

Is It Safe to Walk My Cat?

CatChannel behavior expert Marilyn Krieger weighs in on the outdoor activity.

By Marilyn Krieger

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Q: I have a 5-year-old Bengal cat who I adopted. I would like to take him for walks with me. I bought a harness and a leash for him but he hates it when I put the harness on him. I know it is a bad idea to allow him outside, but I think he needs the sun and the fresh air. What do you think?

A: Walking cats is becoming a popular way of giving cats some outside time while simultaneously having some protection and safety. While walking a cat can be safer than allowing a cat to be outside on his own, it still has many pitfalls you need to be aware of. Though there might be a rare exception, I do not recommend walking cats for a number of reasons: While you have some control of the cat on the leash, you have no control over the environment. Cats can easily become startled and agitated. A barking dog or the sounds from road noises such as sirens and car horns can frighten and stress a cat. An agitated or startled cat can develop anxiety and stress behaviors and can potentially hurt himself or his human companion. One of my friends was peacefully walking a cat in her back yard when unexpectedly the neighbor's dog barked. The cat reacted by jumping up, biting my friend's hand, then squirming out of his harness and running away.

Other potential problems are dogs and other animals who chase cats. Currently, I have one trauma case where the cat was on a nice walk with her mom. A dog off-leash spotted the cat and lunged for her. My client picked the cat up and held her over her head. The dog jumped up on my client, knocked her down and traumatized the cat.

Walking cats can trigger behavior problems. Some cats that are walked become door darters, dashing to the door whenever it is open. Additionally, it is not uncommon to find that cats who enjoy their outings become howlers and criers. They cry at the windows and doors in their attempts to get outside.

Cats can have very full and complete lives living indoors. Providing lots of environmental enrichment, interactive toys and scheduled play times will help keep cats happy and satisfied.

It is true that not all cats adjust to indoor living. For those cats, I recommend large outdoor enclosures, or a yard that has a safe (nonshock) fence system. These fence systems will keep cats safe in their yards, while simultaneously keeping other animals out.