

Leash Training a Cat

The outdoors is full of enrichment opportunities for cats. These sights, movements, sounds, and smells are enticing and stimulating. It is important to make sure cats are safely secure when bringing them outside. Some owners use a large cat playpen or crate, but you can also take your cat out on a harness and leash. Here is a step-by-step guide to help your cat feel comfortable on a harness and leash. Throughout this process, you will be watching your cat's body language to ensure their comfort. Before beginning, check out the **Cat Body Language handout** so that you are familiar with how cats communicate, so you can identify when your cat is relaxed and when they are showing signs of stress.

Training Steps

1. You will need to have an appropriately sized harness. A harness is safer than a collar and much more difficult for your cat to get out of. Size may depend on harness brand, so always check individual harness recommendations. A harness should be snug but allow you to put two fingers between the harness and the cat. Adventure Cat <https://store.adventurecats.org/> has several harnesses made just for cats, or you can find the PetSafe Gentle Leader Come with Me Kitty Harness at your local pet store pictured here.
2. Get your cat used to wearing a harness indoors. If your cat is uncomfortable with the handling to put on a harness right away, that is okay! Use smelly cat treats and or canned food to work up to putting the harness on. Once it is on, a lot of cats will freeze when a harness is put on them for the first time. Pairing the harness with smelly cat treats or canned food will associate the harness with positive things! If your cat loves to play, start a play session with your cat's favorite toy. Your cat will begin to see the harness and know good things are coming!
3. Once your cat is comfortable with the harness on, attach a leash. Let your cat drag around the leash so they get used to the tension and feel of the harness. Continue to introduce treats, canned food or toys to continue the positive associations.
4. If your cat is displaying relaxed body language with the harness and dragging the leash, pick up the leash. This will be a good opportunity for you to coax your cat with treats to follow you.





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5. When your cat is comfortable with all the above steps, you can now go outside! Make sure the first few times you lead your cat outside that it is a quiet time of day and start in an area that has less activity. We do not want your cat to have a negative reaction or be frightened by this new experience.
6. Follow your cat's lead! Some cats will slowly walk along with you, and you can offer smelly treats along the way. Other cats may prefer to start with a small space. Your cat may prefer that you sit in a quiet part of the yard and let your cat explore while you hold the leash. Keep the first several sessions short so your cat does not become overwhelmed. If your cat seems scared or does not explore, pick them up and take back inside and try again later. You never want to leave your cat outside unattended for their safety.

Remember that grass and woods are much more interesting to your cat than a concrete sidewalk! Taking a cat outside is a great way to provide mental stimulation and possible physical exercise. Using a leash with a harness makes it safer!

If you have additional questions, contact the Wisconsin Humane Society behavior department at asktheexperts@wihumane.org or 414-431-6173.