



Leash Training a Cat

Scientific principles can be used to train most animals to walk on leashes. Cats are both hunters and prey, and so they chase small animals and flee from frightening, unfamiliar things. Overcome this by training gradually using food.



Let your cat set the pace.

Time spent on each training step will vary with your cat's personality. Multiple ten-minute training sessions with breaks between them will keep it fun, not frustrating, for your cat. The more frequently you work with your cat, the faster your cat will learn to walk on a leash.

This is a sample training plan:

1. Choose a harness and leash that are the right size for your cat.

Avoid retractable leashes which may injure cats. I use this Cat-It brand harness with a leash for small dogs:



2. Find a quiet area of your home for training.

3. Expose your cat to the harness and leash inside, away from anything scary.

- a. Place the harness near your cat. Give him a treat if he looks at or moves toward it.
- b. Briefly, gently, place the harness, on your cat's back. Give your cat a treat, then remove the harness.
- c. Clip one of the harness clips & give your cat a treat, then take the harness off
- d. Clip two of the clips, give a treat, then remove the harness.
- e. Once he is calm while you put the harness on, you can leave it on for longer periods. Pet your cat and feed him while he wears his harness.
- f. Attach the leash to the harness. Give him a treat.

Watch your cat closely – his body language shows if he is distracted or scared. If he stares very intently, away from you, he is distracted (hunting). If the training isn't moving smoothly, he may be stressed. If the hair on his tail and back becomes extra puffy, he may be scared.

4. Walk Indoors:

- a. Fill your pocket with cat food.
- b. While your cat wears the harness/leash, hold the leash in your hand. Stand still.
- c. If your cat looks at you, give him a piece of food.
- d. Give your cat a treat every time he walks toward you.

Cats are sensitive to the feeling of the harnesses touching their sides. If your cat runs away from you while you hold the leash, the leash becomes tense causing sudden pressure on your cat's body. This may make him feel scared, like he's being attacked by a larger predator.

- e. Practice taking a step forward. Quickly give your cat a treat if he walks with you.
- f. Gradually increase this to take more steps with your cat, while rewarding him.
- g. Practice this multiple times, then practice in other rooms of your house.

5. Train a safety "recall":

- a. Call your cat's name before you feed him. Give him food when he comes to you.
- b. Call his name from different rooms of your house, giving him treats when he comes to you.

6. Walk Outside

- a. Find a quiet, low-distraction outdoor area.
- b. Practice walking through the door with your cat. Give him treats when he walks through the door.
- c. Once he is outside, give him treats if he looks at you or moves toward you.
- d. Take a very short walk with him -just one or two steps at first, giving him treats every time he looks at you or walks with you, then go inside.
- e. Practice many short walks with treat rewards.
- f. Build this into longer walks. Train at your cat's pace. Training should stay interestingly challenging for him, but not frighteningly fast.

Watch for anything that might distract or scare your cat. Cats see moving objects better than we do, and their senses of smell and hearing are much better than ours. Indoor cats have not experienced most things outside, so walks can be overwhelming for them at first. Gradual exposure to the outdoors with treats will get them used to these things and help them walk with you. Avoid car traffic and areas with dogs who might chase or injure your cat. Keep your cat's favourite food with you on walks so you can give him food and get his attention on you if something outside startles him. It is important that you stay calm while leash-training so that you can reassure him and build his confidence on walks.

-- Joanna Berger, Animal Behaviour Consultancy

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