



## **COVID-19: IF YOU NEED TO KEEP YOUR CAT INDOORS**

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The advice to keep cats indoors only applies to cats from infected households or where their owners are self-isolating, and only if the cat is happy to be kept indoors. (BVA 8/04/2020)

Being confined indoors can be highly stressful for some cats, which may cause or exacerbate stress-related medical conditions and/or behaviour problems such as: house-soiling, indoor urine marking, fighting between cats that live together, and predatory/ play behaviour (biting and scratching) directed towards people or other household animals.

**If your cat does need to be confined the following advice should help to limit stress and avoid potential behavioural problems.**

### **Avoiding house-soiling problems**

**Provide a sufficient number of litter trays:** Cats often prefer one area to urinate and a separate area to defecate. They can also be reluctant to share a litter tray with other cats. For these reasons the recommended number of litter trays to provide is at least two for a single cat and one per cat plus one extra for two or more cats in a household. These should have a good amount of distance between them, and preferably be located in separate areas of the house. If they are placed side-by-side the cat(s) may regard this as single litter location and still eliminate elsewhere.

**Provide litter trays that are big enough and deep enough:** A litter tray needs to be at least 1 ½ times the length of the cat (excluding its tail), otherwise it can be uncomfortable for the cat to use it. Cats need to be able to dig a hole and bury their waste and therefore need a litter tray that can contain enough cat litter to enable them to do so. Approximately 4cm (1.5 inches) of cat litter is about right for most cats, although a large cat may need more. If you cannot find a litter tray big and deep enough a large plastic storage box as shown here can be used instead.



**Provide the 'right type' of cat litter:** Cats can have an individual preference as to what type of cat litter they like best, but most will prefer a non-scented granular cat litter.

**Keep the litter trays clean:** Cats are very clean creatures many will not use a litter tray if they consider it to be unclean. Scoop out faeces and wet patches at least twice daily – or better still, as soon as you notice them. Completely clean the trays in warm soapy water and refresh the litter once a week.

**Do not use plastic litter tray liners:** Cats can get their claws caught in the plastic when digging which can be uncomfortable for them and deter them from using the litter tray.

### **Do not place the litter trays:**

- **Near food or water.** Most cats do not like to urinate or defecate close to where they eat or drink.
- **Near windows or glass doors.** A cat can feel vulnerable when it uses a litter tray and feel particularly at threat if it thinks may be seen by neighbouring cats.

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- **Near the cat flap or other entrances and exits.** Where the cat enters or exits the house can be viewed as a potential entry point for rivals from outside. Therefore, this is not a place where a cat is likely to feel comfortable using a toilet.
- **Near to other potential threats or disturbances:** For example: in a walkway, by the dog's bed, by a cupboard that is frequently opened, where children play, near the washing machine or other noisy household appliances, or in any area where the cat has had a frightening or painful experience. Most cats will prefer to use a litter tray that is placed in a quiet partially hidden position such as behind a chair, under a table or in a quiet corner.

## Avoiding conflict between cats that live together:



**Feed the cats separately with a good distance between their food dishes.** Cats are solitary self-reliant predators. In other words, each individual cat hunts only to provide food for itself. Cats do not share their food and if given the option will choose to eat in a safe place away from other cats, who might potentially steal their food. Cats will eat side-by-side, especially if food bowls are placed close to each other, or they are forced to eat together from a single dish, but this is often because they have no other option. This can give the false impression that they are happy to do so, but in fact this

situation is a common cause of stress and increased antagonism within multi-cat households.

**Provide additional food and water dishes in various locations around the house.** If food dishes, or other important resources are located only in one area of the house it is not uncommon for one cat to sit in a doorway or corridor leading to that area and 'block' the other cats' access to that area and thereby create a conflict situation. Providing extra feeding bowls or puzzle feeders in other locations, can prevent this situation from arising, because if one area is 'blocked' another is available.

**Provide ample, comfortable resting places.** If warm, comfortable resting places are in limited supply this can force cats into unwanted close contact which can lower their tolerance of each other and result in conflict.

**Ensure that the cats have enough space to get away from each other.** Provide escape routes, hiding places, and elevated areas.

**Provide sufficient number of litter trays in separate locations:** See above.

## Avoiding stress from 'boredom' and human-directed predatory behaviour

**Space:** Cats should have sufficient space to run around. It is quite normal for a household cat to occasionally run around the house at high speed as a means of energy expenditure.

**Access to 'high places':** As well as having enough floor space a cat also needs to have access to vertical space at varying levels for climbing, exploring and resting. Access to shelves, high furniture even stairs can allow this, but additional levels can also be provided in the form of cat trees and walkways.

**Hiding areas:** Even the most confident cat needs places to hide occasionally. But hiding places are not just used when a cat feels at threat, they can also be used in play, as areas to explore and as places to retreat to when the cat does not want to be disturbed. Suitable hiding places can include gaps under furniture, covered beds and cardboard boxes.

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**Cardboard Boxes:** Most cats love cardboard boxes. Not only do they provide the cat with somewhere to hide, but they can also provide opportunity for the cat to play and explore.

- Provide boxes, and/or paper bags (with any handles removed or cut through) of varying shapes and sizes.
- To keep your cat interested, move the boxes daily from room to room and in different places within a room. Also vary their positions e.g. opening at the top, or at the side or even underneath.
- To make the boxes even more interesting, cut small holes (just big enough for the cat to peer through, or stick a paw through) in the sides of the box and place a ball or other toys inside. Another idea is to place several pieces of 'scrunched up' newspaper in a cardboard box along with a small handful of dry food, that the cat needs to search for.

**'Bat and chase' toys:** A 'bat and chase' toy is anything lightweight enough so that it can be made to move easily by your cat batting at it with a paw. It should also be safe for your cat (i.e. it does not have sharp edges or could be easily swallowed). Examples of potential 'bat and chase toys':

- Table tennis balls
- Old wine corks
- Dried pasta shapes,
- Walnut shells,
- Balls of crunched up paper,
- Cotton reels

**Food Foraging and food puzzles:** If we did not feed them, cats would need to hunt several times a day for their food. Having food placed in a dish in front of them may be the easy option, but it can also be quite boring. It can be a lot more exciting and interesting for a cat if food is provided in way that requires some element of challenge to get it. More information on food puzzles and feeding your cat can be found in the FABclinicians handouts section <https://fabclinicians.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Cat-Feeding.pdf>

**Wand Toys:** Sometimes called 'fishing rod toys' these usually comprise of a stick, or 'wand' to which is attached a long string, sometimes elasticated, with a toy at the end. Or in some cases the 'string' itself is the toy, which can be made to 'wiggle' and 'slither' along like a snake. The advantages of these toys are that even small movements of the 'wand' results in much larger movements of the toy, plus the toy that the cat uses his teeth and claws on is kept well away from your hands.



*How to use a wand toy:*

- Draw the toy in long fast sweeps along the ground. This is often best to get the cat's attention towards the toy and encourage play.
- Move the toy directly upwards, or in circles in the air, to encourage leaping and grabbing.
- Move the toy in small, fast erratic movements to mimic prey.

*Ending the game:*

- Be careful not to end the game too soon. Cats will often appear to stop playing and walk away from the toy and watch it from a short distance away. This is part of the normal predatory sequence and it does not mean that the cat is no longer interested. After watching for short time, the cat will usually go back to playing.
- Also avoid ending the game suddenly while the cat is a highly aroused and motivated state. If this happens the cat may direct his predatory type play behaviour towards nearby people or other animals.

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- Gradually reduce the movements of the toy, and eventually stop moving it altogether before removing it.
- If he does not lose interest, distract him onto another activity that has lower arousal potential e.g. throw a few tasty treats onto the ground nearby that he has to sniff out.
- Remove the toy while he is looking away from it e.g. while searching for or eating treats. Pick it up by holding the toy and the 'wand'. If he sees the toy move this could trigger further play activity.