

THWARTING THE ALARM CLOCK CAT

Dr. Nicholas Dodman

Niles Animal Hospital and Bird Medical Center

7278 N. Milwaukee Ave. Niles, IL 60714

(847)-647-9325 FAX (847)-647-8498

www.nilesanimalhospital.com

WAKING UP AT DAWN

Contrary to popular belief, cats are not nocturnal. The term “nocturnal” refers to the lifestyle of being awake at night instead of during the day, and that isn’t what cats do. They sleep at night as we do, just not for quite as long. Cats are “crepuscular,” which means they are most active at dawn and dusk. This is because their ancestors’ prey was most active at these times, so it made sense for them to adjust to that schedule. No creature in his or her right mind ran about during the heat of the day or in the middle of night when it was pitch black. Though cats’ night vision is very good, they can’t see without light. Instead, they sleep.

And herein lies the problem of the chronic “alarm clock” cat. Two things combine to make this phenomenon possible:

1. **Nature.** Your cat’s internal clock and crepuscular nature tells her that it’s time to get up at around dawn.

Depending on the time of sunrise, cats will become active sooner or later. During summer in lands of midnight sun, cats may not be triggered by the dawn. During the long, dark, sunless winters of the Antarctic, a cat would probably sleep till lunchtime everyday.

2. **Training.** This is where the cat’s owner comes in. Let’s say your cat becomes active first thing in the morning. She quickly becomes bored because there’s nothing going on. If you so much as look at this cat, rewarding her with your attention, you may well get more of the same in days to come. Worse still, if you assume that your cat is pacing around and scratching your furniture because she’s hungry, and you get up and feed her, then you have really made a bed upon which you must lie (awake).

At this stage, pretending to be asleep, yelling at the cat, rolling over, and other forms of stubborn resistance usually do not work. The cat continues her (no doubt) occasionally successful quests. And remember, occasional reward is a more powerful reinforcer than continuous reward (reference: the slot machines in Las Vegas). Some of the things you do may even amuse and entertain the bored cat and serve as reinforcers in their own right. You may, in effect, become a big squeaky toy for your cat.

Here are some suggestions to prevent early awakenings:

HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

- Understand your cat and don’t blame her for the way that nature designed her. Have some patience and forbearance as you try to realign her habits.
- Fit thick, lightproof curtains in your bedroom and hallways so that your whole sleeping area is totally dark at night.
- Do not respond (in any way) to your cat’s dawn-time demands ... ever.
- Feed your cat twice daily on a set schedule, but do not feed her first thing in the morning.

- Keep the cat occupied during the day (exercise, games, toys, bring her to your place of work, etc.)

THINGS THAT MIGHT HELP

- Feed your cat her last meal of the day at bedtime, which may help her sleep (“as the blood rushes to her stomach”).
- Get a cat for your cat so that you are no longer her sole source of entertainment.
- Give your cat the internal-clock-resetting-hormone, melatonin at night to induce a lengthier period of sleep. Consult your veterinarian before giving this or any other medication.

The most important things to remember about “early morning syndrome” is that it is a natural tendency for cats to rise and become active at dawn, and that owners can inadvertently feed into this tendency by responding with attention or food. If you are not careful, a cat that you feed at 6 a.m. will start jumping up on your bed at 5:45 a.m., trying to get a jump start on her day. If you respond to your cat’s 5:45 a.m. demands, next you will find yourself being woken up at 5:30 a.m., then 5:15 a.m., and so on, until eventually you’re being woken up in the wee hours.

Because most cats are keen to bend the rules, especially where food is concerned, and are naturally quick studies, it is important to make acceptable house rules *and stick to them*. If you cave in under pressure, you will get more of whatever behavior you have just rewarded. That is to say, you can inadvertently train a cat to wake you up. The old proverb about “making your own bed and lying in it” really applies here, except that you won’t be doing much lying. If you do have a problem of this nature, you should avoid making any early morning activity rewarding to your cat. It may take weeks to accomplish what you set out to do, but it will finally dawn on the cat that sunrise doesn’t signal anything worth waking you for - and then you’ll be off the hook.