



Peninsula Humane Society & SPCA

Nocturnal Activity in Cats

Does your cat like to scurry around the house at 3 A.M., running across your bed, meowing up a storm and batting balls across the hardwood floor? It's perfectly natural for cats to be active at nighttime! If you find this behavior annoying, don't punish your cat. Instead, consider the following tips to help you get a good night's rest.

Treatment

There are a couple reasons your cat could be keeping you up at night. If your cat meows all night long, take him to the vet immediately. He could have a medical condition that is causing him to cry. Some cats might try to wake you up because they are bored, and simply want to play. Many cats get into the habit of waking their owners up early in the morning because they want to be fed.

The first goal in solving behavior problems is to not make matters worse. Your efforts to discourage the cat may actually be reinforcing the misbehavior. Some people might get up and play with the cat, thinking he is lonely. Others feed the cat when he pesters them; in this case, the cat quickly figures out he can wake the owner up earlier and earlier to be fed! Without realizing it, many cat owners actually train their cat to wake them because they've been rewarding their cat's behavior with food or attention.

It may sound insensitive, but if your cat tries to wake you up for food or attention, the best way to get rid of this behavior is to ignore your cat's attempts to wake you up. This takes persistence and self control, but your cat will give up eventually! If the cat is biting you to the point it is impossible to ignore the behavior, you may need to lock your cat out of your bedroom at night for the time being.

If your cat is pestering you for food, you can try feeding her later in the evening. Also, stop feeding your cat right after you get up in the morning. Instead, do a few other morning chores first (put on the coffee, read the paper), before feeding your cat. This way, your cat will not associate you getting out of bed with immediately being fed. This will make your cat less anxious to wake you up.

Given the choice, most cats will sleep all day. At about 8 or 9 pm, they will rise, stretch, scratch, eliminate, and go about the nightly business of being a cat. Cats are naturally most active in the middle/late evening and dawn. This schedule is 180 degrees out of phase with yours. Therefore, you need to change the cat's working schedule from night-shift to day-shift.

You cannot expect the cat to sleep 24 hours a day. He needs to play and be active some time. If you do not provide him with daytime activity, he'll spend the day asleep. Rather than letting him doze all evening while you are watching television, get down on the floor, and play with your cat! If possible, make sure these play sessions last at least 15 minutes. Tie a feather or a piece of crumpled tinfoil to a length of string and run around the house, dragging the toy. Provide him with several tall scratching posts to climb. You can even train a cat to fetch a toy! If you tire a cat out in the evening, he will sleep better through the night. If he still becomes active late at night, provide him with quiet (i.e. soft) toys until he is fully acclimated to a day-shift routine. Rotate these toys to avoid boredom.

If you are still not getting your beauty sleep, contact our Behavior Helpline listed below.

For more info, call our free Behavior Helpline (650/340-7022 x783 or, for Spanish, x786) or consider a low-cost consultation. To make a consultation appointment, call 650/340-7022 x667. The PHS/SPCA Behavior Department, like many shelter programs, is funded by donations.