

FACTSHEET

Harness and lead training

It is important to understand before reading further that only particularly relaxed and outgoing cats may be trained to successfully walk with a harness and a lead, and only in an appropriate outdoor environment. Many cat personalities are simply NOT suited to this training. Anxious or shy cats, for example, would not be appropriate candidates.

Many outdoor environments are not be suited to this training, for example, areas with busy vehicle traffic or areas with lots of dogs off-lead. Do not push your cat to do this training if your cat shows signs of stress at any point. Remember that your cat depends on you for security and protection.

Always use a harness. **Never** attach a leash directly to a collar. Cats have sensitive throats and neck muscles, and the tension from pulling may cause injury. A harness ensures any pressure from pulling on the lead will be absorbed by the shoulders and chest of the cat's body.

It is best to start this training at the kitten stage. A kitten who grows up feeling comfortable in a harness will be much more suited to venturing outdoors on a lead. To minimise disease risk, avoid taking your kitten outdoors (even on a harness) until approximately 6 months of age when their full course of vaccinations is complete.

Adult cats of the right personality may adjust to lead walking provided they are given adequate training at a slow and gentle pace. Successful training can be achieved in three phases.

Phase one

Start by working indoors. Allow your cat to adjust to wearing a harness. Put the harness on your cat, immediately follow-up with a treat, then resume normal activities. Let your cat wear the harness for about 10 minutes, then remove the harness and give your cat a treat. Keep this routine for a period of days, gradually increasing the harness time until your cat moves comfortably around your home as usual. Always give your cat a treat immediately after putting on and immediately after removing the harness. Always supervise your cat's harness time.

Phase two

Allow your cat to adjust to the lead. Attach the lead to the harness, then give your cat a treat. Let your cat wear the harness and drag the lead behind for about 10 minutes, then remove the lead and give your cat a treat. It is normal for your cat to play with the lead, and it is best to just ignore this behaviour. Again, keep this routine for a period of days, gradually increasing the time your cat wears both the harness and the lead. When your cat seems comfortable in the lead, pick up the lead but allow your cat to initiate movement around the house. This will help your cat adjust to the feeling of tension in the lead.

Let your cat be in control. Remember that not all cat personalities are suited to harness and lead training. Monitor your cat's response and stress levels and be prepared to slow the pace of training or even stop if necessary.

Phase three

Now it's time to move outdoors. Start with a quiet place where you know your cat is safe, such as your back garden or a courtyard. Allow your cat to explore the surroundings as you hold the lead. Keep this routine for a period of days, gradually increasing the length of outdoor time if your cat isn't feeling stressed. As your cat's confidence increases, you can begin to venture out for short walks in your local area. Choose quieter times of the day for walks, when your cat is less likely to be frightened by traffic noises and frequent passing pedestrians. Be alert to the presence of neighbourhood dogs and be prepared to take evasive action or pick your cat up as necessary. For added safety, a soft collapsible cat carry basket may be carried over your shoulder, just like a handbag.

Over time, your cat will become familiar with your local walking area and gain confidence. You may eventually find yourself sitting at an outdoor café table with your cat at your side, soaking up the sunshine.

Keep in mind that this training will only suit some cats and be prepared to stop this training immediately if your cat shows signs of stress. Allow lots of time, patience, and have plenty of treats on offer. Lead walking may be a great way for your cat to enjoy the outdoors in safety, and a rewarding experience for both you and your cat.

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