

Home Alone

CatChannel behavior expert Marilyn Krieger, CCBC, explains how to keep a cat entertained when alone.

By Marilyn Krieger, CCBC

Q: I am going away for two weeks. I have a 3-year-old male, part Siamese cat named Max. I don't want to put him in a kennel, so my neighbor will be taking care of him. Max is a housecat and is skittish around loud noises and strangers. He does know my neighbor since she's my friend and comes to visit frequently. I give Max lots of attention and we go for walks outside, on a leash. I am very worried about leaving him for so long. Are there any calming aids that might make his time alone easier?

A: Max should be fine at home, being cared for by someone he knows while you are away on your trip. Instead of using calming aids or remedies, make your home entertaining for him and provide him with regular activities so that he won't become bored in your absence. Ask your neighbor if she is willing to visit Max twice a day, spending quality time engaging him in some of his favorite activities. If he enjoys playing, than maybe she will be willing to play with him every day, using his favorite toys. If he likes to be groomed, ask your neighbor to groom him every day. I don't recommend that she takes Max outside for walks though, because you don't want to risk him escaping or becoming frightened by a startling noise or animal.

In addition to Max's regular activities, there are others that he will probably enjoy. Treasure hunts are usually a hit with cats. Ask your neighbor to hide Max's favorite treats on the cat furniture, shelves, window perches and in cat toys for him to find. Another fun activity that will also cool him off during these hot summer months is broth ice cubes. If he doesn't have diet restrictions, consider making a plain, spice-free meat broth before you go on your trip and then freezing it in ice cube trays. Many cats prefer chicken broth, easily made by boiling chicken pieces. It is important that there are no spices in the broth. Your neighbor can either float a broth ice cube in Max's water or put it in a bowl for him. It will keep him busy and simultaneously help cool him off.

Max might also enjoy a talking treat ball. These are hollow plastic balls with recording devices inside. They are filled with treats and every time Max rolls it to access a treat, he'll hear you telling him what a perfect boy he is. Interactive toys are also a must. The toys must be safe since he won't be supervised for most of the day. They need to be toys that he can't swallow, be cut with or become tangled up in. There are wonderful puzzle toys available as well as scratchers that most cats enjoy.

Max's environment can also be enriched by videos developed especially for cats. They come in different formats and feature birds, rabbits, gerbils, insects and other fascinating wildlife. Classical piano music will also help make his days more interesting while you are away.

With environmental enrichment, regular activities and frequent visits from your neighbor, Max should be fine and won't need any calming remedies. To ease your mind, you might want to consider occasionally phoning or e-mailing your neighbor for updates.