

Walking Cats

CatChannel behavior expert Marilyn Krieger, CCBC, describes the safest way to walk your cat outside.

By Marilyn Krieger

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Q: My 3-year-old cat had a bad experience with a leash as a kitten. He is an indoor cat, but always attempts to escape outside. I have shown him a leash, but he runs at the sight of it. He is declawed, so the only way I will let him outside is on a leash.

Is there any way I can ease him into accepting a leash? Everything I have tried so far has not worked.

A: I'm not a great fan of walking cats on leashes for a number of reasons, though if done right, the risks are reduced. My concerns are based on the following:

1. Many cats become used to being taken on walks and can become insistent about being taken outside.
2. Walking cats increases the door darting syndrome. This occurs when cats are allowed to exit out the door on foot. These cats are used to walking outside and understandably develop the mindset that they should be able to exit to the outside as desired.
3. Other animals always pose a threat.
4. Cats can be little Houdinis. In the right circumstances, cats can contort and twist themselves, escaping from their harnesses.
5. There is always a potential disease factor.
6. Cats love consistency and can become easily frightened and agitated in situations and places that are unfamiliar to them.

That being said, there are cats that should be walked. Walking an anxious cat is safer than letting the cat outside on its own. One of my clients has a cat that spent the first five years of her life living as an outside feral kitty. My client converted the cat to a 24/7 inside cat, but the cat still wants to go outside. Walking her at the same time every day satisfies the cat's need to go outside.

The risks can be reduced. Instead of a harness, use a walking jacket. Cats find it next to impossible to squirm out of a good walking jacket. Relatively inexpensive walking jackets that are custom-made for your cat are a good choice. They are also fun since most come in a variety of colors and designs. Your cat will be stylish as well as secure in his new form-fitting walking jacket.

Don't let your cat walk out the door. Instead pick him up in another room far from the door you will be exiting and then carry him outside. Better yet, put him in a carrier and carry him outside. Make sure that he is safe in the carrier and that the walking jacket and leash are on and that there is no way he can escape when you open the carrier.

You should always have complete control of the leash, the cat and the situation. Always be aware of what is around you. Look for potential threats such as other cats and dogs that aren't accepting of your cat's presence, even if they are only passing through. Additionally, some cats frighten easily, bolting at sudden movements.

Desensitize and start slow when training your cat to walk on a leash. Start by letting him sniff the walking jacket. After he is accustomed to the smell and texture, drape it on him for a few seconds without fastening it. It is very important to praise and treat him whenever he's around the jacket and isn't displaying any nervousness about it. After he's used to the feel of the jacket, put it on him. Take your time. Gradually increase the time that he wears it. It might take a week or so until he's comfortable with wearing the jacket. The jacket should only be on him when you are there to supervise.



After your cat is used to the jacket, put the leash on him and walk him inside the house. When he is comfortable with the leash and jacket, take him on his first outdoor adventure. His first adventure with the wilds should be in your backyard and only for a few minutes. Gradually increase the time and the area you walk him in.