

ENVIRONMENTAL ENRICHMENT FOR CATS

INTRODUCTION: Outdoor (or outdoor-indoor) cats are usually very active, can choose their environment and are able to express normal behaviours. However, most cats in Hong Kong live indoor sedentary life styles, and their welfare can be compromised if they are not given the freedom to express natural behaviours and are deprived of the ability to take “time-out” if they need it. So it’s important to create a “cat friendly” environment at home. You, your cat(s) and your furniture will reap the benefits!

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS?

Physical Stimulation: fit, active cats are at a lower risk of many obesity related diseases such as diabetes, arthritis and heart disease.

Mental Stimulation: cats have great athletic abilities, strong hunting instincts and other behaviours e.g. scratching and climbing that they enjoy expressing if given the opportunity. Under-stimulated cats on the other hand can become aggressive, over-groom or even develop bladder disease.

HOW TO ENRICH YOUR CAT’S LIFE AND ENVIRONMENT: The key point to remember is every cat is an individual and you will need to experiment with what they find most fun.

- **Cats are designed to work hard for their food:** instead of just filling their food bowl twice a day, consider moving their food around the apartment (lock the cat in another room when you hide the bowl). There are also puzzle feeders available, or you could make your own. A word of warning though, take care with ill or senior cats, they must not be made to work too hard for their food!
- **Cats love hunting:** cats love to jump and chase “prey”. You can use a variety of toys such as feathers or a soft mouse on string. A white light pointer on the wall is a great way to get your cat to chase something.
- **A vertical world:** sitting in a high place makes a cat feel safe, as they can see all around. It a good idea to provide different levels using shelves, steps or cat-trees especially in a multi-cat households to prevent stress. Windowsills also provide elevation but great care must be taken to prevent cats falling out!
- **Cats need hideaways:** sheltered sleeping areas and other secluded options for escaping and hiding are important to cats so they can take “time-out” when they want to. Even a cardboard box will suffice.
- **Companionship:** cats often socialise together and will not be stressed so long as there are plenty of resources such as feeding stations, resting places and litter trays. Introducing a new cat can take time if your cat is suspicious of other cats but a second cat can make a huge difference to a cat’s life, especially if they are left alone during the day.
- **Massage:** massaging or grooming your pet is a great way for both of you to relax!
- **Born to scratch:** cats instinctively keep their claws in a “deadly” condition and need to scratch. Provide a dedicated, sturdy post or scratching box or else your legs and furniture will suffer!
- **Tunnels and Boxes:** cats love tunnels which can be constructed or purchased (or just a simple cardboard box). In addition food can be placed inside to get that hunting instinct honed!
- **Moving objects:** anything that is new to a cat and moves when played with can be fun and stimulating. Polystyrene balls, leaves, bird feathers etc. are all potential playthings. But always under supervision!
- **Mouse computer games:** consider stimulating your cat’s vision with an iPad running mouse games or DVDS of prey items (with sound effects). Click here for more details: <https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/cat-fishing-2/id494384429?mt=8>
- **Water fountains:** changing a water bowl to a water fountain can make drinking more interesting. In addition it may encourage a greater water intake with potential health benefits.
- **Litter trays:** the general rule of thumb to avoid stress/competition is for every cat one litter tray plus one extra i.e. 3 cats need 4 trays! Cleanliness is also paramount to avoid urinary disorders.

**ENVIRONMENTAL ENRICHMENT IS NOT A LUXURY, IT IS A MUST. MANY CATS LIVE VERY DULL LIVES!
FOR MORE INFORMATION PLEASE CONSULT WITH A VETERINARY SURGEON**