

# Boroughbred Behavior Resources



## Issue: The Furry Alarm Clock

Some cats develop bothersome habits early in the morning in order to get something from their humans. Techniques and common strategies include early morning ankle biting, eyelid or ear licking, stomach sitting, chest crawling, meowing, nibbling, pawing, and even water glass tipping to name a few. This behavior is usually food motivated, but can also be attention or activity motivated. Regardless, it is a crepuscular activity, which means the growing dawn is getting the cat ramped up. There may also be an unwritten rule at work here; whatever hour in the morning your cat is normally being fed, they may want their breakfast 1-2 hours earlier.



If your cat's alarm clock is more or less tuned to yours, then this may not be an issue. But if your cat's alarm is going off too early, depriving you of your much earned sleep, then read on.

In the wild, cats eat by hunting. Indoor/outdoor cats will do this to some extent as well. Figuring out a cat's feeding behavior requires that we understand The Cycle of Predation. There are three stages to the cycle of predation and they include hunting, catching, and eating (the meal). For dogs, play is essentially a social activity that's done between people and other dogs. For cats, play is mostly predatory and linked to their chances of survival; it's about catching the mouse and eating it! So the first and most important step in getting your cat through the night is to give them the full cycle of predation about an hour before you go to bed. To do this:

**The hunt:** Give them a vigorous 15-20 minute play session. If your cat has a lot of energy, a longer play session may be needed. Wand-type toys are great for allowing cats to express their natural predatory behavior because we can use these toys to mimic movement like prey. Use the toy to expend your cat's energy, bringing out their inner tiger. When the toy isn't in use, you can marinate the feather end in a Ziploc bag full of catnip to make this toy extra special when it comes out.

**The Catch:** Make sure you give your cat the opportunity to catch the toy as they go in for the "catch". Catching the toy is extremely rewarding for your cat, and it's part of the fun. If they never get a chance to catch the toy, it can cause frustration. Your goal is to help them feel successful for a hunt well done.

**The Meal:** To complete the cycle, we now have to give them the equivalent of the mouse. Offer them a generous wet food meal that they love. This gives them the most satisfaction, a full belly after having chased and caught their "prey". The cycle has been completed and now they can really go to sleep.

If you follow the instructions above, your cat should be sleeping a little later into the morning. If they continue to wake up early, do not give in to feed your furry early riser because you'll need to be prepared to do this long term. If you've already been getting up to feed your cat early when they're being pesky, this habit will be difficult to break because your cat has already learned that smothering you early in the morning means breakfast is coming. This is called "Intermittent Reinforcement". It's the same reason people play slot machines. If the "payout" comes at the 25th pull of the handle, you can be sure that people will pull that handle well past 25 to get that reward.

### Other tips to get that sleep you want:

- Invest in a good automatic feeder, the kind that dispenses food (dry or wet) on a schedule of your choosing. Some feeders now connect to smartphone apps.
- Leave food out overnight. If it's wet food, add a little water so it doesn't dry out.
- Blackout shades because sunlight at dawn or lights on the street in urban areas can trigger activity.
- Give your cat activities during the day to keep them active. If they are only active when you're home, chances are they are napping all day and will have built up energy at night. See our "Play Therapy" and "Environmental Enrichment" flyers to learn more.

If your cat suddenly develops odd night time behaviors, particularly meowing, howling, prowling sometimes while staring into space, these could be signs of a medical issue and you should see a vet. You can also see our "Excessive Meowing" flyer for more information.

### Resources:

<https://pets.webmd.com/cats/features/when-cats-wake-you-up#1>

<https://www.vettedpetcare.com/vetted-blog/how-can-i-get-my-cat-to-stop-waking-me-up-during-the-night/>

<https://petcentral.chewy.com/my-cat-keeps-waking-me-up-too-early/>

### For more information:

International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants: <https://m.iaabc.org/>

Certified Applied Animal Behaviorists: <http://corecaab.org/>