

Fat Cats: Questions and Answers for Getting Your Tubby Tabby Back into Shape

More than half of American cats are overweight or obese. Rolan Tripp answers our questions on the best way to get our feline friends back in shape.

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A 2006 survey by the American Pet Products Association estimates that about one third of American homes have at least one [cat](#), and there are more than 88 million cats in the United States. And a 2008 study by the Association for Pet [Obesity](#) Prevention found that 57% of all the cats in the United States those cats are overweight or obese. Sounds like it's time to get tabby on a training program. So WebMD asked Rolan Tripp for some feline exercise advice. Tripp is an affiliate professor of applied animal [behavior](#) at Colorado State University veterinary school and the University of Wisconsin veterinary school, and founder of [animalbehavior.net](#), a web site that provides pet behavior education and services.

Q: Why are so many of our cats fat?

A: Because they're over fed and under exercised. There's no magic here. The pet food companies make their foods the tastiest they can make it. And then there's the misconception that when a cat isn't eating it's somehow sick. That's not always the case.

Q: My cat has the run of the house, isn't that enough exercise?

A: No. Could you get all the exercise you need just walking around your house? An indoor cat needs planned exercise. The best exercise is object play - playing with your cat with toys. That's the answer to exercise problems, obesity, and how to get a well-adjusted cat. If your cat doesn't get enough exercise, it comes out in bad ways.

Q: If I get another cat, will they get more exercise?

A: If it's a kitten. Kittens are the high-energy ones. If it's another adult cat, you have to be very careful. Bringing another adult cat into the house has very few positives for the established cat. What you need to do when you bring home another cat is buy a bunch of new resources - new toys, new food, new beds, new treats. So the association for your old cat is that this new cat comes in with a bounty, a dowry.

Q: What are some games I can play with my cat to get him moving?

A: Cats are predators, and the way to get them to play is to let them use their hunting talents. Buy toys and then use them to mimic the actions of the animals a cat would normally hunt - a mouse, bird, lizard, rabbit or bug. Take a laser pointer and skitter it across the floor like a bug. Get a wand toy that looks like a bird and pretend to land and take off. But don't just flap it around. No bird acts like that. Try to think about what a bird really does and then reenact that with the toy. It's all pretend play, but try to make it as real as possible for your cat.

Q: Do cats like those videos showing birds, squirrels, and other animals? Should I get them a fish tank or put up a birdfeeder outside a window that they can watch?

A: Some might like the videos, but I don't personally know of any. I think those videos are really more for people who have guilt because they're gone all day at work. But dragging a piece of string around for a little while when they get home is too much work, so they'd rather buy a video.

Now fish tanks are great. And cats love watching birds outside a window. I don't recommend birds inside a house with cats, because birds are very intelligent and know they are being stalked. But a birdfeeder outside a window that cats can watch is a great idea.

Q: Can you train a cat to walk on a leash?

A: Yes, but they don't get a lot of exercise from it because they're too busy sniffing around and checking things out. The main reason to walk your cat on a leash is to safely give them some time outdoors when they can't run away. It's more mental exercise than physical exercise.

Q: My cat doesn't like toys, or gets bored with them quickly. What can I do?

A: Toys for cats to play with by themselves have marginal interest. You've got this ball on a spring. The cat bops it a few times, it goes up and down, and the cat says "OK, now what?"

Cats do want toys, but the toys should be "prey play" oriented. In the wild, a cat will only stalk prey for about three to five minutes. After that, he'll give up and go search somewhere else. So don't try to play longer than the genetic capacity of the cat.

When he's beginning to lose interest, change to another game. Now, some cats will really like bird and they'll play that longer than other games. Some might really like the bug. Fine. It doesn't have to be equal time.

Also, let them win occasionally. Put a tasty treat under the toy and let them pounce on it, eat it, and win.

I also believe if a kitten between 7 weeks and 12 weeks is given a lot of toys to play with, it will probably be more likely to play with toys when it gets older, although that's just my opinion. Two great cat toys are ping pong balls, because they're light and they go a long way if you whack them, and walnuts, because they make a little crackly sound, like a mouse scurrying away, and they roll irregularly, like a mouse would run.

A really good game is bathtub hockey. Give a kitten a ping pong ball in the bathtub and just watch what happens.

Q: How long should our play periods last, and how often should I have them?

A: As often as the cat will play, because a tired cat is a well behaved cat. But at least a couple times a day. And the best time to play is right before bed, so you can tire them out.

Q: Can cats learn tricks like a dog?

A: They're not genetically very well equipped for this. Dogs are pack animals, and they're always looking at their counterparts, seeing what they're doing, and then changing their behavior based on what the other dogs in the pack do.

Cats, on the other hand, hunt on their own. If another cat comes around, they pay attention only long enough to drive them away. They're not taking their cues from other cats. That doesn't mean we can't train cats to do things. They can learn simple, basic things. But it takes a lot longer than it does to train a dog to do a trick.