



Paw Prints

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Columnist

Walk your cat on a leash

You adopted her as a tiny kitten and now she's eight months old. She's an indoor cat and it's gotten nice outside. The windows are open so fresh air circulates around your home. Kitty loves to curl up on her window perch in the sunshine taking in all the glorious aromas of the great outdoors. But lately she's been lurking by the front door just waiting for the perfect escape. Everybody has a touch of cabin fever, and, after all, living inside isn't an entirely natural environment for felines.

It's hard for Kitty to express her innate urge to explore, climb, and hunt prey from her perch at the window.

Unfortunately, letting her run around loose outside is unacceptably risky.

Cats with free access to the outdoors are much more likely to be exposed to viruses and other disease-causing agents — not to mention poisons, predators, and speeding traffic.

Indoor cats need environmental enrichment, and one of the ways to broaden your kitty's horizons is to get her outdoors on a harness and leash.

Walking your cat on a leash offers her safe access to enjoy all the sights and sounds of the great outdoors. It's also an excellent way of revving up her exercise routine and can alleviate boredom-related behavior problems. Outdoor activity provides fun experiences for pet parents and their feline friends, and enhances their quality of life.

According to Dr. Frank McMillan, director of animal well-being studies at Best Friends Animal Society, walking outside can be great fun for cats — it gives them new things to see and sniff out.

So, if you want your cat to join you on outdoor adventures, you first need to find her a harness that fits comfortably and teach her to walk on a leash.

There's no question that a cat's personality plays an important role in deciding if she's game for the fresh-air challenge. An adventurous cat will probably go for the opportunity, while a skittish scaredy-cat may resist, preferring the view from her kitty condo or perch instead.

It will probably be easier to introduce the idea of a harness to a kitten or younger cat than an older one. But either way, patience is the key. Cats do everything at their own pace.

The key to getting your feline friend used to a harness

is making it a positive experience — and that means food. A good way to start is to leave the harness by your cat's food dish, or by simply holding out the harness so Kitty can sniff it and then feeding her treats afterward.

New noises can be alarming to some cats, so practice snapping the harness together or undoing the Velcro to get your cat accustomed to the new sounds.

Now that Kitty is aware of the harness, slip it on her, but don't fasten it. Provide more treats as a distraction and to help your cat associate the harness with a positive experience.

Try putting the harness on right before mealtime, so that the dinner distracts her from the new sensation and keeps her from focusing on removing it.

If your cat is comfortable at this step, you can fasten the harness and practice adjusting the fit. You should be able to fit one or two fingers beneath the harness — but no more than that. Keep in mind that cats can back out of the harness when they are frightened, and you certainly don't want Kitty getting away from you outdoors.

It's completely normal for cats to freeze up, refuse to walk or walk very strangely the first few times they're wearing a harness. Your cat has likely never experienced the sensation of something on her back before, so it's going to take some time to adjust to it.

It may take several days or even weeks to get your cat comfortable in the harness,

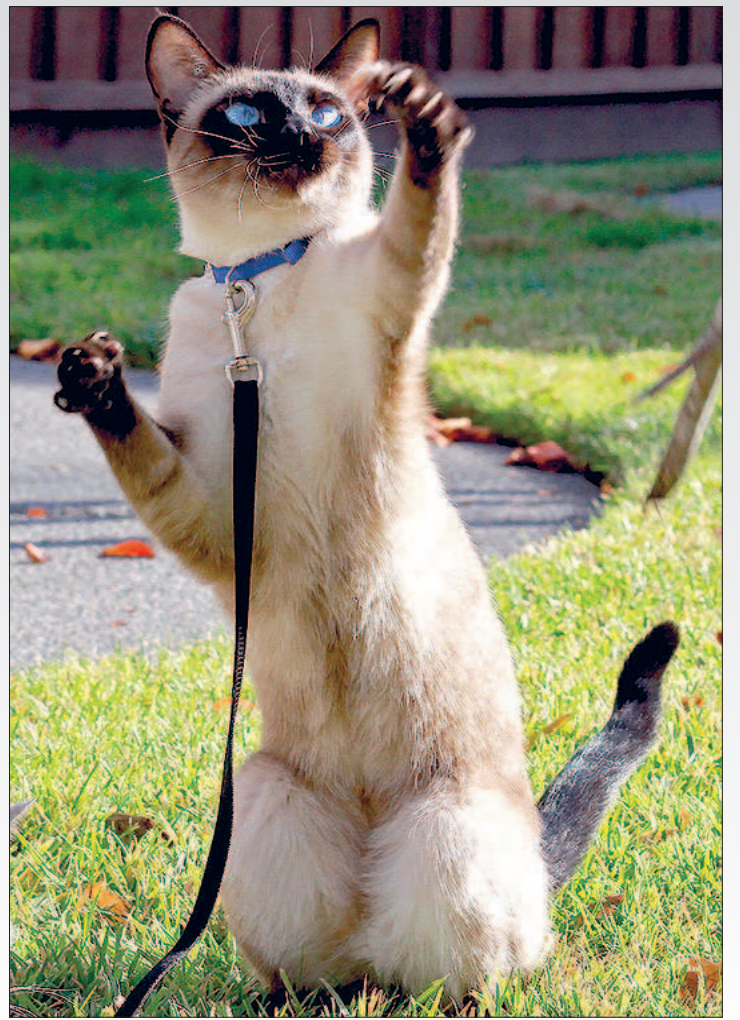


PHOTO BY JODI SCHNEIDER MCNAMEE

Tinkerbelle enjoying nature outside.

but once Kitty is used to having it on and walking normally, it's time to attach the leash.

If the most your cat has interacted with the outdoors has been through the window, it's likely she's going to be on high alert when you take her outside for the first time, so take things slowly.

Going immediately outside to a busy street or neighborhood will certainly overwhelm Kitty. Start in a quiet backyard. You don't have to take your cat far to help her

get used to nature.

Keep in mind that walking a cat is different from walking a dog. While Kitty may happily accompany you on your walk, she may prefer to simply sniff around your yard and doze in the sun. Other cats may hike for a little while and then decide to stop and just look around. It's important to pay attention to what your cat is comfortable doing. Don't force her outside her comfort zone. Just like at home, Kitty is the one who's in charge.

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