

How Can I Stop Cat's Suckling Behavior?

CatChannel's behavior expert Marilyn Krieger tells how to transfer cat's object of affection.

By Marilyn Krieger

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Q: I have a spayed 8-month-old mixed-breed cat. She is obviously mixed with Persian because of her huge fluffy tail. Her problem is very strange to me. Her chosen way of showing affection is sucking and biting my hands or arms. She wants to do this when we are playing in the morning and when I'm looking at TV at night with her on my lap. Have you ever heard of it before, and have you any suggestions to cure this behavior?

A: Sucking and kneading are instinctual behaviors that all kittens must do in order to nurse. Kittens usually nurse until they are 4-6 weeks old, then mom weans them and they transition to eating solid foods. Sometimes the mom will let kittens nurse longer, for comfort and reassurance. Kittenhood is the time where kittens who are lucky to be with their mother and siblings feel the most protected and safe. Mom keeps them warm, secure, well-fed and out of harm's way.

Many cats who were taken away from their mother and bottle-fed or weaned too early will suck on their human companions or on fabrics. It's a comfort behavior, typically accompanied with purring, and is usually done when cats feel safe, secure and content. Some of these cats will suckle on their own tails or other parts of their body. I have a 7-year-old cat who suckles on his right dew claw whenever he curls up next to me on the sofa.

There was an online survey that was conducted on cats who suckle as adults. Based on responses, the conclusions were that cats who suckle as adults most likely were separated from their mothers and siblings at 8 weeks old or younger. It also concluded that most of these cats suckled throughout their lives, though some of the cats suckled less frequently as they aged.

Since having your hands and arms suckled on isn't the most ideal situation for you, gradually transfer the behavior on to a safe object that your cat can not ingest. There are cat-safe toys that will work. Make sure that the new object doesn't have eyes, noses, whiskers and other pieces that can be chewed or sucked off. Also, the fabric needs to be a nontoxic substance that the cat can't ingest. I know someone who transitioned her cat so he would suckle on a teddy bear. Before transitioning your cat to suckle another object, rub the object on your arms and hands, transferring your scent to the object. Whenever she starts suckling on you, present her with the preferred object. Be patient and gentle with her; with time she should suckle the approved object.