

Ask A Vet: Think Twice Before Letting Your Cat Roam

Sunday, March 13, 2016

Dear Dr. Weldy's,

We recently acquired a kitten and are trying to decide whether to let him outside part of the time or keep him strictly indoors. It seems like he would enjoy going out and we wouldn't want to deprive him of that. What do you think?

Dear Reader,

From a safety standpoint this question is a "no-brainer". While many cats certainly enjoy their outdoor freedoms, life on the outside can be simply dangerous. In fact, the majority of the injured or sick cats that I see are outdoor cats. Honestly, I do understand the desire to let your cat roam. They are natural born hunters. Even the tamest of house cats tense up and widen their eyes at the site of a bird or squirrel. It is only natural for us to oblique them by letting them out. The problem is that there is much more lurking out there than the squirrels and birds at the feeder.

The most common problem that outdoor cats face is other outdoor cats. Cats are very territorial, and they are perfectly willing to attack or kill an intruding cat. Diseases, such as feline AIDS, feline leukemia, upper respiratory viruses, and many types of parasites are just a few of the things your cat could catch from others outside. Dogs and other animals such as the coyote, raccoon, and fox also provide a potential threat to your cat. Humans are also high on this list, whether it be with vehicles, guns, or poisons.

Another thing to consider is what your cat is bringing back into the house. Parasites and infections such as fleas, roundworms, ringworm, and toxoplasmosis are just a few examples of things cats can spread to us and other pets.

So what good can come from letting your cat outdoors? Well, there are a couple things. First of all cats that spend time outdoors tend to be much trimmer and don't suffer from obesity near as often as indoor only cats. They exercise more and avoid many of the health problems associated with inactivity. Mental enrichment may actually be higher in outdoor cats as well which could lead to less anxiety. If you have an indoor only cat you simply just have to put more effort into proper nutrition and exercise enrichment.

With all that said, I understand that there are many situations in which keeping your cat indoors is just not an option. If this is the case, it is your responsibility to protect your pet against the many avoidable dangers outside. Spaying/neutering your cat will keep it from roaming as far and will also decrease its encounters with other outdoor kitties. Not to mention it will avoid an unnecessary increase in the cat population. Vaccinating your outdoor cat is especially important. Have a discussion with your veterinarian about what vaccines are available and what he/she recommends for your cats particular lifestyle. There are also several "monthly preventative" products out there to help control parasitic infections of all types in cats. Talk to your veterinarian about which of these best suits your cat. Having a microchip identification placed in your cat is also a good idea just in case he ends up at the shelter or in the hands of another person.

If you still want freedom for your cat but without the risk, an outdoor cat enclosure may be the best answer. There are many building plans available for this as well as commercial kits to fit your exact needs.

-Dr . Justin Sellon