

Our Cat Is Driving Us Crazy at Night

CatChannel behavior expert Marilyn Krieger gives advice on how to keep cat active and let you sleep through the night.

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Q: My husband and I are being driven crazy by our 1-year-old Domestic Shorthair cat. She stays outside our door at night wailing and digging at the carpet. We've tried to let her in the bedroom with us but she either attacks our delicate canopy fabric or our feet. How do we stop this behavior? She has plenty of toys to play with at night, and places to sleep.

A: Your little youngster's annoying demands can be changed through a combination of nightly play activities before bed, scheduled midnight feedings, a few environmental enhancements and by not inadvertently reinforcing the behavior. Start by having active play sessions before going to bed. Pam Johnson-Bennett, author and certified cat behavior consultant, suggests playing with cats in a way that imitates hunting. In order to get the full effect, use a fishing pole toy that has either feathers or a small stuffed animal on the end of the tether. Pretend that the animal on the end of the toy is prey and is the focus of your cat's hunting skills. Pull the toy over sofas, boxes, into bags imitating prey trying to escape a predator. Since prey doesn't run to the predator, try to make the toy always retreat away from your cat. When you are ready to stop playing, don't stop the play suddenly; instead, gradually slow down the toy's movements. It's as if the little animal on the end of the toy is getting tired. Finally let your mighty hunter catch the toy one last time and then immediately feed her. She will eat, groom and go to sleep. Note, that when you are not there to supervise the play with these types of toys, they need to be put out of your cats reach.

Interactive toys will also help channel some of your youngster's energy. The TuboScratcher is one example of a multi-functional toy I recommend for the job. It has a round scratcher in the center which is surrounded by an open channel that contains a ping-pong ball. Other toys and objects that your cat enjoys can also be placed in the channel. Puzzle boxes are usually a safe bet for a cat. These are boxes with lots of holes in them. Toys and treats can be placed in the box before bed.

Consider either providing a timed feeder that opens at the same time every night for a set amount of time or puzzle toys that make your cat work for her food and treats. One, the Nina Ottosson Dog Brick, is shaped like a large, flat dog bone. It has separate compartments that are covered with sliders. Treats or cat food are placed in the compartments and then the covers are slid over them. Your rambunctious cat will have to work for her treats. Treat balls are also an option. These are hollow plastic balls with holes in them. Cat food and treats are put inside of them. In order to access the food, your youngster will have to roll the ball around so that the food falls out of the holes.

Provide your cat with high areas to climb, such as shelves, tall cat trees and window perches. If possible, place the trees and shelves next to secure windows so that your youngster can be entertained by the neighborhood activities.

At the same time you provide your cat with fun alternative activities, consider blocking the carpet area she's shredding by covering it with StickyPaws, a double-sided tape that doesn't feel good on the bottom of paws. Additionally, don't respond to her vocalizing or carpet shredding. It is possible that you are inadvertently reinforcing the behavior by interacting with her during these episodes.

It will take time and a little effort, but by giving your rambunctious little youngster alternative activities to do, making the carpet area off limits and by not reinforcing the behavior, she will stop the annoying night time activities.