



Peninsula Humane Society & SPCA

“What is there to do around here?” How to Play with Your Cat

You give your cat food, medical care, a clean litter box, a scratching post, and, of course, affection. You share your home with her. You brush her and tell her she's the world's best cat. Surely that's everything she needs, right?

A HUNTING I MUST GO

Just a little time with a cat will tell you that she also needs outlets for her natural hunting instincts. Cats are among the most effective of predators, spectacularly well adapted to see, hear, smell, and feel their prey and to pounce and seize them. And if you're good at something, you want to do it! So part of *your* job as your cat's caretaker is to satisfy her need to hunt.

Fortunately, you don't have to let mice loose in your house for her to track down. You can fulfill your cat's instinctive need to hunt by providing toys, opportunities to stalk and pounce, and special places for her to experience the thrill of the outdoors without the danger. As a bonus, an active and interested cat is much less likely to put on unhealthy weight.

“PREY”

Playing comes naturally to cats, bringing out all their instincts and giving them intense pleasure as they use their natural abilities to stalk and “kill.” Because they are so motivated, cats can have fun with almost anything that “runs away” (like a soft rubber ball or ping pong ball), skitters across the floor (like a wadded up piece of paper), peeks or disappears around a corner (like a stuffed animal or a string) or even offers a hiding place from which to lurk and pounce (like a paper bag). You can also buy toys designed to mimic the prey cats find attractive:

- Mouse-shaped toys, often stuffed with catnip
- Longer stuffed toys that let a cat grab and kick
- Wand toys with feathers on the end to remind cats of birds
- Crackly, crunchy toy insects

- Wand toys with felt or string tails to suggest lizards and snakes
- Ball toys to appeal to the “anything that moves” cat
- Puzzle toys that keep the enticing object just out of reach, like a ball in an enclosed track

Most cats will give all of these objects a few minutes of attention, and will likely have a favorite or two. You'll need to experiment and find out whether your cat is a string chaser, a feather fanatic, or mouse maniac. Only about half of all cats respond to catnip, and then only when they reach the age of 6 months. Some cats may overreact to catnip, becoming too aggressive, while others may play wildly for a few minutes, and then mellow out. You'll want to learn your cat's toy preferences and responses before investing in all those cute toys.

PLAY

Some cats initiate play on their own, batting balls around or carrying favorite stuffed toys from room to room in a triumphal march. Others need some stimulus to get them going, and even self-starters enjoy the variety that only a wily opponent can provide. And that's where you come in.

Interactive play with your cat can be the most fun both of you have all day. Toss out a stuffed mouse or crumpled paper ball. Waggle a wand toy to give your cat a reason to pounce, stretch, and box while you are safely at a distance from his busy paws. Toss ping pong balls down the stairs or into paper bags and watch the action. Drag a toy or string behind you to give your cat the thrill of pursuit while you go about your business. Engage him in play “hunts” with soft balls, stuffed “mice,” wand toys with feathers or felt strips, scrunched paper balls, tissue paper, and the ever-popular paper bag. Stage a few toys around the house to take advantage of the impulse of the moment or get creative with “found” toys like the ribbon you are tying around a package or the bathrobe tie that dangles at just the right height.



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While you may often be the one who initiates these play sessions, be ready to respond to cues from your cat: the plaintive meow or appealing paw. Occasionally, your cat may even solicit a little game of chase with a Halloween-arched back. Just make sure not to scare her for real.

To be safe, think defensively about what sort of trouble your cat might get into as she plays. Remove the handles from paper bags, for example, to avoid an entangled cat being pursued around the house by a monster. Wand toys with string or felt strips pose the same hazard and may cause your cat to injure herself trying to get away. Put ribbon or string away to prevent a cat on the prowl from swallowing it.

There is another reason to put most toys away between play sessions: to preserve the novelty factor. Bring them out again one by one. After a few days, your cat may find that squeaky toy fascinating again.

PLAYING FOR KEEPS

You may well find that your cat becomes more playful as a result of your efforts to keep him entertained. He may bring his toys over to you or wait at a favorite spot and call for a round of “swat the mousie.” He’ll be slimmer, more alert, and healthier.

Whatever routine works for you and your cat, take his need to play seriously. His health and happiness depend upon it.

For more info, call our free Behavior Helpline (650/340-7022 x783 or, for Spanish, x786) or consider a low-cost consultation. To make a consultation appointment, call 650/340-7022 x667. The PHS/SPCA Behavior Department, like many shelter programs, is funded by donations.