

Why Cats Love Boxes and Other Small Spaces

It's fascinating to watch a full-grown cat squeeze herself into a tiny space, and you're not alone if you've ever wondered 'why?' You may be surprised to learn that there are instinctual behaviors at play, and your kitty may not even realize why herself.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- If you know anything about cats, you know they love boxes and other small, confined spaces. A team of researchers discovered the reason by studying shelter cats
- The researchers learned that newly arrived cats with access to hiding boxes adapted more quickly to their environment than those without boxes, plus they were less stressed and more interactive with humans
- Cardboard boxes and other small spaces also help cats stay warm in environments that are typically cooler than they like it
- Housecats feel most comfortable when their environment is 86 to 97 degrees F. In this temperature range, your kitty doesn't need to expend metabolic energy trying to either warm up or cool down
- Cardboard boxes provide insulation, and small spaces in general require your cat to curl up, which preserves body heat

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There is no shortage of videos on the Internet that demonstrate the fascination cats have for small, enclosed spaces, and cardboard boxes in particular.

And what's not to love about the sight of a rather large cat stuffing herself into a much smaller container ... or a kitty diving head first into a cardboard box? But as silly as cats can act when presented with an empty carton, there's actually a quite practical reason for their box-love.

Access to Hiding Boxes Reduces Stress in Shelter Cats

A team of researchers from the faculty of Veterinary Medicine, University of Utrecht, The Netherlands, conducted a study of stress in shelter cats. Among their discoveries was that access to hiding boxes reduces feline stress, especially in kitties just arriving at the shelter.¹

The researchers decided to examine shelters because they are known to be extremely stressful environments for cats. The study involved 19 newly arrived cats at a Dutch animal shelter, only 10 of which were given access to hiding boxes.

By day 3 of the cats’ shelter stay, the researchers observed a noticeable difference between the two groups. The cats with hiding boxes were acclimating faster to the shelter environment, were significantly less stressed than the kitties without boxes, and showed more interest in interacting with humans.

According to researcher Claudia Vinke, an ethologist at Utrecht University and the lead author of the study, this makes perfect sense since the universal feline response to a stressful situation is to withdraw and hide. “Hiding is a behavioral strategy of the species to cope with environmental changes and stressors,” says Vinke.²

When cats in the wild feel threatened, they head for trees, dens, or caves to seek safety. Captive kitties don’t have that option, so hiding in boxes may be an adaptation.

Boxes and Other Tight Spaces Preserve Body Heat

If you’re owned by a cat, you’ve probably noticed that boxes aren’t the only small spaces little Garfield likes to inhabit. It’s not unusual to find kitty curled up in a shoe on the closet floor, a bowl or coffee mug on the kitchen counter, an open shopping bag, a laundry basket, and even the bathroom sink.

As it turns out, there’s a good reason for this strange behavior as well: cats like it hot. Housecats feel most comfortable when their environment is 86 to 97 degrees F. In this temperature range, your kitty doesn’t need to expend metabolic energy trying to either warm up or cool down.

However, most humans require a significantly cooler temperature range to be comfortable — typically around 66 to 77 degrees F. Since most of us set our home thermostats to suit human family members, the cats who live with us need to find ways to warm up their immediate environment.

Cardboard boxes provide insulation, and small spaces in general require your cat to curl up, which preserves body heat.

How You Can Help Provide Hiding Boxes for Shelter Cats

The Maddie’s® Shelter Medicine Program at Cornell University’s College of Veterinary Medicine provides care for homeless animals, and trains veterinary students and shelter staff in how to handle the unique challenges of keeping shelter pets healthy both physically and emotionally.

The experts at Maddie’s® Shelter believe shelter cats benefit greatly when given the opportunity to hide when stressed. They recommend that shelters provide hiding boxes in the form of a simple cardboard box, a Hide-Perch-and-Go box, a plastic box or cage insert, a plastic carrier, or a commercially available cat den.

10 Reasons Cats Make Great Pets

1. Cats are very sensitive. They’re independent thinkers and actors. They’re very elegant and beautiful to watch.
2. According to Dr. Dennis Turner, an expert on the feline-human bond, each feline-human pair has an individual way of communicating. This is in part due to the wide variety of behaviors kitties use to “talk” to their human family.³

3. Cats follow their guardian's lead in determining how much involvement they have with each other. Some cat owners want a lot of interaction with their pet, others don't have much time to devote or simply prefer less interaction. Kitties are quite adaptable to their humans' needs.
4. Cats seem to understand the importance of balance in their relationship with their humans. The more agreeable you are when your cat wants attention, the more your cat will be agreeable to your wishes at other times. It's a give-and-take partnership.
5. When your cat interacts with you, she can recognize when you're sad or anxious. She responds by increasing her communication signals, which can include rubbing against you more aggressively, or meowing loudly. This strong reaction can be quite comforting when you're upset.
6. Cats are easy to housetrain. Just tuck a litter box with clean litter in an out-of-the-way spot in your home, and voila ... Fluffy takes it from there!
7. Cats are fastidious creatures. No need to worry about a dirty, smelly kitty rolling around on your carpet or your upholstered furniture!
8. Your cat won't lay a guilt trip on you. Unlike your dog, who will drop his tail and look at you with a dejected expression when you can't stop what you're doing to play with him, if you need to put your kitty off for a bit, she'll wander away, not seeming to mind. You'll find her later stretched out contentedly in her favorite napping spot.
9. Cats are portable. Most kitties don't relish trips in the car or visits to the vet, but if you have a cat carrier, it's a whole lot easier to move a 12-pound cat from point A to point B than an uncooperative 50- or 60-pound pooch.
10. Your cat will keep you warm, even in the dead of winter. As most folks owned by cats can attest, there's nothing that compares to the coziness of a kitty curled up in your lap ... or draped over your shoulder ... or stretched out on your legs as you fall asleep.

Sources and References

[Phys.org](#) February 8, 2015

¹ [Applied Animal Behaviour Science](#), November 2014, Vol. 160, pp 86-93

² [WIRED](#) February 3, 2015

³ [Schweiz Arch Tierheilkd.](#) 1991;133(2):63-70
