

Environmental enrichment

Cats have a number of basic needs that must be met if they are to stay happy and healthy.

1. Companionship. Cats require plenty of social contact with owners. This can be achieved by access to the house through a cat door (and tunnel if applicable). Set aside time each day to interact with your cat, for instance patting, playing with, or grooming him/her.

2. A well-informed owner. You should find out as much as you can about cat behaviour and care. There are many useful books and websites available. For instance, visit www.nssvet.org/ici for information on cat care, indoor housing requirements, and solving behavioural problems. Talk to your vet about health and nutritional requirements for cats.

3. Space. Cats prefer to have their own 'personal space', and this is particularly important to prevent aggression in group housing situations. Each cat requires his/her own area that provides all the essentials (food, water, bed, resting places, litter tray etc).

4. Sleeping, resting and viewing areas. Cats like to spend a lot of time sleeping and resting in quiet areas where they feel safe and secure. Cat beds can be purchased, or blankets, towels, pillows etc can be provided. High-sided cat beds and boxes are useful to give cats a sense of 'privacy'. Cats use elevated areas as vantage points from which to observe their surroundings. These are essential, and can be provided by access to platforms, shelves, climbing posts or windowsills. Some cats love to watch birds (you can place a bird bath/feeder outside the window or enclosure), insects (try planting flowers to attract them), fish in aquariums and even nature footage on TV!

5. Food and water. Ensure bowls are located away from the litter tray. Many cats like having their water bowl in a separate area to their food bowl. Cats can also be given grass to chew (non toxic varieties such as oats, wheat, rye-grass).

6. Litter boxes. Each cat requires its own litter box that is big enough for easy access and is located in a safe and private area (if a cat is startled while using the box, he/she may not use that box in future). You may have to experiment to find out your cat's preferences for covered or uncovered boxes, type of litter and depth of litter. Cats are very clean animals that do not like using dirty litter boxes, so boxes will need to be scooped daily, and cleaned with water and non-scented soap once a week. A thin layer of baking soda placed on the bottom of the box will help absorb odours between scoopings.

7. Scratching posts. Scratching is a natural behaviour for cats, that sharpens claws, stretches muscles and leaves scent marks. Your cat will need a scratching post, which can be horizontal or vertical, and can be made from sisal (a coarse natural fibre), carpet, cardboard or wood. You can encourage your cat to use the scratching post (rather than other things like the furniture!) by putting catnip on it. Cats have an excellent sense of smell, and many cats love catnip, which can be supplied as a dried herb or grown fresh in pots.

8. Toys and exercise. Exercise your cat through play (or even by training your cat to walk outside on a harness and leash!). Cats enjoy toys that move or make noise, and remind them of prey such as mice, birds and insects. They need a variety of toys they can roll, pounce on, capture and bite, and toys should be rotated regularly to prevent boredom. Some examples of simple and cheap toys (that are safe for cats to play with) are crumpled paper balls, paper bags to explore, cardboard boxes, and toilet paper tubes. Try stuffing old cotton socks with cotton balls and some catnip, and tying a knot in the end. You can also buy furry toys (eg in the shape of a mouse) that make noises and can be rolled, balls (eg ping pong balls, or balls that can be filled with food or treats), sticks with toys dangling from the end of a string etc.



For more information on being a responsible cat owner, visit www.cairns.qld.gov.au/pets or follow us on Facebook @CairnsPets