

# Play with your cat and be rewarded with fewer 'gifts'

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If you are tired of your cat coming home with a bird in its mouth, try feeding it more meat and playing with it more often.

Researchers have found that cats which are fed meat rather than other kinds of protein feel less inclined to go hunting for birds or rodents. And playing with them – particularly in ways that mimic hunting, such as dangling a toy above their outstretched paws – satisfies a primal urge and curbs their predatory instincts.

“Our study shows that – using entirely non-invasive, non-restrictive methods – owners can change what the cats themselves want to do,” said Robbie McDonald, of the University of Exeter. “By playing with cats and changing their diets, owners can reduce their impact on wildlife without restricting their freedom.”

His fellow researcher, Martina Cecchetti, added: “Some cat foods contain protein from plant sources such as soy, and it is possible that despite forming a ‘complete diet’ these foods leave some cats deficient in one or more micronutrients – prompting them to hunt.”

The academics found that where proteins were derived from meat, it

reduced the number of prey animals brought home to cat owners by 36 per cent. Other experiments allowed cats to stalk, chase and pounce on a feather toy dangled by their owner on a string and wand.

Owners also gave cats a mouse-like toy to play with after each “hunt”, mimicking a real kill. As little as five to 10 minutes a day of such play reduced predation by 25 per cent, the study found.

By contrast, the use of puzzle feeders was found to be counterproductive, with owners finding that their cats brought home even more prey animals than before.

Lisa George, from Helston in Cornwall, looks after Minnie, a three-year-old tabby cat which took part in the trial. Ms George said: “Minnie loves to hunt. More often than not, she will bring her prey home and let it go in the house. We have had birds in the bedroom, rats in the waste paper bin, rabbits in the utility room.

“On changing Minnie’s food I found that she hardly hunted at all.”

**(i)** The researchers enrolled **219 households and 355 cats** in South West England for the 12-week trial to test the effect of such strategies on hunting by cats.



Minnie’s owner Lisa George says her pet loves to hunt and has in the past brought home live birds, rats and rabbits – and let them go in the house PA