

When Your Cat Gets the "Midnight crazies"

It's 1 a.m. and you're jolted awake by the sound of a trash can lid hitting the floor. You shuffle into your kitchen and there's your cat perched on the kitchen counter - you swear she's grinning at you. She lets out a howl, leaps to the floor, runs sideways, leaps into the air, and pounces on nothing with all her might. Your cat has been gripped by the "midnight crazies."

The "midnight crazies" is a popular name for a cat's behavior when she plays and roughhouses in short spurts in the middle of the night. The cat may entertain herself with wild activity or jump on your bed and paw at your feet, elbows, hair and face to get you to join in.

What motivates a cat to such boisterous and disruptive behavior? One theory is that the cat is simply practicing hunting methods, fighting maneuvers, and escape techniques.

"Cats in the wild are active at times when rodents come out, typically after dark," says Sandy Myers, an animal behavior consultant with Narnia Pet Behavior Clinic in Naperville, Ill. "A cat naturally wants to spend her evenings hunting and playing predator games, even if she is a well-fed house pet."

Another theory is that house cats become active at night simply because they aren't getting enough play and exercise during the day.

"Many house cats spend the days alone and indoors while their owners are at work," says Dr. Barbara Simpson, a board certified veterinary behaviorist with the Veterinary Behavior Clinic at Southern Pines, N.C. "When the owner comes home in the evening, the cat wants to play and will be very active."

Late-night activity is especially common in young cats with a lot of energy to spare, and in new kittens who simply do not know any better. "The kitten may have never lived with a human family before and not know that she is expected to sleep through the night," Myers says. "She may also feel a little unsure of her new human family and be uncomfortable about living in unfamiliar surroundings."

Here are some suggestions for coping with a nocturnally active cat.

Help Your Kitten Relax

If your kitten is too anxious or nervous to lie down and sleep at night, you can help her feel more secure by sitting down with her for a while, holding her closely, and gently petting her. Some kittens are also comforted by a softly playing radio tuned to an all-night talk show or soft music station. Others are comforted by having a toy or blanket from their former nest so that the smell from that



familiar place is present where they sleep. Once your kitten is soothed, put her in her own bed and praise her when she stays there.

Provide More Opportunities for Play

Make sure you're meeting your cat's needs for play at appropriate times during the day and early evening. If you're home during the day, take breaks with your cat by spending a few minutes tossing cat toys for her. Try to keep your cat busy and active so that she doesn't sleep for too long during the daytime, at least until she is in the habit of sleeping at night.

If you're away at work from 9 to 5, try to spend some time playing with your cat before you leave for work, and then have another play session after you get home in the evening. Have your last play session about an hour before you go to bed. "If you play a lot with your cat immediately before you go to bed, you will get her all charged up and she won't be able to fall asleep," Meyers notes.

'Evening Proof' Your Home

Try to anticipate the mischief your cat might want to get into while you're asleep and plan accordingly. Put garbage pails, kitchen glassware, lamp cords, computer keyboards, books, and clothing out of harm's way before going to bed.

Confine Your Cat for the Evening

If your cat is especially boisterous or destructive at night, you may need to confine her to a spare bedroom or bathroom for the evening. Make sure your cat is in a big enough space so that she's able to walk around. Provide food, water, a litter box, and scratching post in the same room. If your cat starts whining because she wants to come out, don't give in. "If you do, you will be rewarding the cat for vocalizing and scratching at the door," Simpson says. That means she'll learn that she'll get what she wants if she cries long enough.

Interrupt Bad Behaviors

If you allow your cat to sleep in your bedroom or have free reign of the house at night, you may want to have either a spray bottle or a gun-shaped hair dryer on hand so if your cat wakes you up with her meowing, you can just reach for the hair dryer and blast the cat with some air or water. "Doing so won't hurt the cat, but will simply startle and discourage her from doing the same thing again," Simpson notes.

Punish the specific action, and do it at the beginning of the behavior. "Then once the cat stops meowing in your face, you can then pick her up and snuggle," Myers says. But don't give any attention during the actual bad behavior. "Sometimes pet owners pick up the cat while she is saying 'meow' and in effect they are just reinforcing the meowing," Meyers says.





Kitten 101

Keep in mind that it's unrealistic to think your cat should sleep all night if you haven't taught her to do so or if you haven't met her need for play during other times in the day. Remember, cats need recreation and sleep, just as humans do. The trick is coordinating your schedules so both you and your pet can be happy.

