

Introducing a Cat to a New Territory: The Importance of Confinement

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When introducing any cat into a new home, there's one thing they all need – time to adjust to their new space. You can make the adjustment period shorter by letting your cat get to know his or her new home slowly. Many adopters hesitate to confine their cats, thinking it's "mean," but the nicest thing you can do for your cat is give him a "safe space" at first.

Cats are territorial by nature, and their first priority in any situation is establishing and knowing their territory. Only once they're comfortable in their space can they feel comfortable eating, drinking, resting and eliminating.



The safe space should be a small, quiet room (bathrooms, small offices or large walk-in closets are all good candidates) without any hiding spaces such as under the tub or bed, behind a bookshelf, etc. You don't want to have to pull your cat out of hiding to interact with him – that would be getting your visit off to a very bad start. However, you can provide your cat with an acceptable hiding space by tipping a box on its side and putting a towel inside. Many cats also like cat cozies or tee-pee style beds.

The room should be set up with a litter box on one end of the room, and the food, water and bedding as far away from the litter box as possible. Your cat should be given some safe toys to play with, and should be given visits while confined to this space. Start off slow when visiting your kitty – don't do too much petting or interacting until he has had some time to settle in. Sit in the room and see if your cat will approach you; if not, offer him your hand to sniff and try some gentle face pets. Give your cat frequent breaks and work up to more handling. Be patient and remember: the more love, the quicker they will adjust!

Confinement is especially crucial for shy or fearful cats. Many cats are overwhelmed when they first move into a new place; this is normal behavior. However, for a cat who is fearful by nature, it's even more terrifying to be in an unfamiliar space. Given the free run of the house, a scared cat will often bolt around, looking for a safe place to hide. Many cats injure themselves running into furniture or walls in a panic. They may also hide somewhere unsafe (such as under the stove, inside a reclining chair) and stay in hiding for several days. They may forego eating, or even urinate or defecate in their hiding space. Their "safe room" gives them a small space where they feel secure and will also make them more sociable with you – the less they are worried about their territory, the more interested in YOU they will be! By providing your scared kitty with a cozy space to hide in, you are making him feel safe in a way that also allows you to pet him while he's hiding (as opposed to trying to crawl under your bed to interact with him!).

Kittens also benefit from an initial confinement to a small room (or even to a large crate). This will give you time to kitten-proof the rest of your house. When you're away from home, you will want to confine a smaller kitten for three reasons: it reinforces good litter box habits; it prevents accidents where the kitten might injure himself; and it means you don't have to search high and low for your kitten when you return home!



When moving to a new home, it's best to confine your cat to a safe room before and after the move. The more you can prevent him from being exposed to the chaos of lots of people walking around, moving all the things that are familiar to him, the better! If he's startled by the commotion, there's a good chance he could slip outside when doors are left open. Be sure anyone helping with the move knows there is a cat in the room (a sign on the door will let everyone know) so they know to be aware. Eliminate chances for escape when transporting your cat to his new home by putting him in a secure carrier while he's still in the safe room. In the new house, again give him a safe room to adjust to before allowing him full access of the house.

When bringing a new cat into a home with resident kitties, the new cat should be confined to one room for a few days (sometimes weeks). This allows the cats to get to know each other by scent and accept each other's presence without having to see one another face-to-face, which can be a very threatening experience for a cat. Please refer to the **Cat-To-Cat Introduction Protocol** handout for more instructions on this subject.

You may be wondering when you can be sure it's okay to let your kitty out of his safe space. For some cats, the confinement period will be only a few hours – for others it could be several weeks. The important thing is to not rush your cat before he's ready. You will want to see **all** of the following:

1. He's performing his natural functions: eating, resting, grooming, using the litter box.
2. He's responsive, allowing you to pet and play with him.
3. He's comfortable with you doing normal activities in the room, and is not afraid of you when you stand up or walk around.
4. He's showing some interest in getting out of the room.

Don't mistake just one signal for readiness. Even a very scared cat may meow or scratch at the door for attention. This does not mean the cat is ready to explore more space – for example, if you notice that the cat meows at the door, but when you open the door, he runs and cowers back in his bed or box, he's not ready. When possible, expand a cat's territory slowly (especially for fearful cats). You could close all the doors to bedrooms and allow the cat to first explore the hallway and rooms that do not close off (such as the kitchen and living room). If at any time your cat seems overwhelmed, return him to his safe room for a few hours and try again later.

Don't feel bad for confining your kitty at first. It will help him relax and adjust to his new surroundings much faster. The sooner he adjusts, the sooner he'll have full run of the house, and the sooner he will feel comfortable in his new home!

If you have a pet behavior question or would like some training assistance,
San Diego Humane Society is here to help!
Visit our website at www.sdhumane.org to view our behavior and training options,
or call our **Behavior Helpline at 619-299-7012 ext. 2244** to speak with a trainer.