

Nocturnal Activity

Cats may be known for their propensity to sleep away a good portion of their lives but when they are awake, cats can be very active. These periods of activity often happen during the night. The cat may want to play, eat, or simply want company. Young cats in particular can drive their owners crazy from sleep deprivation!

Your cat's ancestor, the African wildcat, is predominantly nocturnal. Domestication has shifted the cat's activity patterns to be more diurnal (awake during the day), but they still tend to wake at least twice during the night. The good news is that you can retrain your cat to let you sleep in peace.

IMPORTANT: If you own a cat who has traditionally not bothered you, but is now restlessly wandering about the house and crying during the night, there may be an underlying medical problem. If your cat is also eating noticeably more, she may have an overactive thyroid (hyperthyroidism), which can be easily controlled with medication. To be on the safe side, have the cat checked by your veterinarian.

What to do:

- Schedule a few play sessions with your cat during the evening. Interactive play is best, using toys that mimic the movement of mice and birds, such as cat dancers and kitty teasers. Games with Ping-Pong balls, soft balls, and furry "mice" toys are great for kitties who like to fetch. Try to play until the cat is tired.
- Feed the cat a main meal just before your bedtime. Cats tend to sleep after a big meal. If your cat continues to wake you during the night for food, obtain a timed feeder that you can set to open once or twice, with fresh food, during the night. The cat will learn to wait by the feeder rather than bother you. Make sure you adjust meal sizes so your cat doesn't gain weight.
- Incorporate a variety of enrichment activities to keep your cat busy during the day. The more active your cat is during the day, the more likely she will sleep at night. See our information on enrichment for helpful tips.
- If your cat is social with other cats, consider adding a second cat to your family. If the cats are compatible, they will play with each other and be more likely to leave you alone. But be forewarned—conversely, they may both decide to play during the night!
- If your cat tries to play with you or wake you while you're sleeping, you may need to banish the cat from your bedroom. Playful cats have been known to unintentionally injure their sleeping owners—for instance,

the cat may notice your eyes moving under your lids and swat at your face in play. If your cat cries and scratches at the door, you can discourage her by placing something

she dislikes in front of the door, such as vinyl carpet-runner (placed upside-down to expose the knobby feet), double-sided sticky tape, foil, or a Scat Mat™. Alternatively, you can set up a "booby trap" outside your door. For example, mount your blow dryer or place your vacuum cleaner by the door and plug it into a remote switch, which you can find at Radio Shack. When your cat wakes you, you can hit a button on the remote to turn on the appliance. The startled cat will be unlikely to return to your door after that!

What not to do:

- Do not get up and attend to the cat—unless, of course, you suspect something is wrong. If you rise and feed the cat, play with her, or even interact with her for a few minutes, you are reinforcing the cat for waking you up. She will likely become more persistent each subsequent night. Even scolding the cat is unlikely to work, because negative attention is better than no attention at all for some cats.

Dealing with your nighttime troublemakers:

Certain cats believe that nighttime is the right time for making merry. Whether it's a rousing game of Hop on Pop or the feline equivalent of the Hallelujah Chorus, nighttime escapades can turn a cat keeper's sunny disposition cloudy within a few sleep-deprived nights.

In the wild, cats are most active at dawn and dusk—the most opportune times for hunting birds and rodents, respectively. To maintain the energy needed to successfully stalk and pounce, the average cat sleeps approximately eighteen hours a day by taking multiple catnaps. With their cats' inherent need for so much sleep, why do so many humans find themselves an unwilling audience to feline nocturnes?

Youthful Energy

When it comes to excessive nocturnal activity, single kittens and feline adolescents are the worst offenders. The youngsters are bursting with energy and an abundant desire to engage in play. They are easily set in motion—and predatory play—by the smallest twitch, such as a toe wiggling under a light blanket. Some sleepers have even been awakened by a kitten batting at their eyelids during the rapid eye movement stage of sleep!

If this is you, don't despair. Engaging young felines in interactive play an hour or so before bedtime can tire them out. What cat can pass up swatting and leaping at a feather wand or fishing pole toy? Providing a late snack can also buy you some peace, as can making the bedroom as dark



as possible, since cats cannot see in total darkness. They are quite adept at getting around in low light, however.

The extremely playful cat may need to retire to her own playroom at the other end of the home. Here, she can expend her energies knocking around pingpong balls or dangling toys to her heart's content without disturbing her human companion. This nighttime isolation is usually only necessary until the cat matures. For working households, the addition of a second young cat with a similar activity level can be a godsend. The two felines will become fast friends while stalking and pouncing on each other as the humans go about their business.

Who's in Charge Here?

At quarter to five, you feel a light tap on your cheek; at ten to five, a more insistent tap. By 5 a.m., the tap is replaced by a head bump, a furry body wipe to the face and an impatient screech near your ear. At this juncture, how many cat caretakers have bartered for an extra hour or two of sleep by getting up and filling the food bowl? Unfortunately, the cat has now been richly rewarded for the behavior, and rewarded behaviors become fixed behaviors. Grisabella has trained you to do her bidding. But you can change these behaviors with time and patience. Assuming you feed your cat the appropriate amount of food to fulfill her daily nutritional requirements, when the cat comes tapping, turn over and ignore her. When she ups the ante, pull the covers over your head or play 'possum. No matter how insistent she becomes, do not get up and feed her or you will be putty in her paws. Unrewarded behaviors will eventually disappear.

Moonlight Serenade

Nocturnal arias come from two quarters—estrous females and geriatric felines. The case of the hormonally charged female vocalizing for suitors is simple to solve: spay her! The geriatric cat presents more of a challenge. If your senior feline begins to keep you up nights, a trip to the veterinarian is in order. Elderly cats may appear more restless at night for many reasons. As mammals age, their sleep-wake cycles change. As some senses dim, others become hypersensitive. Their ability to handle environmental changes lessen, and they become more easily stressed. Illnesses, such as hyperthyroidism, can also be responsible for excessive vocalizations. In most cases, the specific reason for vocalizations in your cat can be determined through careful history taking and medical testing. By making a few changes, you will soon find yourself nodding off to the throaty purr of a contented cat.

If you need further assistance go to www.petsforlife.org,
www.mobilespca.org or email the Mobile SPCA
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