

Cat: Leash Training



Teaching your cat to walk on a harness and leash is a great way to let your cat safely enjoy the outdoors. It can also come in handy during trips to the vet, other necessary travel, or even when safely introducing two cats to each other. Before you get started, be sure your cat is up to date on all recommended vaccinations and has a microchip in case he gets lost.

Most cats can be easily trained to walk on a harness and leash. Kittens are naturally more accepting of this new experience, but older cats can be trained with patience. Proceed in small steps, rewarding each bit of progress. Start harness training indoors so that your cat is comfortable with it before you venture outside.

How to Train

- Purchase a harness designed for cats, for example “Come with Me Kitty.” The leash attachment should be located on the back of the harness, not at the neck.
- Leave the harness and leash near your cat’s food or favorite sleeping spot for several days. This way your cat will get used to the sight and smell of it and associate it with feelings of contentment and comfort.
- Hold the harness, let your cat sniff it, and offer him treats. Then lay the harness against your cat’s body and neck. As he’s sniffing the treat, remove the harness and let him eat the treat.
- Next, drape the harness over your cat’s shoulders and down his chest between his front legs. Introduce the new feel of the straps while your cat is sniffing or eating his treat, and remove the harness immediately. Work until you can snap the harness on him over his neck and shoulder area and between his front legs.
- Put the harness on your cat, but don’t attach the leash. Adjust the fit of the harness. You should be able to slip two fingers between the harness and your cat’s body. Leave the harness on for just a couple minutes, removing it before your cat’s interest in his rewards starts to decrease. Repeat this training daily for several days. If your cat stays relaxed, gradually increase the time the harness is on. If he ever gets upset, distract him with treats, and then remove the harness.
- Now it’s time to attach the leash. Place your cat in an open room with a few things that might snag a leash. Put the harness on your cat and attach the leash, letting it drag on the ground behind him. Distract him with treats or play. Repeat this step for several days.
- When your cat seems relaxed and comfortable while dragging the leash, hold it gently (not pulling against him) while he walks around the house. Let him go wherever he wants to, and keep the leash loose as you follow him around. As he roams, praise him often and periodically reward him with tasty treats.
- Now you are ready to practice slightly directing where your cat walks on leash, start indoors before you go outside, this is important since most likely you’ll need to direct him once you’re outside:
 - Using a sweet, soft voice, encourage your cat to follow you.
 - Drop him a treat, and while he eats it, walk away to the end of the leash. When he catches up to you, praise and reward him with another treat. Repeat this over and over.
 - Apply gentle, persistent pressure on the leash if your cat tries to go in another direction. NEVER jerk or pop the leash. Just wait patiently. When your cat finally takes a couple of steps toward you, IMMEDIATELY put slack in the leash and he’ll be rewarded by relief from the tension on the leash.

Cat: Leash Training *(continued)*

- Most cats who haven't been outdoors are nervous and easily startled outside. So start in a quiet, sheltered spot and just sit with your cat on the leash. He'll start exploring as he adjusts. Just as you did indoors, start by following behind your cat as he checks things out and travel farther with your new walking buddy when he's relaxed and ready to move on.

Tips

- Try setting a regular walking schedule, so your cat won't constantly pester you to go outside.
- Always put the harness on away from the door and carry your cat outside. Never let him walk out on his own, or he might try to dash out between walks without his harness.
- Never harness your cat when he's crying or pestering you. Ignore him until he's quiet. Then you can reward his good behavior with a walk.
- Do not tie your cat's leash to something outside and leave him, even if you plan to be gone for only a minute or two. Your cat might get tangled in the leash and hurt himself, and he won't be able to escape if a dog or other animal approaches. In fact, it's best to avoid leaving your cat outdoors unattended altogether, whether he's on a leash or not.
- If your cat is stalling or crouching on a walk or tries to escape he might be scared, and going for walks is not a good way of enriching a fearful cat's life. There are many options for indoor enrichment that can make your cat happy and engaged in an indoor environment – see our handout on enrichment indoors.