

Don't Let Your Cat Do This, It's a 'Virus Magnet'

And it could also lead to other pathogens that cause serious diseases. Plus, the diabetes spiking mistake made by 58% of cat owners, which can lead to high blood pressure.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Even the most loving, well-intentioned cat parents can make mistakes in the care of their feline companions
- One fairly common mistake is allowing a cat to roam freely outdoors, which presents a significant risk to his health and longevity
- Another misstep is allowing kitty to grow overweight. This sets a cat up for any number of obesity-related diseases and a shortened lifespan
- A third mistake some cat guardians make is in not insuring their pet is properly hydrated through a moisture-rich, species-appropriate diet, and a constant supply of clean, fresh water
- Kibble-fed kitties tend to be chronically dehydrated, which places tremendous stress on their kidneys throughout their lives

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Most loving and committed cat guardians do their best to take excellent care of their feline companions. If a mistake is made and kitty suffers as a result, it's usually because the cat's parent didn't have the experience or knowledge to avoid the problem.

The following are some common mistakes many cat owners inadvertently make, and tips on how to fix them.

Allowing Your Cat to Roam Outside Unsupervised

While it's true living indoors isn't an entirely natural environment for your cat, letting him run around loose outside actually presents much more risk to his health and longevity.

Housecats with free access to the outdoors are much more likely to be exposed to viruses and other pathogens that cause serious disease. They can also be inadvertently poisoned, or become prey for dogs and wild animals like coyotes.

Fighting among outdoor cats is common, and someone has to come out the loser. Usually it's the kitty who doesn't live outside full time and hasn't honed his street-fighting skills.

Cats with access to the outdoors in winter commonly seek warmth in hazardous places, like the wheel well or up inside the hood of a parked vehicle. Kitties have also been known to dart out into traffic after being startled or because another animal is chasing them.

How to fix this mistake:

- Enrich your cat's indoor environment. Enriching a kitty's surroundings is about creating minimally stressful living quarters and reducing or eliminating unusual external events that cause anxiety.

Any change to her daily routine is experienced by your cat as a stress-inducing unusual external event. The goal is to minimize change and maximize the amount of control kitty feels over her situation.

Enrichment may also mean adding or changing things in your pet's environment that encourage her to perform or mimic natural feline activities like climbing to a high spot or hunting “prey” in the form of a **cat toy**.

Because change is unnerving for your cat, nothing should be forced on her. If you decide to purchase a climbing tree, for example, place it in an appropriate spot and let your cat discover it on her own terms.

- Supervise your cat outdoors. If you happen to have a safe, fully enclosed porch or patio area that prevents your cat from getting out and other animals from getting in, your kitty can enjoy spending time outside in good weather. Don't leave a cat in an outdoor enclosure if you're not home though.

Alternatively, you could take your cat outside on a harness and leash to provide some additional sensory stimulation.

2. Using Harsh Discipline

This is a bad idea regardless of the animal involved, but kitties tend to be especially sensitive to a raised voice or rough handling. Rather than change her behavior, there's a very good chance a punitive approach will cause kitty to fear you and steer clear of you.

How to fix this mistake:

- Just as with dogs, positive reinforcement training is the way to go with cats. Treats, praise, and petting will encourage kitty to perform more good behaviors more often.
- In addition, it's very important to keep your pet's stress level low. Cats who live in low-stress, enriched environments tend to be significantly happier and physically healthier than kitties with a stressful home life.

3. Allowing Your Cat to Get Fat

The majority of housecats in the U.S. are either overweight or obese. According to research by the Association for Pet Obesity Prevention (APOPP), 58% of American kitties are overweight, and 28% are considered obese.¹

It's important to understand that food does not equal love, and in fact, overfeeding your pet is not a loving gesture.

Overweight cats often don't live as long as cats at a normal weight. The shortened lifespan can be the result of one or more obesity-related diseases. In addition, carrying around extra weight on a small feline frame places tremendous stress on joints, tendons and ligaments. This can cause arthritis.

Overweight cats have fat lurking in places you can't see. For example, accumulations of fat deposits in the chest and abdomen can restrict the ability of your kitty's lungs to expand, making breathing difficult.

Obesity is the biggest risk factor for diabetes mellitus in cats. Overweight kitties can also develop hypertension (high blood pressure), which can negatively impact major organ systems.

Overweight and obese cats are often predisposed to fatty liver disease, a life-threatening disorder also called hepatic lipidosis. Left untreated, the liver ultimately fails, and cats can and do die from this condition.

Your overweight kitty is also at greater risk for feline lower urinary tract disease (FLUTD), which can take the form of cystitis (inflammation of the bladder), urinary tract infections, urinary stones, urethral plugs, cancer and other disorders.

Overweight cats are also at higher risk for surgical complications, decreased immune function, skin disorders, constipation, and certain types of cancer.

How to fix this mistake:

- Feed a moisture dense, portion-controlled, balanced, and species-appropriate diet. Most overweight cats are fed a dry diet and are often free-fed, which means they're grazing day and night on food that is keeping them fat.
- Make sure your kitty has at least one thing to climb on in your home, like a multi-level cat tree or tower. Invest in laser toys and interactive cat toys to motivate kitty to move around.
- Turn mealtime into a workout session. Put your kitty's food in a bowl, and then walk around the house with it, with her following close behind. Stop from time to time and offer her small bites of food. After 10 to 20 minutes and a good little workout for kitty, you can put the bowl on the floor and let her finish up her meal.

4. Not Paying Proper Attention to the Litterbox

Cats are fastidious creatures and appreciate (demand) a clean bathroom. This goes double for kitties in their senior years. Ignore your cat's box at your peril, because he won't be the first feline to find another, cleaner spot to relieve himself if he gets fed up. Hopefully his alternate spot won't involve that new Persian rug or your bed pillow!

Think about your own reaction when you're forced to use a dirty restroom. How would it feel to have no choice but to use that dirty restroom every day? Eventually, you'd find an alternative — right? Another reason to scoop the litterbox consistently is so you can monitor your cat's "output" for any signs of a problem (diarrhea, constipation, little to no urine, massive amounts of urine, etc.)

How to fix this mistake:

- Especially if you use unscented litter — You need to be religious about scooping the box. Scoop at least twice a day of all feces and urine clumps.

Each time you scoop, remove any litter stuck to the sides or bottom of the box with a damp paper towel. Dry the area thoroughly before scooping dry litter back over it. Keeping the sides and floor of the box clean and dry will cut down on odor and mess, and may help extend the time between full box clean-outs.

I also recommend disposing of all used litter and cleaning the box once a week or every two weeks at a minimum. It's important to wash the box thoroughly to remove as much odor as possible, so that kitty isn't turned off by lingering smells. Wash the box with plain hot water. If you use soap, choose a natural, fragrance-free variety. Avoid any cleaning product that is scented or contains potential toxins.

5. Ignoring Your Cat's Hydration Needs

Healthy cats aren't big water drinkers, since they're designed by nature to get most of their moisture from the food they eat (small prey animals are about 70% water.)

However, kibble-fed cats don't get anywhere near the moisture they require from their diet, so those are the kitties you'll most often find at the water bowl. In addition, cats with certain disorders (e.g., kidney disease) also typically drink more water than healthy kitties.

How to fix this mistake:

- Provide your cat with clean, fresh water every day. Consider placing a few extra bowls around the house to encourage her to drink more. Or consider investing in a pet drinking fountain if she seems to prefer moving water to the still water in her bowl.
- If you're still feeding kibble, try to slowly transition your cat to a moisture-rich, balanced, and species-appropriate diet. Kibble-fed kitties tend to be chronically dehydrated, which places tremendous stress on their kidneys throughout their lives.

Sources and References

[VetStreet November 13, 2015](#)

¹ [Association for Pet Obesity Prevention](#)
