

## AAFP Position Statement

### Impact of lifestyle choice on the companion cat: indoor vs outdoor

There are both risks and benefits to pet cats living exclusively indoors or spending some time outdoors. This lifestyle decision may be based on culture, perceived behavior and health requirements of the cat, or recommendations of regional veterinary and humane associations.

Animal welfare addresses how an animal copes with the conditions in which it lives. Feline welfare includes the ability to express innate behaviors. As a relatively young species, *Felis catus* has retained the behaviors of its wild ancestor, *Feline silvestris lybica*.<sup>1</sup> The cat's physical and emotional needs are unique.<sup>2</sup> The behaviors that go with detecting, stalking and catching prey are normal and essential behaviors (Figure 1).<sup>3,4</sup> Both cats that live as a single household

cat and those living in multi-cat households can have distress, which can consist of boredom, fear and anxiety. As territorial animals, each cat needs safe and enriched spaces to cope in their environment (Figure 2). Outdoor cats can more readily maintain their territory, reducing potential fights and dispersing or avoiding cats that are unfamiliar or threatening, as compared with indoor cats.<sup>5</sup>

The innate needs of the cat are difficult or impossible to replicate in the indoor environment, and meeting those needs requires extensive veterinary and client education. There is an increased incidence of behavior problems if indoor cats are unable to express normal behaviors.<sup>5-7</sup>

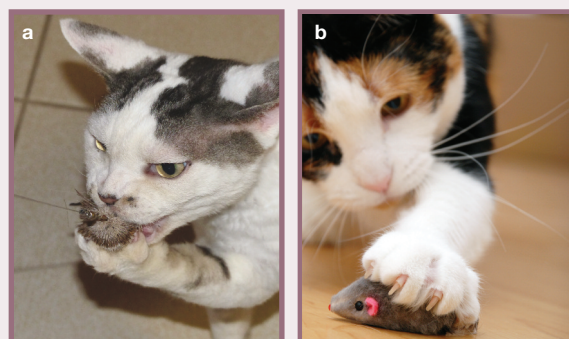
Behavior problems have been associated with an increase in relinquishment or euthanasia.<sup>8</sup>

Until approximately 1950, cats were outdoor only or indoor/outdoor cats. The development of cat litter in 1947<sup>9</sup> and the desire to keep cats safe led to the recommendations by many veterinary organizations that cats be kept exclusively indoors. However, there was little to no knowledge or education about what is

This Position Statement by the AAFP Welfare Committee supersedes the AAFP's earlier 'Confinement of Owned Indoor Cats' Position Statement, dated December 2007.



**Figure 2** Outdoor enclosures facilitate meeting the cat's needs and performance of its normal behaviors. Courtesy of Martine van Boeijen



**Figure 1** The challenge of meeting the needs of the indoor cat requires multiple means of enrichment, including simulation of stalking and catching prey every day. This is essential for cats of all ages. (a) Courtesy of Ilona Rodan; (b) © iStockphoto.com/Tatyana Aleksandrova

needed to maintain feline welfare. Most cat owners and many veterinary professionals are still unaware of the cat's emotional, social and environmental needs. Although it is easier to measure the incidence of injury, recognition and measurement of emotional wellbeing or pleasure is more difficult, but at least as important.<sup>10,11</sup> Consideration for longevity often underlies the decision to keep cats indoors. However, a lifestyle choice made with the sole intention of increasing longevity – but in an impoverished or inadequate environment for each cat in the household – is not in the cat's best interest.

### Risks vs benefits

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#### Risks for the indoor cat

- ❖ Inability to express normal cat behaviors<sup>3</sup>
- ❖ Increased incidence of behavior problems<sup>9</sup> and potential relinquishment or euthanasia due to inability to express normal behavior<sup>12</sup>
  - More cats are affected by behavior problems than any other condition<sup>13</sup>
  - Urine marking is a normal feline communication system, and scratching is normal behavior for the cat. However, if performed indoors, owners are more likely to punish, relinquish or have cats euthanized<sup>8,14</sup>
- ❖ Increased incidence of behavior problems due to reduced access to resources
- ❖ Increased incidence of behavior problems due to the cat's social needs not being met<sup>15</sup>
- ❖ Inability to choose to live solitarily or with affiliate cats (other cats they like)<sup>16,17</sup>
- ❖ Intercat conflict<sup>18</sup> and secondary behavior problems
- ❖ Boredom<sup>3</sup>
- ❖ Lack of stimulation<sup>3</sup>
- ❖ Lack of hunting and normal feeding behavior<sup>2,15</sup>
- ❖ Lack of exercise
- ❖ Obesity<sup>19</sup> and risk factors for obesity (eg, diabetes mellitus)
- ❖ Stress-associated disease<sup>20</sup>
  - Feline idiopathic cystitis,<sup>20-23</sup> the most common cause of lower urinary tract disease
  - Upper respiratory infections<sup>24</sup>
  - Gastrointestinal diseases – stress colitis, suspicion that inflammatory bowel disease is associated with stress<sup>2</sup>
- ❖ Hyperthyroidism<sup>25,26</sup>
- ❖ Lack of preventive treatment by owners due to the misconception that indoor cats have no risk of infectious or parasitic disease
- ❖ It is more challenging to fully meet the physical, social and emotional needs for the indoor-only cat

## Risks vs benefits

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### Benefits for the indoor cat

- ❖ Reduced risk of injury (Figure 3)
- ❖ Reduced risk of poisoning
- ❖ Reduced risk of human abuse
- ❖ Reduced exposure to wildlife and predators
- ❖ Reduced exposure to infectious and parasitic agents
- ❖ Protection from environmental temperature extremes and hazardous weather conditions



**Figure 3** Windows with perches can provide a way for a cat to watch outdoors from the safety of indoors. Courtesy of Debra Givin

### Risks for the indoor/outdoor cat

- ❖ Increased risk of injury
- ❖ Increased risk of poisoning
- ❖ Increased risk of danger from exposure to other animals, including wildlife (eg, coyotes, wolves, owls and other birds of prey), other cats<sup>27</sup> or feral animals (especially feral cats)
- ❖ Increased chance of human abuse and theft
- ❖ Violation of leash law in some areas if not confined to yard or walked with harness and leash
- ❖ Increased exposure to infectious and parasitic agents
- ❖ Exposure to temperature extremes and hazardous weather

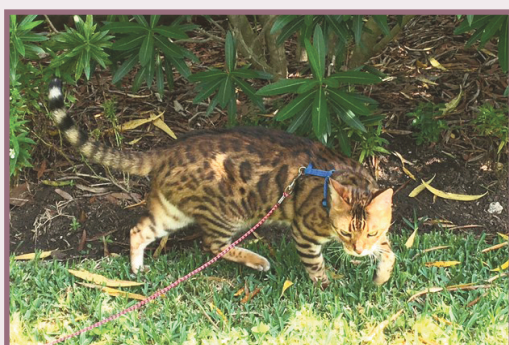
### Benefits for the indoor/outdoor cat

- ❖ Access to the outdoors allows a cat to express normal feline behaviors, including the following:
  - Development of own territory with adequate resources
  - Choice of living solitarily or with affiliate cats
  - Scratching and choice of appropriate scratching resources
  - Elimination and choice of preferred elimination substrates and sites
  - Ability to mark (eg, urine mark, scratch, cheek mark) as desired
- ❖ Improvement of emotional health/reduced risk of stress-related behavior problems
- ❖ Increased activity and exercise
- ❖ Environmental enrichment and a more stimulating lifestyle
  - The video, *The Secret Life of Domestic Cats*, by John Bradshaw and Sarah Ellis (see 'Useful resources' on page 754), describes the stimulation of an indoor/outdoor lifestyle
- ❖ Better adherence to preventive treatments given the perception of owners that indoor/outdoor cats need vaccinations and parasite prevention more than indoor-only cats

Understanding the risks and benefits of the different lifestyle options provides veterinarians with the tools necessary to counsel clients on how to minimize health risks to their cat regardless of their choice of indoor-only or indoor/outdoor lifestyle.

## Minimizing the risks

The AAFP Welfare Committee has developed this 'Impact of lifestyle choice on the companion cat: indoor vs outdoor' statement to replace the 2007



**Figure 4** Walking on a leash provides opportunity for a cat to explore and forage outdoors. Courtesy of Joelle Derrick

'Confinement of Owned Indoor Cats' statement. Whether the cat is indoor-only or spends time outdoors, it is essential to provide an environment that meets all the environmental needs of the cat. For more information, see the AAFP and ISFM Feline Environmental Needs Guidelines listed in 'Useful resources' on page 754.

This AAFP Position Statement emphasizes that indoor/outdoor living for cats in an environment that is safe is the best option for pet cats. Safe outdoor living keeps the cat away from most dangers and yet provides a more stimulating environment with potential for more normal feline behavior. Examples include walking the cat on harness and leash (Figure 4), an outdoor enclosure (Figure 5), and a fenced-in or invisible fence around the property. Clients should be educated about these options.

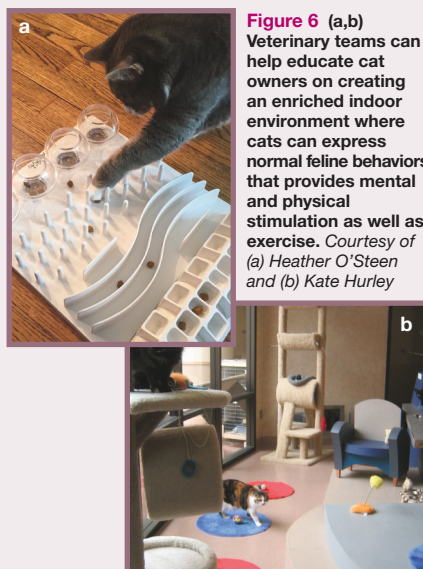
Indoor-only living is an option, but each and every cat's needs must be addressed so that each



**Figure 5** Another example of an outdoor enclosure that can provide a stimulating outdoor living environment while keeping the cat away from most dangers. Courtesy of Martine van Boeijen

has good welfare to include: simulation of hunting and foraging; play; safe territory with vertical space (Figure 6); and appropriate and clean toileting areas as described in the Environmental Needs Guidelines, and the AAFP and ISFM Guidelines for Diagnosing and Solving House-Soiling Behavior in Cats (see 'Useful resources' on page 754). In addition to vertical space and appropriate litter boxes, emulating





**Figure 6 (a,b)** Veterinary teams can help educate cat owners on creating an enriched indoor environment where cats can express normal feline behaviors that provides mental and physical stimulation as well as exercise. Courtesy of (a) Heather O'Steen and (b) Kate Hurley

foraging and hunting is essential.<sup>4</sup> It is the responsibility of the veterinary profession to address feline welfare that meets these cats' needs.

There are some cats with welfare needs that can never be met indoors. Often these are cats that have previously been outdoor-only, have conflict with other animals and/or have particular physical or emotional needs that are not met in the indoor environment. Whenever possible, an outdoor enclosure is preferred (Figure 5). If safe outdoor access is not possible, other considerations must be taken for the welfare of the cat.

Welfare of wildlife is addressed elsewhere, whereas this statement addresses the cat's welfare. To improve safety from their predators, it is recommended that cats be allowed outdoor access only during the day and kept indoors or in an outdoor enclosure with indoor access at night. Young cats and male cats are more likely to engage in activities that increase risk of injury<sup>28,29</sup> and should be monitored more closely.

#### Submitted by:

Ilona Rodan DVM, DABVP (Feline)  
 Carlye Rose DVM, DABVP (Feline;  
 Canine & Feline), CVA  
 Roy Smith DVM

#### Useful resources

- ✦ **The Secret Life of Cats:** [www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/latestnews/2013/secret-life-of-the-cat.html](http://www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/latestnews/2013/secret-life-of-the-cat.html)
- ✦ **AAFP and ISFM Feline Environmental Needs Guidelines:** [www.catvets.com/guidelines/practice-guidelines/environmental-needs-guidelines](http://www.catvets.com/guidelines/practice-guidelines/environmental-needs-guidelines)
- ✦ **AAFP and ISFM Guidelines for Diagnosing and Solving House-Soiling Behavior in Cats:** [www.catvets.com/guidelines/practice-guidelines/house-soiling](http://www.catvets.com/guidelines/practice-guidelines/house-soiling)

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