

Managing Feline Nighttime Activity

Is your cat loud or active at night? This is a common challenge for feline pet owners. While there are many possible causes, high levels of nighttime activity can absolutely be managed. Cats are in fact *not* nocturnal (most active at night); they are **crepuscular**, meaning most active at dawn and dusk—right when you'd most like to be in bed!

Possible Causes

Medical causes

It's always important to consider a medical cause of an undesirable behavior, ESPECIALLY if it is a new behavior. Skin conditions, parasites and nerve conditions can all cause erratic behavior. Ruling out a medical condition is always a first step when looking to modify behavior!

Not enough satisfying energy outlets

The average cat sleeps for 16-18 hours a day. That's a lot of energy to build up! This means that during the hours they are awake, their bodies are telling them to hunt. We know that behavior as something else—play! Cats are hardwired to be active in catching and killing their prey (read: toys). Frustration and excitability can build up if these needs are not met. Without a satisfying outlet for that energy, your kitty might choose activities you don't prefer. This is especially true during the times their bodies are telling them they should be hunting!

Mismatched circadian rhythm

Does your cat's sleeping routine not match yours? Cats can certainly change their circadian rhythms, but it takes some commitment on their human's part to help them along. Their behavior could be due to confusion and frustration that you aren't awake and active when they are.

Practiced behavior –have they trained YOU?

Cats are experts in *doing things that get them what they want*. Do prowling and yowling produce specific responses from you?

- **Feed me!** Are they hungry? If your cat's noisemaking prompts you to feed them (even if it only happened once!) they will be far more likely to continue the behavior.
- **Entertain me!** Is your cat bored? If your cat is entertained by you responding to their antics, they will be more likely to continue the behavior.
- **Pay attention to me!** If your cat craves your attention or companionship and gets any amount of it when acting out, they will be more likely to continue the behavior.
 - NOTE: *Even scolding can be reinforcing for some cats!* If you are paying attention to them (even if it is what you would perceive as negative attention, such as shouting, or spraying with water) they have still succeeded in achieving their goal.

Spay/Neuter status

Is your cat fixed? Both male and female cats communicate vocally when they are looking for a sexual partner. It's possible communicating with unseen cats is a factor contributing to their nighttime activity. Consider a spay or neuter surgery to curb this behavior.

Recent life changes

Change is tough for cats! A new home, a new family member, a change in routine, being able to see new cats out the window—all these things can trigger new behaviors. Stress can drastically affect the ways cats interact with their space.



Suggested solutions

Scheduled active play sessions. Designate a few times a day to get your cat's heartrate up! Not just throwing a ball around—make sure you have interactive toys like wand, cat dancer, or fishing pole style toys that put YOU in the driver's seat. Aim for at least 10 minutes 2x/day. Have a busy schedule? Try squeezing these sessions in between normal activities, such as waiting for water to boil in the morning or during the commercial breaks of a TV show.

Capitalize on their play cycle. Cat's bodies work on a specific routine where food and energy are concerned. This is a documented routine in both wild and domestic cats; **Hunt > Catch > Kill > Eat > Groom > Sleep**. After the exertion and excitement of hunting comes the satiation of eating, then grooming, then relaxing to digest. This can work to our benefit! If we designate specific times for exertion and satiation, cats' bodies will respond in kind. Try to have a big play session BEFORE feeding your cat their meal—they are more likely to settle down afterwards.

Try environmental management. These options aren't cure-alls, but can be starting points while you build your new routine. A cat can't step on your face at night if they aren't allowed in the bedroom. They are less likely to yowl to a neighbor if the window is closed. Your cat won't need to come to you for food if you install an auto-feeder. Your cat can't annoy you by meowing at the door if you are wearing earplugs.

Ignore what you don't want... If your cat is banging on your closed bedroom door, walking on your face, or otherwise disturbing you at night, punishment and scolding can backfire (see above!). If you ignore an unwanted behavior and *it never works for the cat again*, they will abandon the behavior. Be ready however! If the behavior has worked in the past, you *will* see an escalation of the behavior before it decreases. Stay strong!

...and reinforce what you do! Make alternate, more appropriate activities more desirable than the behaviors you are trying to get rid of.

- **Add enrichment.** Offering your cat a puzzle feeder can be a great way to occupy them at night. These come in all shapes, sizes, difficulties and price ranges, from fancy rigs to DIY. Check out Dr. Mikel Delgado's website www.foodpuzzlesforcats.com for a comprehensive overview!
- **Offer access to a heated bed.** Cats have a "thermoneutral zone" (i.e. temperature at which they are most comfortable) of 85 degrees! This means that they are often seeking out the warmest areas to occupy. Offering them a heated cat bed can give them a desirable alternative to sleeping on your face.
- **Consider adding a kitty playmate!** If your cat is amenable and it's safe to do so, adding a new feline friend can be a great constructive energy and social outlet for when you are sleeping.
- **Consider an auto feeder.** If food is your cat's motivation for yowling, having an auto feeder can help. This is often useful when used in conjunction with puzzle toys containing treats.
- **Add environmental enrichment at bedtime.** Does your cat love delivery boxes? Do they enjoy catnip, or exploring tunnel and tube toys? Keep these high value enrichment items sequestered until it's time to sleep. The goal is twofold; hopefully your cats will want to pay more attention to the enrichment than to bothering you, and consistently providing fun stimuli will give them a positive association to you retiring for the night.

Track your progress!

Dealing with nighttime activity can be a very stressful process. Keeping a log of your cat's preferences, speedbumps and successes can be a wonderful tool. When you find something that works or changes the game, stick with it! When you have a cat exhibiting nighttime activity, days can feel like weeks. Tracking your progress helps to keep your journey in perspective, and help you identify what works!