

Perils in the Life of an Outdoor Cat

by Traci M. Jones

One decision every cat owner must make is whether or not their feline friend will be allowed outdoors. Many people feel that keeping their kitties indoors deprives them of a full life. However, one must consider that *the average life span of a totally outdoor cat is about a year and a half, while a totally indoor cat is expected to live upwards of 15 years.*

Aside from the obvious dangers of car fan belts and tires, [toxic plants](#), dogs and cruel people, there are many hidden dangers to cats allowed outdoors. Life-threatening dangers include:

- Diseases for which we currently do not have vaccines for (Feline Aids), or vaccines that are not reliably effective (Feline Leukemia, Feline Infectious Peritonitis).
- Heartworm. Yes, it is true that a cat can get heartworm, through mosquito bites. Shorthairs are at higher risk than longhairs.
- Antifreeze. Its sweet taste is irresistible to cats, and a cat who has walked through a small pool of antifreeze and cleans its paws has ingested a fatal dose.
- Skin cancer. Light colored kitties (especially white) are at risk for skin cancer of the ears due to exposure to direct sunlight.
- Hanging/choking. Those neat little cat collars which do not provide breakaway or stretch releases have killed many a cat.
- Fighting among outdoor kitties not only spreads disease, it can result in painful abscesses which require medical attention (an untreated abscess can kill a cat). Unaltered tom cats are prime candidates for such fighting, not to mention they will impregnate any and all receptive females they come upon.
- Toxoplasmosis. A single celled organism that cats can ingest while eating prey that has been exposed. Not only can it kill a cat, it is contagious to people and can result in severe birth defects to human babies whose mothers are exposed during pregnancy. Wearing rubber gloves while handling litter pan duties and gardening is highly recommended for pregnant women. Finding another home for your cherished pet is NOT necessary.

As if that is not enough food for thought, consider our wildlife. Cats kill many songbirds each year, plus rabbits, squirrels, mice, chipmunks, reptiles, etc. Most areas are not overrun with these creatures, and cats are not performing a necessary service by killing them.

Being neat creatures, cats bury their feces. It's not a lot of fun to be digging in your garden and get a handful of that! Not to mention that kitty excrement is not an effective fertilizer, or that your neighbor will probably not see the humor of their gardens being dug up and destroyed...

Non-life threatening things outdoor cats are exposed to can serve to make our human lives miserable also. Fleas, ticks and mites would just as soon bite you as they would the family pet, and getting them out of your home is expensive and time-consuming. These parasites can also carry life-threatening diseases. Kitties who come inside with motor oil or used chewing gum on their bodies and sit on your antique sofas cause quite a stir, also. Ringworm is sometimes contracted by a cat while outdoors digging in the dirt; this fungus is very contagious to humans.

Cats do not observe property lines by any means. To them, a fence is something to climb on, not a barrier. Your neighbor may not have a problem shooting, trapping or poisoning your family pet.

There are so many obvious benefits to keeping your cat indoors. Indoor cats are no lazier or less happy than their outdoor counterparts. Provide a window perch for them, put out a bird feeder for entertainment. There are so many toys available for cats now, both the interactive kind (a stick with a string with something fun on the end), and the toys that do not require human intervention. Avoid toys which have small parts that can come off and cause choking or gastrointestinal problems. A paper grocery bag will provide hours of entertainment for your kitty. A scratching post of some kind is a necessity.

An indoor/outdoor cat can easily be made a totally indoor cat with perseverance on your part. They may resent their confinement for a short time, but they will adjust. Another option is a safe outdoor enclosure. It must be carefully constructed, as you need to keep other animals OUT, as well as your cat in. Screen porches work well, too, just be sure to give the kitty some way to get back into your house if they need to.

Many cats live their entire lives without ever setting foot on grass. The difference in their life expectancy as well as quality of life speaks for itself.