

Cat: Excessive Meowing



Is your cat driving you mad meowing nonstop at 3 a.m.? Read on!

Compared to dogs, cats are not as obviously vocal. However, certain cats are more vocal than others, and cats can learn to use vocalization to communicate with humans. Some breeds, such as the Siamese, are known for their vocal demeanor. Many different feline vocalizations exist, and experts have tried to describe the repertoire, a daunting task when trying to classify the different acoustic variations. Most cat owners know when to give their cat attention or when it is time to feed (at least in the cat's opinion). Most people can tell when a cat is happy, and most of us have heard a very angry cat—those emotions are differentiated by the different tones and noises the cat makes.

Cats can learn to communicate with us, just as we learn to communicate with them. Cats vocalize to express discomfort or pain, agitation, and in some cases, territoriality. Unneutered (intact) male cats may yowl in conjunction with sexual behavior, and female cats in heat may meow excessively.

Your cat may have learned that if she meows, people will talk to her, play with her, feed her, or even yell at her. Remember for some cats negative attention is better than none at all. Some owners love to “talk” with their cats, back and forth, so if you have adopted your cat when she was an adult, it is possible that this behavior was encouraged by a prior owner. This is often how behavior patterns start. So if your cat is very chatty, this is how you can stop this habit: Do Not Reward. Ignore her when she meows, do not talk to her or provide her with food or play—especially not in the middle of the night.

This should be the backbone of your behavior modification plan. Pay attention to your cat when she is being quiet; wait for a moment of silence before you feed her. If you are having trouble sleeping at night, try earplugs and close the door to your bedroom. You will have to be strict for a few nights, because if that behavior has worked in the past, your cat will try harder for a few nights before she will give it up. It also helps to provide her with an alternative option for food and play such as automatic feeders or food-dispensing and other interactive toys in a different room of the home.

Make sure your cat's needs are met. Cats need attention and interaction, so make sure that somewhere in your daily schedule you allot times for scheduled play sessions. Cats like routine and will meow excessively if their routine is changed. It helps to give your cat a good play session before you go to bed. Provide your cat with plenty of mental and physical stimulation. Cats are most active during morning and evening hours—similarly to their natural hunting hours. Indoor cats need to be entertained and encouraged to play and exercise. But even a cat with access to the outdoors needs owner interaction and stimulation. New toys, bought or made, food cubes that make cats work to get the food, and the occasional catnip toy help keep her from getting bored. Interactive playtime is the best kind of playtime for cats. Make sure her diet is adequate and she has a clean litter box and fresh water at all times. If your cat seems excessively hungry you should have her checked out by a veterinarian.

Cat: Aggression Toward People *(continued)*

THESE SITUATIONS REQUIRE A DIFFERENT RESPONSE

If your cat is grieving. If your cat has recently lost a companion, feline, human, or canine, she may walk around the house and meow, perhaps in search of them or just reacting to the change. While you don't want to reward the meowing, it is important to give your cat extra reassurance in these cases, spending quality time, preferably on a schedule, until she adjusts to this loss.

If you have just moved to a new home, or have just brought a cat into your home. It is normal, especially for an adult cat, to be disoriented and unsure in a new environment. Introducing your cat to the house gradually may help prevent some agitation (see the handout on introducing a cat to a new home). Again, don't reward the meowing, but be a little understanding in these instances. This behavior usually takes a few weeks to resolve.

If a normally quiet cat has become very vocal. Make sure there is nothing medically wrong with her; schedule a check-up with your vet. If your cat is getting older she could be going deaf or displaying cognitive dysfunction.

Pay attention to environmental changes to see if something could be bothering her, such as a new stray cat coming by your back door. If you cannot find a cause, you may want to contact a veterinary behavior specialist.