

Plucking up the courage to let your cat into the great outdoors

There are lots of reasons you may be considering letting your cat outside. It could be that you have just taken on a new cat or have moved house with an existing cat. No doubt you may be concerned that a recent relocation will have inevitably caused you cat confusion and stress – will they just run away? You may not even know if your cat has ever been outside before – will they be “worldly wise”? Whatever the situation, it is understandable that it is a nerve racking time for any cat owner.

As a vet I see all too often what a scary world it can be out there for a cat. You may be undecided about whether an outdoor life is suitable for your cat. If you would like to discuss this further then please contact me. There are other options available and I have lots of resources, advice and experience on this subject. Many cats enjoy lives as completely indoor cats and some still go out under supervision. This is a perfectly valid option in some circumstances but the logistics have to be considered properly so that you are sure to take into account both your cat’s temperament and their physical and psychological needs.

Assuming you’ve decided to take the plunge and let your cat out, please keep reading ☺

Understanding the need to take things slowly but surely

After any relocation it can take us a while for our new surroundings to feel like home. Rest assured that most cats *will* settle in their new indoor surroundings given time and the right approach. It is worth taking a moment to consider how well each cat has coped with any change in its life so far? This will have been influenced by lots of things like their background, temperaments and hopefully the measures you’ve taken to reduce stress by making your cat’s new home “cat friendly” (eg calming plug-ins, secure hiding spots etc). I have a wealth of information on this last subject and have dedicated advice sheets if you need them – **A Recipe for Happy Cats, How To Make Your Cat Stress Less and Purr More**. My website also has a dedicated are on **Avoiding Stress** and making your home “cat friendly”.

Cats are creatures of habit and tend to feel secure once they have developed a routine that they feel comfortable with, which inevitably takes time – it will not happen within a few days. As a rule of thumb I would not advise letting any cat outside unless they have **settled indoors first and this takes in most cases at least 14 days and in many cases a month is better**. As tempting as it may be to let your cat out sooner, you do run the risk of them fleeing if startled without yet knowing how to return home.

There is no truth in the old belief that smearing butter on cats’ paws will discourage them from straying. Most cats do not like having wet/sticky paws and the experience will only make your cat feel even more stressed. On the subject of wandering though, if your new home is only a few streets away from your old one, then there is a chance your cat(s) may return to familiar territory. Cats have been known to travel long distances to their old home. Before moving, ask the new owners of your old house and any neighbours who knew your cats to keep a look out in case they come back. Always make sure that they have your telephone number in case you need to come back and collect one of

them. Ask them not to welcome and encourage your cats (eg no feeding or stroking). Sometimes they may even need to deter them with a few flicks of water.

Checklist for The Great Outdoors

“Pre-flight” safety and health checks:

- Microchip working with updated contact details?**
- Quick release safety collar with contact details on the tag and “I’m microchipped”**
- Vaccinations up to date – especially young cats/kittens - have they finished their full course of injections** at least 7 days ago? Is their annual booster up to date and critically does it include Leukaemia Virus (FeLV) cover?
- Parasite control** organized – a product that covers **fleas, ticks, mites and kills worm** will protect **both you and your cat** if applied at regular intervals. Ask me about a clever new product that does all this in an easy to give monthly spot-on.
- Neutered more than 2 weeks ago?**
- Pet insurance policy paid and new address details updated?** Your residential address can affect the price of your monthly premium – you definitely don’t want to find out that you’ve moved to a more expensive insurance postcode and have been underpaying your premium after your cat gets injured/unwell!
- I advocate keeping your cats **indoors between dusk and dawn** as this is the most common time for them to predate wildlife, wander and suffer injuries from other cats and motor vehicles or worse!
- There is always a risk of your cats coming into conflict with any existing cats in the neighbourhood, particularly until they have found their place in the local pecking order and established the boundaries of their new territory. The more cats there are in the neighbourhood the greater the chance of fighting, so keep a close eye on them for **tell-tale signs like scratches/scabs or painful spots**. Some cats will get a **fever** which usually makes cats **less keen to eat**.

You might like to surround your garden with familiar smells/items to help your cat find its way home:

- Leave your cat's favourite toy/piece of their (unwashed) bedding in your garden, sheltered from rain.
- Also leave out an unwashed item of your clothing, which will have your smell on it, again in a sheltered place.
- Put the contents of your Hoover bag in assorted spots around the garden.
- Place small amounts of used litter from your cat's tray in areas where you won't mind them toileting. This should ensure it smells of them rather than any local/previous cats.

Crunch Time!

A bit like moving house in the first place, some forethought and a step by step plan of action is always a good idea when letting your cat outdoors for the first time.

- Check the **weather** forecast is good
- Choose a day when you're available to **supervise** – weekends are good for this!
- Start **early** in the day when everything is **calm and quiet** – think about occupying young children inside, and be mindful of things like busy traffic times, barking dogs, bin men or neighbours mowing lawns etc
- Preferably choose a time when your cat is **hungry** (before a meal is due)
- Take some of your cats' favourite **treats and toys** and let them explore under supervision first – you will be more relaxed if you know you have a way of getting your cat's attention.
- You can even try feeding them small meals outside for a while so that they associate positive vibes with their new outdoor surroundings.
- **Don't rush** - I wouldn't advise picking your cat up and plonking it outside. **If your cat is not used to wearing a harness/lead then this is not the time to purchase one as it will just scare your cat and distrust you at a time when you want it to want to come home!** It is always best to take an unhurried approach and allow them to discover the outdoors under their own terms. If need be, use gentle persuasion like treats, closing escape routes into the rest of the house and even distancing yourself by going outdoors but staying close.
- **Take a step back**...don't follow your cat everywhere like an overprotective parent, better to pretend to ignore them but be in eyesight so you still know what they're up to. Get a good vantage point and take a seat or if the weather's nice sprawl on a blanket in the sunshine on the lawn so you are down at cat level and not just a pair of feet! Read a book or sip some tea and relax.
- **...and breathe!** It is natural that your cat may initially dart under a shrub ...or the gap between the shed and the fence that you didn't know existed until now! They like to retreat and review their surroundings from afar (a bit like when they arrived inside the new house for the first time). Inevitably it will only be a matter of time before curiosity gets the better of them and they slowly venture out, usually slinking with their belly to the ground.
- Don't be offended if they seem to ignore you – there will be a lot for your cat to take in and they may be preoccupied with looking out for potential threats and exploring their surroundings.
- Always keep a **clear route of entry back into the house** (that means keep the back door open). This way when they decide to come out they know the exact route they need to return to safety. Longer term, it is worthwhile having two separate entry and exit points to the property (ie cat flaps, windows) to avoid the risk of other cats intimidating your cats – you want them to feel like they can get indoors/outdoors unhindered.
- **Begin with several short excursions outside**, then once you are happy your cat is confident at finding their way back indoors reward them with fuss/treats/play and finish the session on a positive note. For some cats this **may take several days to several weeks** depending on the individual cat/owner.