

Excessive Nocturnal Activity in Cats

Why does my cat seem to be most active at nights?

Some cats are active at night or awake and “raring to go” very early in the morning. Since many owners are out at work or school during the day the cat may spend the daytime hours in rest and relaxation, especially if it is the only pet in the household. The cat’s day then begins when the owner arrives home to provide the cat with feeding, play and social interaction. This is also the most natural time for cats to be active since they normally are most active in hunting and exploration at dusk and dawn (this is known as crepuscular). Typical complaints are cats that

nibble or even attack the owner’s ears or toes in bed, walking across the sleeping owners, nighttime vocalization, or explosive, uncontrollable play sessions across the furniture and/or owners, during the night or early morning. Some owners inadvertently reward the behavior by giving the cat a little food, affection, or attention to try and calm the cat.



How can I stop my cat from keeping me up at night?

You must learn to schedule and encourage play and feeding during the daytime and evening hours, so that the cat’s schedule more closely matches that of your household. Adjusting the timing of feeding or the type of food may help to alter the cat’s sleep schedule. For example, eating a few hours earlier or later, or increasing the evening meal to one that is higher in carbohydrates may help to alter the cat’s schedule just enough that it sleeps through the night.

Keeping the cat awake and active by playing, feeding and interacting with the cat throughout the afternoon and evening, can resolve the problem in some cats. Since nighttime activity may be a form of social play and attention seeking behavior, the first consideration is whether the cat is getting sufficient amounts of social interaction and social play during the daytime. This may be particularly problematic for an only cat in the household and an owner who works all day. Offering several social play sessions with chase toys, as well as some reward based training exercises might help to fill this need. In addition, the cats daytime hours can be further enriched by offering fewer more frequent meals, perhaps in foraging and play toys, as well as new objects of exploration each day (See our handouts on play and enriching the lives of indoor cats). Catnaps in the evening should be discouraged.

If the cat continues to disturb you during the night, confining your cat out of the bedroom, as far out of earshot as possible, and providing it with a comfortable sleeping area and litter may do the trick. Do not provide food through the night as this encourages the cat to stay awake. However, providing a litter box, a play area for climbing, scratching and perching and a few favorite play toys may help your cat to feel more comfortable in the area. If the cat sleeps through most of the night but wakes very early for food, placing a self-feeder in the room (one timed to deliver food at 5 am) may do the “trick”.

How should I respond to the cat’s vocalization and nighttime activity?

Cats that are vocal during nighttime hours must be ignored. Going to the cat or giving attention in any way will only serve to reward the demanding behavior. Cats that scratch or bat at the bedroom door can be kept away by the use of an upside down carpet runner, electronic pet mat or perhaps a motion detector (although it might disturb the owner). Motion detector spray devices are also available (See our handout on ‘Behavior management products’). If the cat is overly vocal, lock it away in as sound proof an area as possible such as a washroom, or a cat carrier in a distant bedroom. Nested corrugated cardboard boxes around the cage help to further reduce the noise.

What if it is necessary to have the cat sleep in the bedroom?

If you decide that your cat would do best if allowed to stay in the bedroom, you must remember that any attention whatsoever will further reinforce the behavior. React to the demanding cat with inattention. However if the cat persists or the behavior escalates to a point where it cannot be ignored, punishment may be effective.



It should first be noted that punishment is generally contraindicated in cats because punishment that is too mild is likely to be ineffective and may actually serve to provide enough play or attention to reward the behavior. Punishment that is too harsh on the other hand could lead to an increase in anxiety, fear of the owner and even aggression. If punishment is to be used, devices that quickly deter the cat without the need for owner contact, such as a water sprayer, air horn, ultrasonic device or compressed air or a spray of citronella are usually the safest and most effective.

Is there medication that might help?

If all else fails and the cat does not sleep through the night with behavioral techniques alone, your veterinarian may be able to provide some medication to help your cat fall asleep for the first few nights. There may be natural sleep aids such as melatonin or valerian or drugs such as antihistamines and benzodiazepines that can help to induce sleep. However, after a few nights of success, if you have not established a new routine then the drugs may no longer be effective.

*This client information sheet is based on material written by Debra Horwitz, DVM, Diplomate ACVB & Gary Landsberg, DVM, Diplomate ACVB
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