

# Cat: Nocturnal Behavior in Cats



Has your kitten been waking you up at 5 AM for food and a good play session or even keeping you up all night playing vigorously with toys he ignores during the day? Pouncing on your feet the moment you finally fall asleep? Or has your senior cat who sleeps all day become vocal all night and not able to fall asleep?

**There are two different categories of nocturnal behaviors in the cat:**

**1. The young cat** being active due to being “crepuscular” (which means they’re most active at dawn and at dusk). This is the best **hunting time** and although our cats are domesticated and rarely have to hunt for their food, this behavior is still engrained and can lead to higher levels of activity and play behavior during those hours of the day. It’s important to remember that as far as the cat is concerned these behaviors are normal, although guardians often call them “bad habits.”

**2. The senior cat** being active at night due to **shifts in the sleep cycle**, which can be signs of onset of cognitive dysfunction, and vocalization due to changes/loss in hearing ability or even anxieties. Any senior cat with the onset of such changes in sleep cycles should be examined by your veterinarian first.

This handout will hopefully provide you and your cat with a better night’s sleep.

## Prevention and Modification

These tips can be used to prevent and modify behaviors with kittens, adult, as well as senior cats.

- **Establish a routine.** Set your cat’s routine to match yours. If your cat is very playful, and you keep a late schedule, begin your nightly playtime at around 11:30 PM. Give the cat his big meal of the day just before you go to bed. It is NOT imperative (despite your cat’s thoughts on the subject) that you feed (or play with) the cat when you FIRST get up in the morning or when you FIRST arrive home from work. Feeding a cat first thing in the morning will only increase his desire to wake you up earlier and earlier because he will associate your waking up with the reward of being fed. To discourage this, take a shower, have your breakfast, play with him for a few minutes and THEN feed him. Whatever your personal schedule is, include your cat! The important thing is to decide on a schedule and stick to it.
- **Daily exercise.** Your cat needs daily exercise no matter what age or what time of day it occurs. Many cats, in fact, need 2 or more 20–30 minute play sessions with INTERACTIVE toys. Interactive is the key word here because the cat’s playtime is also his bonding time with you. The more time you spend interacting directly with your cat, the closer the bond between the two of you will be. Yes, lap time is interactive too, but playtime will keep his mind and body engaged with you and will tire him out, which will help him sleep better at night. A good play session before bedtime is essential for a good night’s sleep for you both!
- **Mental Stimulation.** Don’t let your cat sleep all day; keep him stimulated! There are ways to do this, even while you’re away. Open the curtains, set up a birdfeeder by the window, fill a Kong® toy or treat ball with food before you leave in the morning, leave the TV turned on to a nature channel, or play a “Video Catnip” style video (the movie Winged Migration seems to be a big hit in the cat world), change it up and leave out a paper bag one day and a big cardboard box the next. Change the location where the food is so your cat can “hunt” for it. Put catnip on the cat tree when you first get home from work, and rotate any solo play toys

## Cat: Nocturnal Behavior in Cats *(continued)*

to keep it interesting. These are just a few options. Use your own imagination to keep kitty entertained!

- **Special places for play.** Establish a location (or two) in your home where you play. This could be the living room, the kitchen, or the cat tree. We strongly suggest that you NOT make the bedroom one of those play places. This will only confuse the cat, if during the day he can play there, but at night he cannot. NEVER play with the cat on your bed.
- **Pick up the toys at night.** Before bedtime, make a general sweep of the house and pick up anything that rolls, bounces, or makes noise. If your cat isn't tempted, it's a lot more likely he'll sleep. If you have the rare cat who plays quietly, you can leave the toys out.
- **Sleep alone.** Many of us can't imagine a night spent away from our furry friends, but if those friends are keeping us up at night, one choice is to sleep in a separate room. Give the kitty his own room, or close your door. You might have to try both options to see which one works better.
- **Ignore attention-seeking behavior and play elicitation from your cat when you want to sleep.** If you choose to sleep alone, you MUST enforce your choice by NOT rewarding your cat's attention-seeking behavior. It may take weeks for him to stop pounding on your door, but if you EVER open it while he's knocking, he will try even harder the next time you don't feel like opening. One option for the door pounding is to use double sided tape (they sell wide rolls of this at pet stores, but test it out first as it may remove paint) on the outside of the door. Most cats don't like the sticky sensation on their paws, so they won't touch it. This can often bring about a quick end to the door pounding behavior. You can also muffle the sounds by sleeping with earplugs, a radio, a fan, air purifier or other "white noise" maker.
- **Positive reinforcement.** Rewarding behavior works both ways: do not reward unwanted behaviors, even inadvertently. Playing with your cat when she wakes you up so you can get back to sleep will not work in your favor. She is being rewarded for waking you up and will do it again and again, earlier and earlier. Therefore, it is better to reward calm behavior with play or even use a cue word or toy when play with you starts so your cat is being rewarded for waiting for the cue. Also if your cat prefers to be sleeping on your head and you want him to sleep on your feet, place him where you want him to sleep and pet him there. Do NOT pet him (even occasionally) while he is up by your head. Ways of discouraging your cat from sleeping near your head are: changing your shampoo (he might like the smell), placing a pillow, like the one you sleep on, on a more appropriate location on the bed, tempting your kitty with a fleece, a cozy cat bed, plush animal, or even a wig (if he likes to knead your hair).

**NEVER punish your cat.** Physical punishment, throwing things, using electronic collars, squirt bottles, or even yelling can destroy the human-animal bond. Cats that are motivated to play and are being punished for trying to play may become conflicted and aggressive.

Letting your cat go outdoors might seem like a good idea; however, it might put your cat at high risk of disease, injury and even death if the outdoor environment is not safe. See the handout *Indoor vs. Outdoor* for more information.