multiple levels in your home, and/or buy cat furniture with different levels and surfaces (many also have a built-in hiding box). Other options for hiding places include a cat carrier left open and wooden, plastic or cardboard boxes. Remember to make your cat's safe places comfortable with soft bedding – they will love you for it!



ABOVE: Existing furniture or containers can offer great safe places.

RIGHT: Cat furniture is a great way to provide plenty of choices in height, location and hiding places.

Food

It's not just what you feed your cats, but where and how you feed them, that's important. Making feed time fun by giving frequent small amounts of food, introducing different textures and flavours, and placing food in different locations, will keep your cat in good shape for body and mind. Make sure you offer food in a separate place from water bowls and toilet areas.

Prevent poisoning: When your cat is safely contained to your home you can protect them from toxic plants (such as lilies) that can be fatal. Just ensure that there are no dangerous plants in the areas to which your cat has access. You can find more information about plants that are poisonous to cats on the RSPCA Knowledgebase (kb.rspca.org.au).

Water

Cats often have individual preferences for what they like to drink from and where they like to drink. Many prefer ceramic or glass rather than plastic bowls. Give your cat several bowls in different spots filled with clean, fresh water and take note of what they prefer – you'll probably find that bowls from your own kitchen are the most popular! Water fountains made for pets are also a great way to provide your cat with both fresh running water and enrichment.

Litter trays

It's important to help your cat feel comfortable when they need to toilet. Negative experiences associated with their toilet area can cause cats stress and anxiety, and lead to them avoiding use of their litter tray. Making your cat feel comfortable and relaxed while using their litter tray will help prevent toileting becoming a problem; we have some tips to help you to achieve this.

Cats prefer a wide, shallow bowl filled to the brim as this avoids their whiskers touching the sides.

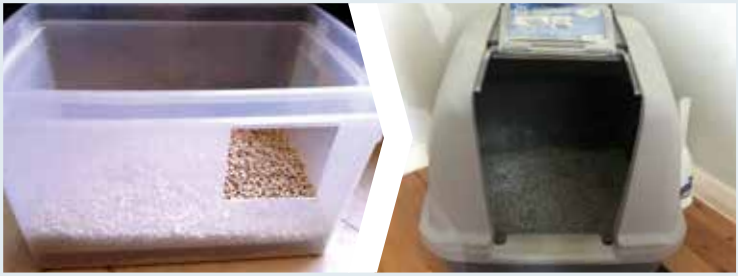
TOILETING TIPS

- **Location of litter trays**: Place litter trays in a quiet area away from food and water bowls, i.e. corner of a room or in a gap bordered by furniture.
- **Number of litter trays**: One cat needs two trays; each additional cat needs another tray, all in different places.
- **Size of litter trays**: The trays need to be large enough for your cat to comfortably dig, turn around and squat – that means at least 1.5 times the length of your cat (e.g. an average cat measures about 50cm nose to tail, so their litter tray should be at least 75cm long). Many commercial litter trays are too small, but it is easy to make your own using modified plastic storage containers.
- **Litter**: Cats need to dig, so make sure you fill the tray with litter to a depth of at least 6 cm. Some cats prefer a sandy or clay-based litter, others like wood pellets or crystals. You can try out different litter types and see what your cat likes to use.
- **Cleaning**: Ideally you should spot clean the litter tray every day (scoop out any waste), and replace the litter once a week. It is best not to use scented litter or to leave soiled litter for too long as this may put your cat off using their tray .

How can you tell if your cat is happy with their litter tray?

If a cat digs a lot in their tray this generally indicates they like it. Scratching the walls near the tray or sides of litter tray may be a sign that they don't like something about the tray or litter, so if you see your cat doing this, try changing something about the tray and/or litter to see if your cat seems to be more comfortable with their toilet.

Plastic storage containers make ideal litter trays.



Places to scratch

Cats love and need to scratch – it helps spread their scent which makes them feel at home, and also helps keep their claws healthy. Providing a variety of horizontal and vertical scratching posts in different locations and with different surfaces will help keep them happy and reduce the chance of them scratching other furnishings. Long vertical posts are good as they also allow your cat to enjoy a full body stretch.

How will I play and do other fun things?

Cats need and love to engage in natural behaviors like stalking, chasing and pouncing. Cats staying at home can still do all these things, and it's easy to provide them with activities that provide mental and physical stimulation.

Other enrichment ideas include providing your cat with music made specifically for cats and cat-safe plants to smell and rub on.

Food games

- Hide food in different locations for your cat to search for and find.
- Throw individual pieces of dry food for your cat to chase.
- Try out a food ball or a puzzle feeder where your cat has to play to obtain the food.

Playtime

Some cats prefer to jump in the air, others prefer to run on the ground, some prefer bird-like toys and others mouse or insect-like toys. Learn your cat's preferred style of play and find the best toys and activities to match it.

- Let your cat catch the toy occasionally to give satisfaction.
- Occasionally reward a 'capture' with a treat.
- Vary play sessions, rotate between different toys, and hide toys to provide more stimulation and prevent boredom.
- Choose safe toys for your cat and regularly check to make sure they remain safe (no broken, loose or sharp parts). Be cautious with items that can be swallowed like string or wool, cut handles off paper bags (as cats can get stuck in them), and always supervise your cats with new toys.

TOP LEFT: Make sure your cat has both vertical and horizontal scratching areas.

TOP RIGHT: A long vertical scratching post allows your cat to fully stretch.

MIDDLE LEFT: Jumping and using different levels (such as windowsills and furniture) helps to keep your cat physically and mentally healthy.

BOTTOM LEFT: Food puzzles provide mental and physical stimulation for your cat

BOTTOM RIGHT: Toys can be moved in the air or along the ground like a bird or mouse.

Can I hang out with you on my terms?

When you hang out with your cat, it should be on their terms so that they have choice about the interactions and feel comfortable and secure. You just have to follow their lead: for example, they may like to come up to you and rub against your legs, but may object if you go to pick them up. But that's okay – they will let you know what they want and when they want it. Respecting this helps build trust and harmony between you and your cat.

Enjoy some daily 'cat time'.
Always allow your cat to initiate and guide the type of contact.

Allow your cat to scent mark, especially new items. You should avoid cleaning 'scent mark' areas.

Can I make your home mine too?

All cats need to 'mark their territory' by rubbing their face and body on furniture, doorways and other places as it makes them feel at home. To avoid stressing your cat, it's best not to clean these scent marks off or at least try to clean them as infrequently as possible. Scratching is also an important way that cats scent mark. It is really important they can do this as it helps them to feel safe and secure and this positively affects their health and happiness.

Potential problem behaviours

If you've followed this advice so far, you should be on the right track for a happy and healthy future with your cat. But things don't always go according to plan, especially when cats are entering a new home. If that's the case, you might encounter one of these problems:

- howling and yowling
- scratching furniture
- toileting in an inappropriate place
- being aggressive towards other cats or humans.

These behaviours are more likely to develop if your cat has become stressed because their basic needs are not being fully met. As a first step, carefully check that you've covered all the points we've outlined here and that your cat has choices in where they feed, drink, rest, hide, scratch, toilet and play, and an interesting and stimulating environment. Observe your cat to see how and where they spend their time and what choices they make. If there is anything that you could improve, then change this straight away. If problems persist, you should seek advice from your veterinarian and/or a qualified animal behaviourist as soon as possible.

Living in harmony

Keeping your cat happy and healthy without roaming from home, will help ensure harmony for everyone – you, your cat, neighbours and local wildlife.

Useful resources

- RSPCA Knowledgebase: kb.rspca.org.au
- Safe cat, safe wildlife: safecat.org.au
- Indoor Pet Initiative: indoorpet.osu.edu
- International Cat Care: icatcare.org
- American Association of Feline Practitioners resources:
  - catfriendly.com
  - catvets.com/guidelines/client-brochures
- Food puzzles for cats: foodpuzzlesforcats.com
- RSPCA World for Pets online shop: worldforpets.com.au

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