



Vets On Main - The Five Pillars of a Healthy Feline Environment

Source: Environmental Needs Guidelines - American Association of Feline Practitioners (AAFP) & International Society of Feline Medicine (ISFM)

The Goal

To provide you with the information you need to create a harmonious living space for your feline friend(s). This will lead to more comfort in the home, reduced stress and possible unwanted behaviours.

Pillar #1 - Providing a "Safe Space"

Every cat deserves a safe spot to call their own and to retreat to in times of stress. Each cat has their own preferences. Some prefer a spot to hide, others prefer elevation to give them a vantage view over the space to spot possible threats. Each cat should have equal access to their spot **without challenge**.

<p>For Hiders consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• A box with cozy bedding• A cat tree with a hidey hole• A dedicated favourite blanket to hide under• A cozy spot in a closet	<p>For Climbers consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• A cat tree with a cozy ledge• Cat shelves• A cozy bed on top of cupboards or cabinet
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Pillar #2 - Provide Multiple and Separate Key Resources

In order to achieve harmony in the living space (especially in multicat households), cats should never feel like they have to compete for essential resources. Spreading the resources throughout the household widens their territory and avoids tensions over limited resources.

Essential resources include:

- Food / Feeding Stations:

Cats often feel safest eating on their own, away from other pets. If they're watched or challenged during meals, it can increase stress, reduce appetite, and create tension between cats.

Feeding at a set time instead of leaving food out all day is also helpful. Scheduled meals support a healthy weight and make it easier to spot changes in appetite. If your cat suddenly eats less or stops eating, you'll notice sooner—an important early sign to contact your veterinarian.

- Water

To support good hydration and urinary health, offer several water stations around your home. Many cats prefer running water, like fountains or a gently running tap, but simple bowls or cups work well too. Water bowls and food bowls should be kept separate to avoid crowding and tension.

- Litter Boxes

Providing the right number of litter boxes helps keep your cat comfortable and reduces stress. A good rule is one box per cat, plus one extra. Place them in separate areas of the home, ideally on each level, so they're easy to access—especially for senior cats or those with mobility challenges. Multiple boxes also help prevent tension between cats who may guard or claim a single box.

Cats can be particular about their litter setup. Some prefer shallow boxes, others like covered or uncovered options, and many have favorite litter types. Stick to unscented litter, as strong smells can be overwhelming for cats.

- Scratching post/station

Scratching is a normal and healthy behaviour for cats. It helps keep their nails in good health by removing old nail sheaths, and it also allows them to relieve stress and mark their territory through scent. Each cat has their own preferences for scratching, so it's a good idea to offer a variety of options. Try both vertical and horizontal scratching posts, and experiment with different materials such as cardboard, carpet, sisal rope, or wood to see what your cat enjoys most.

- Safe Spot

This was discussed in the first pillar but is considered an essential resource. If the "safe spot" is not available, this can cause some tension or insecurity for the cat. Ideally this spot

should be reserved for that pet specifically. Having multiple safe spots will give them variety and increased comfort.

- The Owner

Believe it or not, you are an essential resource for your pet. It's important to remember that cats prefer low intensity/high frequency social interactions. This means that you should let your cat approach you on their own and that interactions should never be forced. Because cats thrive on routine, try to set aside some quality time each day—ideally at the same time—so your cat knows what to expect. This consistency helps them feel secure and strengthens the bond you share.

Pillar 3: Provide Opportunity for Natural Behaviours

Cats need chances to engage in play that mimics their natural hunting instincts. These activities not only support their physical health but also provide mental stimulation and stress relief. Encouraging your cat to “hunt” for food or toys is a great way to meet this need.

Pseudo-predatory play can look like:

- Scavenger hunts with their favourite toys or treats
- Foraging box
- Chasing a feathered toy, rewarding your cat when they catch the toy for positive reinforcement
- Food puzzles (start easy and build up the challenge)

Helpful Tips

- Avoid using your hands or feet as toys. This can lead to unwanted biting or rough play.
- Senior cats still benefit from play – just adjust the pace and intensity to match their comfort level.
- Rotate puzzle feeders and toys regularly to keep things fresh and engaging. A little challenge goes a long way.
- Put away toys with strings, small parts, or anything that could be swallowed once playtime is over

Pillar #4 – Positive, Consistent, and Predictable Social Interaction with Humans

Cats feel safest and happiest when their daily interactions are calm, predictable, and on their terms - and every cat has their own preferences. Building a routine helps strengthen trust and deepens your bond. Avoid forced interactions with cats whenever possible, allowing them to choose when and how to socialize.

- Try to keep feeding times consistent each day.
- Let your cat choose when and how they want to interact.
- Use soft, relaxed eye contact—slow blinks or half-closed eyes help cats feel comfortable.
- Every cat is unique. Take time to learn what your cat enjoys.
- Set aside one-on-one bonding time without other pets around.
- Your cat's preferences may change with age. Adjust how you interact, and reach out to your veterinarian if you notice new behaviours or have concerns.
- Remember that cats are low intensity - high frequency socializers.

Pillar #5 – Cats' Sense of Smell is Important - Provide an Environment that Caters to it!

A cat's sense of smell plays a big role in helping them feel safe and at home. Cats use their vomeronasal organ and natural scent markings (pheromones) to scent and create familiar, comforting boundaries in their environment. They rely on these signals far more than humans.

Whenever possible, try not to remove these scents completely. For example, rotate bedding when washing so some of their natural scent remains.

How to Support Your Cat's Sense of Smell

- Stick to mild or unscented cleaning products so your cat isn't overwhelmed by strong smells.
- Use an unscented litter to keep the litter box comfortable and familiar.
- Synthetic pheromone products can help create a calming, reassuring environment.
- When washing bedding, rotate items so your cat's natural scent stays present and comforting