

Why Does My Cat Need to Knead?

CatChannel expert Marilyn Krieger, CCBC, explains cats' urge for this comfort behavior.

By Marilyn Krieger

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Q: My sister adopted a cat who survived ground zero of Hurricane Katrina. The cat, Midnight, moves her front legs up and down on a towel repeatedly (20-30 times) and then stops. Does this mean anything or is she just stretching or doing something with her claws?

A: Midnight is either looking for a horizontal surface to scratch or she is demonstrating a common cat behavior called kneading. Since it is common for cats to knead on towels and other soft fabrics, I am going to assume she is kneading.

One way that cats communicate their happiness and contentedness is through kneading. Usually kneading behavior is accompanied by loud purring and sometimes drooling. The intensity of the kneading varies from cat to cat. Some cats are gentle, soft kneaders; others knead with a strong strokes, their claws extending and retracting rhythmically.

Many cats enjoy sitting and kneading on their favorite humans laps. While it is a sweet behavior, some cats knead with an enthusiasm that can be a little too intense for their people. In order to avoid becoming a human pin cushion, a towel or a blanket can be placed on the person's lap while the cat kneads.

Kneading is a comfort behavior that dates back to Midnight's days as a nursing kitten. Kittens instinctually knead to increase or stimulate the milk flow from their mother. Midnight's kneading as an adult signals she is happy, secure and all is well in her world.