

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

When introducing any cat into a new home, there is one thing all cats 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 is “mean” but the nicest thing you could 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 are 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. The 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 the cat has had some time to “settle in.” Sit in the room and see if the cat will approach you; if not, offer her 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 that is fearful by nature, it is 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. The “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 or box to hide in, you are making her feel safe in a way that also allows you to pet her while she is hiding (as opposed to trying to crawl under your bed to interact with her!).

Kittens also benefit from an initial confinement to a small room (or even to a large cage/crate. This will give you time to kitten-proof the rest of your house. When you are 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 her/himself; and it means you don’t have to search high and low for your kitten when you return home! This is especially true if you have a large home.



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When moving to a new home, it is 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 is startled by the commotion, there is a good chance he could slip outside when doors are left open. Be sure that anyone helping with the move knows there is a cat in the room (a sign on the door will let everyone know) so they don't accidentally open the door. Eliminate chances for escape when transporting your cat to his new home by putting him in a secure carrier while he is 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 each other face to face, which can be a very threatening experience for a cat. Please refer to our [Cat To Cat Introduction Protocol](#) handout for more instructions on this subject.

You may be wondering when you can be sure that it's okay to let your kitty out of her 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 that you do not rush your cat into being exposed to more space than she can handle. You will want to see all of the following:

1. The cat is performing his or her natural functions: eating, resting, grooming, using the litter box.
2. The cat is responsive, allowing you to pet and play with her.
3. The cat is comfortable with you doing normal activities in the room, and is not afraid of you when you stand up or walk around.
4. The cat is 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 introducing him to the rest of the house later.

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

