

Harness Training Your Cat

There are many scents, smells, and textures outside of your home that can be very enriching for your cat! Unfortunately, there are a great number of dangers out there too, so it is not advisable to let your cat roam freely. But if you train your cat to walk on a leash they can benefit from all that nature has to offer, without the associated risks. The first step in this process is harness training your cat.

Tools you will need:

- **Fitted harness:** It should be snug, but not too tight (you should be able to fit one or two fingers between the harness and the cat). “Vest-style” (wider straps) are generally more secure than “H-style” (narrow nylon webbing).
- **Leash:** Beginners or people living in urban areas should use short leashes ($\leq 1.5\text{m}$). Avoid retractable leashes (there are many dangers associated with these products), but bungee leashes can help reduce harsh ‘jolts’ at the end of the leash if your cat tends to dart in unexpected directions.
- **High value reward:** A treat that your cat LOVES and only gets during this training. Use cat treats or experiment with foods you may already have in your fridge, such as plain yogurt, tuna, bits of cheese, pieces of lunch meat, or even mayonnaise. For cats that love to play but are not food motivated, try a wand toy.



Harness training your cat in 4 steps

1. **Lure into the harness.** Start by putting your hand through the ‘head-hole’ loop of the harness and feeding your cat a treat. Continue to feed treats like this but reduce how far your hand goes through the loop each time. Eventually, offer treats behind the loop requiring your cat to put his head through it to access the treat. Once your cat is clearly comfortable with the harness against his chest and neck, clip the straps and feed more treats.



2. **Practice walking indoors – with the harness, but without the leash.** Lure the cat to walk forward by offering a treat a short distance in front of them. Keep the treat steady as they approach and allow them to eat it – do not move the treat forward to encourage further movement. Once they finish eating, offer another treat further away. For cats that are not food motivated, a toy can be used instead. Continue until your cat walks around your home comfortably.



3. **Practice walking indoors – add the leash.** Attach the leash and repeat step 2.
4. **Explore outside!** The great outdoors can be overwhelming to cats at first. Start with short trips, avoid busy areas, and be sure to offer lots of treats/toys to keep the experience fun. If you live in an apartment start by taking them for walks in the hallway. After a few visits to the hallway and stairs you can take them outside to a quiet spot. Slowly increase the duration of your trips, but don't proceed if your cat is showing signs of fear, anxiety, and stress (such as tense posture, large pupils, or flattened ears).

Tips:

- This process is likely to take many sessions. Never proceed to the next step unless your cat eats the treat without hesitation. Rushing the process can lead to your cat developing a negative association with the harness/leash. This will make things less fun for both of you.
- Do not expect your cat to walk on a leash the same way a dog would. Since the purpose of walking your cat is to allow them to experience the sights, sounds, and scents of the outdoors, there is no need for them to walk quickly in a straight line – just follow your cat to where they want to go!
- Many cats tend to lie down once they have a harness on. If this is the case for you:
 - Practice Step 2 before putting on the harness.
 - Motivate your cat by delaying their meal until after your harness training sessions.
- Going outside on a leash can be a great way to tire out a high energy cat or encourage weight loss in a cat that is overweight.
- Now that your cat is going outside, be sure to protect against fleas/ticks. Talk to your veterinarian about what product is appropriate for your cat.

*Note: Much of this information and many of the images in this manual are taken from *Low Stress Handling, Restraint and Behavior Modification of Dogs and Cats* by Dr. Sophia Yin DVM. Dr. Yin was a pioneer in the field of animal behaviour and stress-free handling methods. She took her own life in 2014. Her tragic death was a wake-up call to the veterinary community and has resulted in greater awareness of stress and depression in the profession. We honour her memory by continuing her legacy of compassionate animal handling. For more information or other resources please visit <https://drsophiayin.com/>

