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Cat Toys and How to Use Them

Although cats generally have different play styles than their canine counterparts, toys are as much a necessity for cats as they are for dogs. Toys help fight boredom and give cats an outlet for their instinctive prey-chasing behaviors. When you are moving the toy around while your cat fishes for it, chases after it, or jumps in pursuit of it, playtime becomes a bonding experience for you and your cat.

Safe Toys

Our mothers always told us “no playing ball inside the house,” but cats can usually participate in that forbidden exercise without knocking down a vase or a lamp (and being grounded for two weeks). Still, there are plenty of factors that may contribute to the safety of the toy they’re batting around.

Many of those factors are completely dependent upon your cat’s size, activity level, and preferences. Another factor to be considered is the environment in which your cat spends their time. Although we can’t guarantee your cat’s enthusiasm or their safety with any specific toy, we can offer the following guidelines.

Be Cautious

Things that are usually the most attractive to cats are often the very things that are the most dangerous. Cat-proof your home by removing string, ribbon, yarn, rubber bands, plastic milk jug rings, paper clips, pins, needles, dental floss, and anything else that could be ingested. All of these items are dangerous, no matter how cute your cat may appear when they’re playing with them.

Avoid or alter any toys that aren’t cat-proof by removing ribbons, feathers, strings, eyes, or other small parts that could be chewed and ingested.

Soft toys should be machine washable. Look for stuffed toys that are labeled as safe for children less than three years of age and that don’t contain any dangerous fillings. Problem fillings include things like nutshells and polystyrene beads. Remember that rigid toys are not as attractive to cats.

Recommended Toys

Active Toys

- Round plastic shower curtain rings are fun either as a single ring to bat around, hide, or carry, or when linked together and hung in an enticing spot.
- Plastic balls, with or without bells inside.
- Ping-Pong balls and plastic practice golf balls with holes to help cats carry them are a great time. Try putting one in a dry bathtub – a captive ball is more fun than one that escapes under the sofa.
- Paper bags with handles removed are good for pouncing, hiding, and interactive play. Plastic bags are not a good idea, as many cats like to chew and ingest the plastic.
- Sisal-wrapped toys are very attractive to cats that tend to ignore soft toys.
- Empty cardboard tubes from toilet paper and paper towels are made even more fun if you unwind a little cardboard to get them started.

Comfort Toys

- Soft stuffed animals are good for several purposes. For some cats, the stuffed animal should be small enough to carry around. For cats that want to wrestle with the toy, the stuffed animal should be about the same size as the cat. Toys with legs and a tail seem to be especially enticing to cats.
- Cardboard boxes, especially those a little too small for your cat to fit into provide comfort and fun.

Catnip

- Catnip-filled soft toys, which cats like to kick, carry, and rub. Catnip is not addictive and is perfectly safe for cats to roll in, rub in, or eat.
- Plain catnip can be crushed and sprinkled on the carpet or, for easier cleanup, on a towel placed on the floor. Catnip oils will often stay in the carpet, and although they're not visible to us, your cat will still be able to smell them.
- Catnip sprays rarely have enough power to be attractive to cats.
- Not all cats are affected by catnip. Some cats may become overstimulated to the point of aggressive play and others may become relaxed.
- Kittens under six months old seem to be immune to catnip.

Get the Most Out of Toys!

- Rotate your cat's toys weekly by making only a few available at a time. Keep a variety of types easily accessible. If your cat has a favorite, like a soft "baby" that they love to cuddle with, you may want to leave that one out all the time.
- Provide toys that offer a variety of uses - at least one toy to carry, one to wrestle with, one to roll, and one to "baby."
- Hide-and-seek is a fun game for cats. Found toys are often much more attractive than a toy which is obviously introduced.
- Many of your cat's toys should be interactive. Interactive play is very important for your cat because they need active "people time" - and such play also enhances the bond between you and your pet. Cats generally engage in three types of play - "fishing, flying, and chasing" - and all types are much more engaging for cats when you are part of them.

Adapted from material originally developed by applied animal behaviorists at the Dumb Friends League, Denver, Colorado. © 2000 Dumb Friends League and © 2003 The HSUS. All rights reserved.