

# The YOWLING CAT

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A client complained today that her cat vocalizes all the time. What is the best way for me to handle this?

A cat that vocalizes persistently or at inconvenient times can be a source of complaint for owners. Some breeds of cats, such as Siamese, are particularly inclined to vocalize. The most common reasons cats may vocalize include attention-seeking behaviors, anxiety, estrus or male sexual behaviors, play behavior, medical problems especially in senior cats, discomfort, and aggressive displays.

Prevention is preferable to treatment: Ensuring a regular and enriched daily routine from the outset may prevent problem vocalization. Keeping the cat awake and meeting its need for sufficient play, social interaction, and exercise during the daytime and early evening may help it sleep through the night and prevent nighttime vocalization, which is especially problematic for owners. Activities provided for the cat can include cat-scratch feeders, activity centers, feeder toys, or perhaps even another pet. For cats that wake their owners for food, bowls with timers may help. Determining whether the owner is providing a sufficiently stimulating, regular daily routine should be a focus of history taking.

### The Aging Cat

For middle-aged or elderly cats, a veterinary examination is recommended to rule out potential medical causes of vocalization, such as pain, endocrine dysfunction, or hypertension. A recent study determined that out of 100 cats over 12 years of age, 90% have radiographic evidence of degenerative joint disease, yet many

pet owners do not report lameness or signs of this disorder to the veterinarian.<sup>1</sup> Other research has shown that elderly cats may have decreased cognitive function that may account for some behavioral changes.<sup>2</sup> The study evaluated 135 cats older than 11 years. In cats 11 to 14 years old, the most common sign of cognitive change was alteration in social interaction. In cats older than 15 years, nearly 50% showed changes in sleep-wake cycles, and nighttime vocalization was the most common owner complaint. Geriatric cats may begin to wake more at night and vocalize more often if they have medical problems; diseases of the central nervous system; or disease processes that lead to hypertension, altered sensory function, or cognitive changes. These situations need to be addressed on a case-by-case basis depending on the cat's physical health. It is crucial for elderly cats to have their medical needs assessed and addressed and perhaps receive treatment for cognitive dysfunction.

### Overattachment & Anxiety

Overattachment and anxiety may also cause a cat to vocalize excessively. Overattached cats may follow their owners incessantly and perhaps vocalize. For these cats, regular interaction and ignoring undesirable behaviors are useful.<sup>3</sup> Anxiety can result from changes in scheduling, changes in social interaction with people, new pets, moving, remodeling, or problematic social interactions between cats. Anxiety-based



vocalization is likely to be accompanied by

other signs of anxiety, such as anorexia, lapses in litter box use, hiding, trembling, and depression. To treat this type of vocalization, it is first necessary to determine the source of the anxiety and remove it or desensitize the cat to the stimuli.

Vocalization may be associated with estrous cycles in females and mating behaviors in males. Females in estrus are particularly vocal in “calling” to attract a mate. Neutering should help to reduce vocalization in these cats.

Unless the cat has a medical problem, treatment generally involves modifying the environment or the pet's behavior. If environmental stimuli (such as the sight or sounds of other cats) are causing the cat to vocalize, preventing exposure to the stimuli may diminish or stop vocalization.

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**WHAT TO DO**

- **Middle-aged or Elderly Cats**—Rule out potential medical causes such as pain, endocrine dysfunction, or hypertension.
- **Overattached Cats**—Ensure regular interaction and ignore undesirable behaviors.
- **Reproductive Causes**—Neutering will minimize vocalization in estrous females or mate-seeking males.
- **Daytime Activity**—Keep cat awake/active during the day and evening.
- **Physical Correction**—Should never be used.

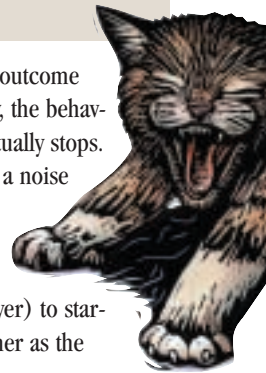
If the cat is vocalizing at night, keeping the cat out of the bedroom or confining it where it cannot be heard may be acceptable to some owners. Medical problems contributing to vocalization should be identified and treated, and vocalization may diminish or stop. However, many medical problems—especially those associated with old age—cannot be entirely resolved, or the problem may persist (learning) even after the medical problem is resolved so that environmental modification and behavior therapy may also be required (although the prognosis in these cases may be more guarded).

**Avoiding Reinforcement**

To modify the pet's behavior, determining what reinforces the behavior is essential. Giving the cat something it values, such as attention, affection, play, a treat, or access to a desirable area (outdoors, indoors, the bedroom), when it vocalizes inadvertently encourages the behavior, and it may only take a few repetitions of access to the reward after vocalization for the cat to learn the association. The behavior may actually be reinforced if the owner ignores the cat for some time but eventually gives the valued reward. Based on the history and what precedes vocalization, it may also be possible to address or treat the specific events and stimuli that incite vocalization.

Mild episodes of vocalization should either be ignored or interrupted with remote punishment techniques, never with physical punishment. Not only is physical correction usually ineffective, it can cause the cat to fear the owner, people in general, or being handled and petted. Ignoring vocalization in the absence of a medical reason (including senility) for the behavior is the best solution, but difficult to implement. When a cat

does not receive the expected outcome after behaving in a certain way, the behavior may get worse before it actually stops. Interrupting the behavior with a noise device may stop the behavior; remote-control devices can be used to activate noisy devices (e.g., vacuum cleaner, hair dryer) to startle the cat and remove the owner as the source of the punishment.



**Pheromones & Melatonin**

In most cases, medication is unnecessary and probably inappropriate. Sedatives, benzodiazepines, and sedating antihistamines may help for a few nights, but tolerance often develops and vocalization resumes. Feliway may calm some cats and others may be responsive to melatonin. Medication is inappropriate if a cat is vocalizing because social, play, and exploratory needs are not being met. In these cases the owners need to restructure their time with the cat to meet its needs and learn to ignore inappropriate vocalization. However, for anxious cats, medication may be necessary but should only be used on a temporary basis. Commonly used medications include selective serotonin-reuptake inhibitors (fluoxetine or paroxetine), tricyclic antidepressants (amitriptyline or clomipramine), or benzodiazepines (diazepam, oxazepam, or alprazolam). Doses for various conditions are given in other sources.<sup>4</sup> Unless the underlying anxiety-producing stimuli are identified and desensitization implemented, vocalization is likely to resume. ■

See Aids & Resources, back page, for references, contacts, and appendices.