

Catercize

Does your cat need to lose a few pounds? Incorporate play into her daily routine!

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You can only handle so many fat jokes, subtle references to Atkins and pointed remarks about extreme makeovers before you decide that your cat needs to shape up.

It's not like you hadn't noticed. These days Fluffy only drags her growing frame off the couch long enough to hit the litterbox and the food dish. It's a feline dream turned into a nightmare.

Sadly, we've all gone soft. Exercise is a dirty word for many cats and humans. Maybe it's time for all of us to shape up.

Unlike many humans, cats actually like to exercise. Watch them in their natural habitat: They climb, run, jump, stretch and spar. They move like Tai Chi masters and prima ballerinas. They can leap two or three times their body lengths, move almost as fast vertically as they can horizontally and perform midair maneuvers that make gymnasts look like klutzes. In short, they're athletes, until they learn otherwise.

Plan Your Play

"Too many people bring home a lovely kitten full of life and then immediately try to dismantle the very energy that makes them what they are," said Ellen Stevens, a Persian breeder in Whittier, Calif. "We punish them when they climb the curtains, get on the table or mess with the stuff on our desk. We won't play with them for more than a few seconds, and then only when it suits us. And heaven help them if they want to play at night when we're watching TV or trying to sleep! Pretty soon the kittens get the hint and stop racing around. Then they turn into lazy bums."

Keeping cats indoors, a necessary precaution these days, adds to the problem, as does leaving them alone for hours and days at a time. Boredom does not beget exercise, so cats need to schedule their exercise sessions. But it's your job to get things moving.

Check with your vet before putting your couch potato on the treadmill, Stevens said. "Overweight cats often have some other underlying health problems like arthritis or heart disease, so you'll want to check all that out first," she said.

Then it's time to go to work. You can take the direct approach with a harness, lead and mandatory daily walks, but most cats resist that kind of regimen. According to Dale Williams, a cat behaviorist in Chicago, you're better off being sneaky.