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Alarm Clock Cat... Ask a trainer

By Nan Arthur, CDBC, CPDT, KPACTP

Dear Trainer,

Help! I can't get any sleep at night. My cat thinks that lights out means play time. She jumps all over the bed and attacks my feet. What can I do to convince my adolescent kitten to sleep when I do?

Signed,
Sleepless

Dear Sleepless,

The bad news is that cats are dusk and dawn hunters with a very strong instinct to be awake during those times—much to the demise of our sleep-deprived bodies! The good news is that we can help them adjust to our sleep schedule with some simple adjustments to their routines and diet.

Before I go into all the suggestions, I would like to stress that punishing your cat is not the answer, as some might suggest. Your cat is only doing what her genetic time clock tells her. Punishing her would be like punishing a person for being hungry, so look at the following ideas and suggestions for ways to help your kitty sleep through the night.

How to Discourage Nocturnal Activity:

- Get your cat on a high-end food, without all the carbohydrates and junk filler grains. When considering this, bear in mind that cats are true carnivores and the product should include a high percentage of meat. The best foods for cats will contain no grains at all. Which ever food you choose, it should not include corn, wheat or soy products. Also, be willing to feed wet food at least once a day (some experts believe *only* wet food should be fed to cats to protect kidney and bladder health) to ensure your cat's hunger is satisfied and her early morning adventures are not really her tummy's alarm going off. Switching to a super premium food will hold your cat over longer.
- Consider instituting feeding times rather than free feeding. With your kitty hungry in the morning or evening, you can use that appetite for a training session, (which uses your cat's brain for a more mentally satisfied cat). Then for the evening feeding, you can wait until later for that meal so she is sleepy after her dinner. Mental activity such as training can be just as effective for ensuring a tired kitty as physical activity. In addition, by having your cat eat a larger, but later meal, her internal time clock will tell her to rest up and digest all that food.
- *Exercise during the evening!* Your cat sleeps all day while you are gone because her genetics tell her to rest up for the next awake cycle. Cats spend about 65% of a 24-hour period sleeping and resting, so you just need to get some of those hours



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in when you sleep. Genetics, plus the enthusiasm of having you home means she is ready to interact and play at all hours of the night. Providing active exercise before you go to bed can tire out your cat so she sleeps through the night, and the nice thing is that it doesn't take that much time. A 10-15 minute play session between 6-7 PM, then the late feeding afterwards should make your cat very sleepy.

- *Interactive toys* can provide your cat with play and stalking releases during the night, as well as keep your cat from bothering you. Use things like treat balls that hold dry food and challenge your cat by requiring her to push and bat the ball around to get the kibble to fall out. Kitty Kongs are wonderful food carrier toys as well. They can hold a combination of wet and dry food. There are also many fun and challenging toys for cats that will challenge her mentally and physically. Many of my favorites are at: www.welcometopawcountry.com, or www.cattoys.com
- *Train your cat to walk on a leash and harness*— many cats enjoy walks outside, and the physical activity combined with the mental stimulation of seeing/smelling new things will tire your cat out. Remember to watch out for dogs or loose cats when out on your walk, and be sure your cat's vaccinations are up to date if you are going to venture out where other cats roam. It is understood; don't allow your cat to interact with unknown cats.
- A second cat can be a nighttime companion for your existing cat to play with rather than bothering you. Be aware— intros take time, and not all cats will get along. Should you go this route, work with an experienced adoption counselor at one of the local rescues or animal agencies. They will be able to help you select the appropriate cat to suit your household.
- Get your cat on an alarm clock! This is a little more labor, but it does work to give your cat a signal that it is time to get up. If your cat gets up at 4:00 AM, you will set your clock to 4:15 AM, and no matter what your cat does, you will not respond until the alarm goes off. When the alarm goes off, you will get up and pet your cat, feed her and then go back to bed. The next night you will set your alarm for 4:30 AM and only get up when the alarm goes off. Continue this course until you are at the time you would like your cat to awake. She should be waiting to hear your alarm, rather than listening to her's.
- If you want to try to keep the door closed, you might try placing a corrugated cardboard scratching station just outside the door. Load it up some catnip and when your cat comes "a scratching" to wake you, she will get to have some fun with that instead of the carpet under the door. You may have to attach the station to the outside of the door so you can close the door with the station in place, but this is more fun than carpet for most cats.
- Sleeping with earplugs is still another way to ignore the behavior!



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Being creative and using things that will gratify your cat's innate behaviors should help you get more sleep and have a happier cat overall. Happy snoozing.

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