

# One Tiny Toy, a Big Boost for Bored Cats

Their wild ancestors hunt and forage for food, and a life that doesn't require those natural skills can lead to boredom, obesity, and even behavioral issues.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Food puzzles are a great way to spice up your indoor kitty's life and encourage him to use his hunting and foraging skills
- Food puzzles can be used for wet cat food (recommended), and can be either store-bought or homemade
- Case studies with food puzzles show they can be very beneficial for overweight/obese kitties and cats with behavioral problems
- The researchers recommend providing several different types of puzzles to keep cats engaged, and initially loading up the puzzles with food until your cat gets the hang of it
- If you have more than one cat, it's advisable for each kitty to have his own food puzzle, and if there's a dog in the family, you'll want to keep him away from the cats and their puzzles at mealtime

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One of the problems feline specialists and loving cat parents are trying to solve is how to help indoor-only kitties stay healthy and emotionally balanced while living in captivity.

Indoor cats are generally much safer and longer lived than outdoor and wild cats, but the trade-off is too often a host of health and behavioral problems.

## For Indoor-Only Cats, the Struggle Is Real

Cats are the most popular pet worldwide, and have lived with humans for 10,000 years or so, according to some experts. But despite their long and close association with us, unlike dogs, cats turn feral without human contact.

*"Cats have retained their hunting skills and they're less dependent on humans for their source of food," says Wes Warren, Ph.D., of the Genome Institute at Washington University in St. Louis.*

*"With most of the modern breeds of dog, if you were to release them into the wild, most would not survive."<sup>1</sup>*

If, as many experts believe, domestication involves complex genetic and behavioral changes, then cats can't be considered domesticated, according to Warren.

There are affectionate cats, but there are also plenty of wary and aggressive cats, and he believes the spectrum of **feline behavior** is wider than we see in dogs. "Cats only come to you for affection when they feel like it," he says. "They pretty much take care of themselves."<sup>2</sup>

So with all that said, it's no wonder indoor living can present a significant challenge to so many kitties. According to online site Gizmodo:

*"Indoor housing has been linked to an assortment of health problems, including chronic lower urinary tract issues, obesity, diabetes, and troublesome behaviors such as aggression, house-soiling, and attention seeking."*<sup>3</sup>

Several of those health problems are also closely linked to the diet many cats are fed, specifically kibble and free feeding.

In the ongoing effort to understand how to better enrich the environment of indoor cats, researchers at the University of California (UC) at Berkeley have studied the use of food puzzles that require kitties to work for their food.<sup>4</sup>

Food puzzles were originally developed for zoo and laboratory animals. Then they became popular with dog owners who use them to keep their pets busy and mentally stimulated.

The use of food puzzles with cats is a fairly new concept. The UC Berkeley researchers believe the puzzles appeal to the feline hunting instinct and therefore can make cats more physically active and less stressed.

According to study authors, "Presenting some challenge that is appropriate to an animal's natural ecology and matched to its skill level is likely to provide cognitive, physical and behavioral benefits."<sup>5</sup>

## **Food Puzzles Can Be Store-Bought or Homemade, Mobile or Stationary**

The researchers were interested in food puzzles because the guidelines for the care of domestic cats suggest kitties need to be able to "... express the predatory sequence to the extent possible, including active acquisition of food."

There are a variety of food puzzles on the market that can be used with either wet food or dry food, according to the researchers.

There are mobile puzzles designed to be rolled or pushed using the nose or a paw. They typically have one or more holes in them, and some can be adjusted to make the release of food easier or harder.

There are also stationary puzzles, which are typically larger and have sturdy bases as well as holes, cups or channels. Cats need to fish the food out with their paws or lick it out (which mimics how feline predators use their jaw muscles to tear flesh from bone).

# Veterinary Case Studies Show the Benefits of Food Puzzles for Kitties

The UC Berkeley study includes a **chart** (see pages 3 and 4) with over 30 cases from the authors' veterinary practices in which food puzzles benefitted cats with specific health or behavioral problems. One obese 8-year-old male cat lost 20% of his body weight within 12 months of being introduced to food puzzles.

Another older obese kitty lost over 6% of his body weight in less than four months and also improved his mobility, and two younger overweight cats each lost 11% of their body weight over the course of a year. Other successes include resolution of redirected aggression and substantial improvement in noise phobia in a 9-year-old cat, and significant improvement in a 2-year-old kitty who was afraid of people, including his owners.

According to study authors (and no surprise to anyone with cats), kitties have their own individual preferences in food puzzles, so trial-and-error will be necessary in many cases before settling on the right type of puzzle.

The researchers also recommend providing several different types of puzzles to keep cats engaged, and initially loading up the puzzles with food until your cat gets the hang of it. As she gets better at getting to the food, you can decrease the amount. Finally, if you have more than one cat, the study authors suggest that each kitty have his own food puzzle, and if there's a dog in the family, you'll want to keep him away from the cats and their puzzles at mealtime.

## Sources and References

<sup>1</sup> [Smithsonian.com, April 30, 2015](#)  
<sup>2</sup> [Slate, July 5, 2015](#)  
<sup>3</sup> [Gizmodo, September 1, 2016](#)  
<sup>4, 5</sup> [Journal of Feline Medicine and Surgery \(2016\) 18, 723-732](#)

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