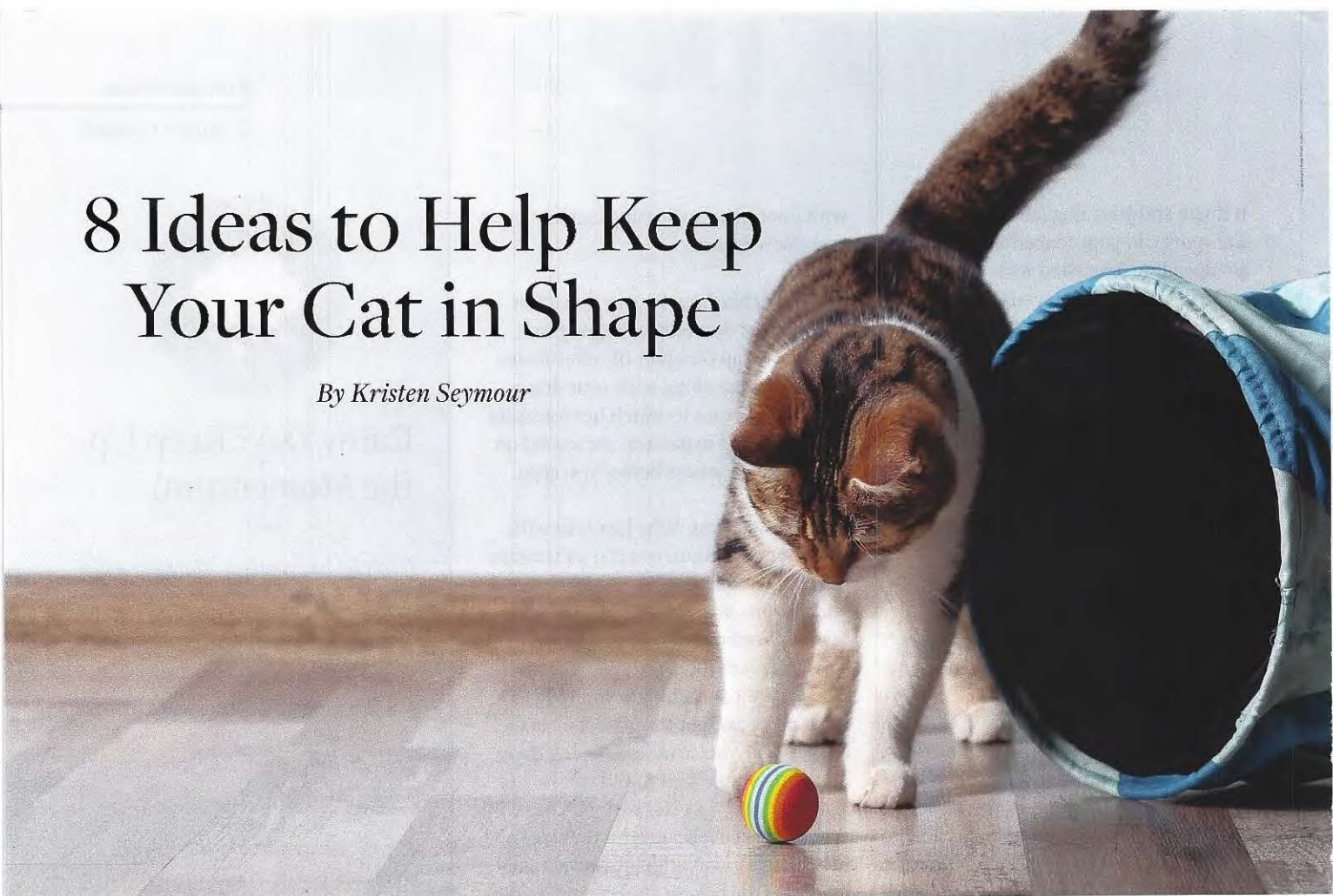


8 Ideas to Help Keep Your Cat in Shape

By Kristen Seymour



The sight of a cat peacefully snoozing in a soft spot is something that immediately brings a smile to any cat lover's face. That is, unless we're talking about a cat who spends a little too much time lounging around—and an owner who's struggling to find ways to keep the kitty active. In that case, a feline who's dozing all day might be cause for concern.

Unfortunately, the likelihood of the cat in question being overweight is high. A 2016 survey by the Association for Pet Obesity Prevention found that 59% of cats (more than 50 million!) in America were considered overweight or obese.* Excess weight can lead to an increased risk for other health issues, and an obese pet's quality of life can suffer as well.

So what should a responsible cat owner do? It's not like you can force Fluffy to do jumping jacks, right? Not exactly. But you can encourage your cat to move more—while keeping several things in mind.

BEFORE YOU PLAY

Check with your veterinarian before making any changes to your cat's activity. Cats may sometimes sleep more or lie around more because they aren't feeling well. Your vet can rule out medical causes for your cat's reduced activity. Assuming medical conditions are ruled out, your vet can also tell you about specific challenges your cat might face (for instance, if she's older or has limited mobility), help you set reasonable weight loss and exercise goals for your cat, and maybe suggest activities targeted to your kitty's individual needs.

Next, consider safety. It's often easier for a cat to climb up than it is to jump down, so if you're encouraging climbing, offer platforms (that are reasonable distances and heights apart) onto which she can jump as she comes back to earth. If you're playing leaping or chasing games, avoid stairs and sharp corners that might injure her.

Take notice if there are areas where your cat seems more likely to play, as previous experiences (encounters with dogs, skidding into a wall) could make certain areas feel less safe to her. You might also see that she prefers playing at certain times of day. And always use positive reinforcement (like offering low-calorie treats or petting as a reward) when encouraging your feline to be frisky—never punish her for opting out.

GET YOUR CAT MOVING

1 Provide high and low places for your cat to climb and scratch.

Got a cat tree? Place it near a window so she can gaze outside, and give her a few treats at the top so she has a strong incentive to climb. Horizontal scratchers are great too—just take note of what your kitty likes best.

2 Incorporate food puzzles. A variety of food puzzles cater to all levels of energy and problem-solving ability, and all require at least some movement.

Start by putting tasty, low-calorie treats in the puzzle to make sure your cat is interested in using it. Over time, start replacing the treats with small portions of food. Depending on your cat's response, you may be able to gradually increase use of the puzzle. If she's not getting all of her food out of the puzzle each day, feed her the remainder in a bowl. What if kitty's just not interested in puzzles? Try creating a scavenger hunt with normal bowls scattered throughout your home to encourage exploration.

3 Teach your cat new tricks. Clicker training isn't just for dogs! Cats can learn lots of commands when provided with the proper incentive. You might consider adding a target stick, which you train your cat to touch for a reward. Using this, you can train her to go to various spots (like her carrier) and even go through a homemade obstacle course!

4 Take your cat for a walk. If your kitty isn't skittish, she might enjoy walking with you outside on a harness. Use the same reward-based training you used to teach her tricks, rewarding her each time she takes a step or two on leash indoors. Once she's comfortable, venture outdoors! Just make sure your cat's up-to-date on her parasite preventives first. (These preventives are important for all cats—see the articles starting on pages 2 and 10 to learn why.) For more advice on walking your cat on leash, talk to your vet, and check out the articles at Vetstreet.com (enter "walking your cat on leash" in the search bar).

5 Explore different types of play. Not all cats love the same toys, and sometimes tastes change with age. Some toys, like those on a wand, encourage jumping (which can be difficult for older or heavier cats), while toys like small balls are made for chasing, and yet

others are designed to promote kicking or pouncing. If your kitty isn't into athletic movements, encourage her to bat at a feather toy without running and leaping—this will enable her to use her muscles with less stress on potentially achy joints. Is your cat always losing her toys? Toss a ball into a dry bathtub for some hockey-esque action (if desired, add a rubber mat to give your cat better traction and help protect your tub).

6 Change up the toys available to your cat. You don't have to go out and buy all new toys, but switch out the toys that are out in the open on a regular basis. Notice what your cat goes back to and, when it's time to buy a new toy, opt for something similar.

7 Dip into the 'nip. Whether you use catnip toys or sprinkle catnip on a surface you'd like her to check out (like her cat tree or scratcher), you might find

it's just what's needed to convince your cat that the added activity is worthwhile.

8 Give her additional opportunities to play. When you get a box in the mail or bring home a paper bag from the store, leave it out for your cat to explore. Make the box or bag more appealing by tossing in a toy or sprinkling some catnip in it.

Pay attention to what your cat responds to, get creative, and be ready to watch your feline's fitness flourish!



Kristen Seymour shares her office with a small gray cat named Trixie, who happens to be partial to horizontal scratchers and toys designed to be pounced upon and kicked—usually around 4 AM, and always just a few feet from where Kristen is trying to sleep.



*Association for Pet Obesity Prevention. 2016 survey results. petobesityprevention.org/2016. Accessed January 5, 2018.