

Roam to home

Making your roaming cat a home cat

Step 4 | Troubleshooting



Now that your cat is settling into home life, you can switch from establishing routines to maintaining them. You might have found that playing each day or having some treats at the ready to distract them from the door are the best ways for you to keep your cat inside and happy.

Or maybe you found other routines and interactions which worked for you and your cat. Whatever it is that worked, stick with it, and be consistent. Cats love consistency and often get stressed if their routines change. That being said, if you start noticing unwanted behaviours sneaking in, or escape attempts increasing, switch things up to try finding something that works. This might be seeking help from a veterinary behaviourist or force-free trainer who can watch your cat's behaviour and give you tailored suggestions to solve the issues you're experiencing. Below are some common issues you might face and suggestions to help solve them.

Cat fights

If you have multiple cats, you may find that when you keep them at home they begin to hiss or growl at each other or begin to pick fights. This can be due to the stress of change from staying home and may settle down on its own. It may also be due to a lack of space or resources for the number of cats in the house.

The first thing to do is to ensure you have ample resources in separate locations. This includes litter trays, water bowls, food, hiding spaces, perching places, beds, toys and time with you. If you notice your cats starting to bicker, try and identify which resources might need increase. Add more while keeping an eye on the bickering to see if it stops.

If it doesn't reduce, it may be that the space is too small for the number of cats you have. In this case, emphasise having spaces where the cats can get away from each other and try to increase the space as much

as you can. This may involve installing more vertical spaces such as shelves or building an outdoor cat run where your cats can enjoy some safe outside time.

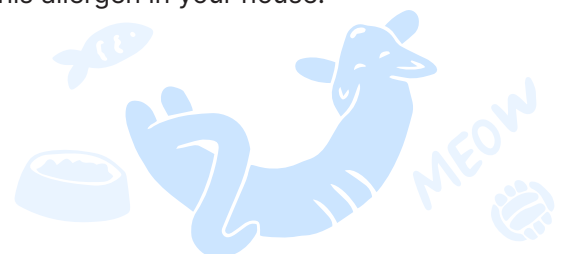
Similarly, if your cat is getting annoyed with your dog or another household animal (or child), make sure they have their own spaces they can go to get respite and everyone in the household knows to leave them alone.

Reducing fights could look like

- Make sure there are enough resources for the number of cats.
- Give your cats their own spaces where they can get away from each other or where you can separate them when they begin to fight.
- If the above tips don't help, seek assistance from a veterinary behaviourist or force-free trainer. Early intervention is best, so it's worth contacting them if your cats are still fighting after a few days.

Allergies

You may already know or have discovered through this process that you or a family member are allergic to cats. Most cat allergies are caused by a protein in the cat's saliva which is deposited on their fur and skin that can get into the air or on your hands or face. Therefore, to help reduce your allergies, you'll need to reduce the amount of this allergen in your house.



Reducing allergens could look like

- Avoid touching your face and eyes after handling your cat.
- Always wash your hands after handling a cat.
- Regularly clean surfaces, floors and upholstery.
- Clean litter daily.
- Groom your cat outside to reduce the amount of cat hair in your home.
- Establish some cat-free areas in the house, such as the bedroom.
- Vacuum with a HEPA filter and use air purifiers.
- Consider speaking to your doctor about ways to manage your allergies medically.

Non-stop meowing

Cats meow to get our attention and tell us what they need. You might notice your cat sitting at the door, meowing more than usual. This can be frustrating, tempting you to let your cat out to roam again. Remember this is a normal reaction for your cat and it may take a few weeks to stop.

First, check that nothing else may be causing your cat's stress or frustration. Consider any other recent changes, or differences in behaviour, and if necessary, seek guidance from a veterinary behaviourist or force-free trainer. If, after this, the frustration still appears to come from the decrease in roaming, the best thing to do is ignore, interrupt or redirect this behaviour and give your cat time to adjust. If it is truly driving you mad, there are a few things you can do.

First up, cats learn best when given positive reinforcement. This is where you reward or reinforce the behaviours that you want to see. You might have heard or read about suggestions to punish behaviours you don't like, but this doesn't work long term and will most likely lead to stress and other unwanted behaviours. Instead, focus on using positive reinforcement for behaviours you do like (such as being quiet) and ignoring, interrupting and redirecting those you don't (such as meowing).

Redirecting, not just ignoring

It's important to pay attention to your cat and their needs. So, in general, ignoring them is not a good idea. The one exception to this is when they are performing a behaviour (such as meowing at a door) in order to get your attention. Ignoring this behaviour isn't exactly what it sounds like either. What you are actually trying to do is to disconnect their behaviour from whatever is reinforcing it by not engaging with it.

Reinforcing is rewarding the behaviour, in effect encouraging your cat to keep doing it. In many instances the reinforcement may be your attention. The cat meows and you give them attention. But it can also be a self-rewarding behaviour. For instance, the cat meows because they are feeling anxious or frustrated and performing the behaviour (e.g. meowing or scratching furniture) gives them some relief from the frustration. In this case, ignoring won't work and may make things worse.

The first step to changing the behaviour, is figuring out why your cat's doing it. Do they want your attention? Are they alleviating their stress? Is it simply fun for them? Once you understand why, you can start training them out of it. If it's to get your attention, you can ignore it. BUT this isn't simply not engaging with your cat, it's important to begin interrupting this behaviour when you see it about to happen. For example, if you see your cat walking to the door they always meow at, interrupt that behaviour by calling them over or giving them something more interesting to do such as playing with them. Or ask them to do something else (e.g. a 'sit' command) and reward them for it, with a treat.

Similarly, you can re-direct your cat to perform a more desirable behaviour, even if they've started performing the one you don't like. If your cat is already meowing at the door, you can use a positive interrupter—this can be a word or sound you've taught your cat to mean 'stop what you're doing and pay attention to me!' and comes with a tasty reward. Positive interrupters can be very useful in keeping your cat (or dog) safe. Many dog owners use commands like this to get their dog's attention in potentially dangerous situations, say to stop them from running after something they see on a walk. These commands can be used in many ways to direct your cat from an undesirable behaviour, towards a desirable one.



For an easy positive interrupter, try saying 'what's this?' or 'look at me' in a raised pitch that sounds friendly and different from your usual talking voice. Be sure to follow up with a big tasty reward.

Once you have your cat paying attention, you can redirect them to a different behaviour like asking them to play, doing a short, fun training set with them (e.g. sit, lay down, high five etc.) or whatever else you would like them to do instead. Remember to reward this behaviour. By ignoring the behaviour you don't want and interrupting and redirecting, your cat has less opportunity to engage in the unwanted behaviour. With less repeats, the behaviour can begin to disappear.

Redirection can relieve their stress or get your attention in ways more desirable to you. Remember, ignoring doesn't mean ignore your cat completely, it means don't connect the undesirable behaviour to giving your cat their desired reward. So don't let your cat out just because they meow, instead give them something else to do.

Reinforcing behaviours you want could look like

- Give your cat a treat when you see them sitting quietly or playing with a toy or scratch post.
- Ignoring your cat when they are meowing by the door—this means don't respond in any way.
- If you have harness-trained your cat: Never take them out when they're meowing to go, only when they're quiet or displaying preferred behaviour. Ideally, have a cue for walk time. Saying 'walkies!' will do. Train your cat that walks and outside time only happen when you give this cue.

Taking their frustrations out on you and the house

Some cats may become destructive when first kept at home. This may take the form of scratching walls or furniture, attacking objects, knocking objects from surfaces, climbing curtains etc. Or your cat may display aggressive behaviour towards you or other family members (if your cat or your family are at risk of injury contact a veterinary behaviourist or force-free trainer immediately).

A first step is to move delicate objects somewhere safe and cover any items the cat has been attacking. Next, focus on what is causing this behaviour. In many cases, this will be frustration or boredom from being inside. Make sure there are plenty of interesting

things around the house. Go back to Step 1 and look through the check list to make sure the house is set up to keep your cat happy. And watch to check that your cat likes the objects you have selected for them. If everything is set up well, try introducing some new, exciting toys, increase the amount of time you set aside to play or train, or consider investing in an enclosed cat run. If destructive behaviour persists or if it gets to a point where you feel you or your cat may be injured, seek help from a veterinary behaviourist or force-free trainer.

Observing cat behaviour

Observe your cat for signs of how they are adjusting to life at home. If you notice any negative signs, refer to the checklist from Step 1 to ensure all needs are being met. If their needs are met and your cat is experiencing more serious symptoms such as vomiting or urinating outside of the litter tray, seek veterinary advice.

MEOW

Some signs your cat is adjusting well

- Eating, drinking, toileting and sleeping as normal.
- Playing or kneading regularly.
- Interacting with you, your family and other animals as usual.
- Using all or most of the rooms in the house. A stressed cat will often hide in one room or not want to move around much. So, if your cat is moving around, they are comfortable in the space.

Some signs of stress to look out for

- Over-grooming.
- Vomiting or diarrhoea.
- Urinating or defecating outside the litter tray, on furniture or clothing.
- Reduction in appetite.
- Hiding more.
- Less tolerant of being touched or approached.

