BEHAVIOR

Indoor Cat Enrichment: Play, Food Puzzles and Places to Climb

What indoor cats need to stay busy and calm: the signs of a bored or stressed cat, play that mimics the hunt, a daily play routine and toy rotation, food puzzles, high places and hiding spots, scratching, multi-cat homes, kittens and seniors.

By Catt County Cat Nippers • Reviewed October 27, 2026 • 10 min read • 9 cited sources

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Why indoor cats need enrichment

Enrichment means giving a cat ways to do what cats are built to do: hunt, forage, climb, hide, scratch and explore. Cats who live only indoors need plenty of stimulation and play to keep from getting bored, International Cat Care says; a cat with outdoor access finds its own, in trees to climb, leaves to chase and new places to explore.

The short answer: short play sessions every day with a toy that moves like prey, part of the day's food from a puzzle or a search, a high perch with a view, a hiding place for each cat, and a sturdy scratching post. Change one thing at a time: cats are creatures of habit, and the Ohio State University Indoor Pet Initiative warns against changing too much too quickly.

What an indoor cat needs, at a glance

THE FIVE NEEDS OF AN INDOOR CAT, AND AN EASY FIRST STEP FOR EACH

Need	Why it matters	At home	Easy first step

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A safe place	Somewhere to hide when something worries it	A box or covered bed, ideally raised; at least one per cat, each big enough for one	Leave the carrier out with a blanket in it
Food, water, litter, scratching, play and rest, each in its own place	Cats need to reach every resource without being challenged by another cat	A choice of each: at least two resting, two feeding and two litter areas, with litter well away from the rest	Move the water bowl away from the food bowl
Play and the hunt	Cats hunt even when well fed	Wand toys, small fur toys, food to search for	A few minutes with a wand toy before a meal
Friendly, predictable time with people	Cats like to choose when to start and stop	Let the cat come to you; play and feed at regular times	Sit on the floor and let your cat make the first move
Respect for its sense of smell	Scent tells a cat it is home and safe	Unscented litter and cleaners; bedding washed in turns	Wash one bed at a time, never all at once

From the Feline Veterinary Medical Association (FelineVMA) and ISFM Feline Environmental Needs Guidelines, which call these the five pillars of a healthy feline environment. A scratching post counts twice: it is a key resource, and scratching leaves scent from the pads of the feet.

Signs of boredom and stress

A bored cat rarely looks bored. The FelineVMA and ISFM guidelines link a home with no outlet for play and the hunt, or one that ignores a cat's needs, to:

- Overgrooming: licking or chewing its fur far more than usual.
- Aggression aimed at the wrong target, like ambushing ankles or another cat.
- Peeing or scratching in the wrong places.
- Weight gain.
- Stress-related illness, such as urinary tract disease.

> **These signs can also mean pain or illness, so see your vet first, then look at enrichment. A cat straining in the litter box with little or no urine is an emergency: see is this cat in pain?**

This quick sheet is the start of the guide. Still to read: Play that mimics the hunt, A daily play routine and toy rotation, Food puzzles and foraging and 7 more sections, plus the Indoor Cat Enrichment Workbook. Read it all free when you join our pet health emails at cattcountycatnippers.org/articles/indoor-cat-enrichment-guide

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