Top 5 Cat Behaviors Explained

LEARN ALL ABOUT THESE UNIQUELY FELINE BEHAVIORS.

from the experts at catster
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Why Do Cats Sit On You?

From basic needs like safety to more obscure reasons, like the fabric of your clothing, here’s why cats sit on you.

BY SUSAN LOGAN-McCRACKEN

Downtime would not be the same for me without a purring cat on my lap. One of the greatest joys of living with cats is when one of them chooses to lounge on top of me. This special bonding time is good for me, as it lowers my blood pressure, and is good for my cat, as it meets some of her needs. Not all cats sit on their humans, though, and some become lap cats later in life. Although some breeds like the Ragdoll are known to be lap cats, it still depends on the cat, and only time with that individual will tell.

All cats are individuals, and it depends on the individual cat, says Marilyn Krieger, Certified Cat Behavior Consultant (CCBC), based in Redwood City, California, and author of Naughty No More! In general, cats seek out a few basic needs when they sit on a human’s lap, but other factors come into play:

1. You’re warm.
Cats like warmth, and people’s laps are generally warm, Marilyn says.

2. They crave connection.
Cats gravitate toward people they like, and they seek connection with their favorite people, Marilyn says. Sometimes they’re seeking petting, because people often pet the cat on their lap. Petting resembles their
mom’s grooming, so most cats love receiving petting from their favorite people. Some cats also knead while they sit on someone’s lap. When they’re kneading, they’re simulating their neo-natal days when they did that to their mothers to stimulate milk flow. “It can be a self-comforting behavior, as can purring,” Marilyn says.

3. It makes them feel safe.
Some cats feel safer when they’re on their favorite person’s lap, Marilyn says.

4. Smell plays into it.
If you have a bathrobe that smells like you, your cat might sit on it whether you’re wearing it or not, Marilyn says. And if you’ve been to an animal shelter, your cat might detect a lot of other animal scents on you and avoid you. Don’t take it personally.

5. Your clothes matter.
Marilyn, who has three lap cats, noticed that her cats won’t sit on her when she’s wearing a plastic raincoat. My husband, Mark, noticed that when he wears his soft bathrobe, our cat Maddie, who usually sits on me, will sit on him instead.

I discovered the difference texture can make when a feral cat I helped take care of for about a year finally came and sat on my lap when I was wearing a soft fleece jacket. The first time I tried to pet her, she scratched me. But eventually, she let me pet her. Then she started sitting next to me on a picnic table bench and gradually started letting me pet her while sitting next to me. Then on a cold day, she rubbed up against my fleece jacket and, to my astonishment, climbed onto my lap.

Cats want to be comfortable and warm, Marilyn said when I told her this story, “and she trusted you.”

6. It shows trust.
“They really do have to trust you to sit on your lap,” Marilyn says. She stresses the importance of not making a cat sit on your lap and giving the cat the option to leave. “When you give them that choice of sitting on your lap or not, and leaving when they want to, they become more trusting of you.”
What Are Cat Zoomies?

These antics are usually funny and harmless.
But are they ever a sign that your cat needs to see a vet?

BY SASSAFRAS LOWREY

**Picture this** — you’re sitting around, having a quiet evening, when suddenly your cat barrels out of nowhere, running around the house like crazy. This behavior is called the cat zoomies, and it’s completely normal ... but there are some instances when it might necessitate a trip to the vet.

Cats with the zoomies often get a bit of a glint in their eyes and then start rapidly moving. These rapid movements may take the form of running laps around the house, zipping out from under tables, going up and down the stairs, or running on and off your lap while meowing loudly. And then — as quickly as the zoomies started — your cat may just relax again.

I call cat zoomies the kitty Olympics in our house because of the sprints my three cats will do from one floor to the other. Cat zoomies have a scientific name: frenetic random activity periods (FRAPs). They are surprising and sometimes alarming (especially in the middle of the night), yet completely normal, cat behavior.

**What causes cat zoomies?**

Kittens and young cats naturally have lots of energy and generally experience zoomies more frequently than older cats, though inspiration can strike cats of any age. Even my 17-year-old cats get inspired to run around like kittens when they experience the zoomies.

Many different things cause FRAPs. Cats may start zooming if another cat in the house has the zoomies, cats might zoom if they’re chasing a bug, and cats can zoom in the middle of the night when their human gets up to use the bathroom. Sometimes it feels like cats get the zoomies out of nowhere, or it seems like they’ve seen a ghost.

**When should you worry?**

Zoomies are normal behavior for cats and a great way to burn off excess energy. But, if you find your cat frequently zooming frantically around the house, it may indicate that she needs more exercise. Increase the amount of time you spend playing with your cat. Enrichment toys, in particular, may help.

If your cat suddenly starts experiencing the zoomies regularly, becomes unusually active or seems distressed when she’s zooming around, bring her in for a checkup with your veterinarian. Increased and unexpected bursts of energy, especially in older cats, could be a sign of an underlying health condition such as hyperthyroidism.

For some cats, zoomies tend to hit in the middle of the night when the rest of the family is asleep. If your kitty only gets the zoomies when you are asleep, and if your household is regularly losing sleep because of your kitty’s antics, it might be time to adjust your morning feeding schedule or increase the amount of play your cat is getting during the day. If the behavior persists, consult your veterinarian to make sure there isn’t something medically wrong with your cat that’s causing her to struggle with settling down at night.
Why Do Cats Knead?

*Cats are interesting creatures,* with many traits and behaviors that are easily recognized as being strictly feline — the way they curl up tightly to take a nap, for example, or their characteristic grooming rituals after enjoying a meal. Cat kneading is another common feline behavior. The kneading is a motion cats make by pushing in and out with their paws, alternating between right and left. Some cats knead with claws completely retracted, while others will extend their claws as they push in and retract as they pull back. So, why do cats do this? Let's take a look.

How cats knead

*First, let’s look at how they knead.* Kneading is sometimes colloquially referred to as "making biscuits," because the motion resembles a baker kneading dough. Cats almost always knead on a soft, pliable surface like a pillow, a comforter, another cat or kitten, or even your lap. Cat kneading is often accompanied by contented purring, and sometimes even by drooling, as the cat relaxes his jaw. It’s not uncommon for a cat to be in an almost trance-like state as he kneads with a steady, rhythmic motion.
Why they knead

There are a few ways to answer this question. Explanations vary, but it is without doubt an instinctive trait. Newborn kittens knead their mother’s belly as they snuggle close to nurse, and the motion is thought to stimulate the flow of milk through her nipples. One rather outdated theory proclaims that cats that knead were separated from or weaned from their mother too early, and therefore continue the kittenish behavior into adulthood, yet nearly all adult cats knead, regardless of how or when they were weaned. It’s more likely that the answer is that it’s simply comforting to cats. (Although some cats do “suckle” the corner of a pillow or blanket while they are kneading.)

Kneading may also go back to the days when wild cats patted down tall grass or shredded leaves to make a soft, fluffy bed for sleeping or giving birth. Through the ages, the behavior continues to be a natural part of cat instinct before settling down for a comfortable nap.

There’s also a more practical aspect: Cats have scent glands in the soft pads on the bottoms of their paws. When they knead, they release some of their unique scent onto the kneaded surface. That scent serves as a kind of territorial marker for any unfamiliar cats who might come along and try to stake a claim. So when your cat is kneading your lap, he’s not only telling you he feels comfortable and secure, but he’s claiming you as his own. (Scratching is also a natural part of cat instinct that results in the cat leaving his own residual scent behind, as well as a visual marker — claw marks — that other cats can recognize.)

What to do about cat kneading

Another question you might have is what you should do about it. If your cat kneads you frequently, it’s a good incentive to keep those cat claws trimmed, in order to avoid being scratched or having your clothing snagged. You could also keep a folded towel next to your favorite chair, and use it to protect your lap as your cat kneads you with his paws.

If the kneading motion is uncomfortable enough to really bother you, you can try gently pulling your cat down into a lying position so he settles down and goes to sleep. Other tricks involve gently holding his front paws together, petting him or distracting him with a toy or a treat. Pet behavior experts agree that it’s not appropriate to punish a cat for natural and instinctive behaviors like kneading.

Some female cats will knead frequently just before going into heat, as a signal to males of her willingness and ability to mate. As the estrus cycle continues, the cat will make plaintive meows that quickly escalate into loud, persistent yowls that are an effort to get the attention of a male. She may also pace restlessly, mark areas of your house with urine, become extremely affectionate and assume the mating position (head low, with raised hindquarters) when you pet her. It’s impossible to discourage these natural behaviors, and the best way to eliminate the symptoms associated with the female estrus cycle is to have your cat spayed.
Why Do Cats Trill?

This cute and funny sound some cats make has a variety of reasons behind it.

BY CAIT KELLY

It happens every day. I get home and I’m greeted with a “rrroooowe, brrring, brupppp, brupppp!” or some variation of similar noises. No, I don’t have an old-fashioned telephone or my iPhone set to some nostalgic ring. This cat sound — commonly known as cat trilling — is coming from my small calico kitty, Merritt, as she excitedly greets me and seems to chat me up about her day.

My other cat, Gabby, is excited to see me but remains silent as Merritt trills away. Maybe he’ll give me a soft purr as he cranes his head up for a pet but that’s about it. So, why does only one of my kitties do this cat trilling noise? And why does it happen in the first place?

Why do cats trill?

I had a hunch that cat trilling was a positive sound. Not only does Merritt trill when I get home, she trills when she sees or hears her treat bag or food. To be sure, I confirmed with Dr. Sasha Gibbons of Just Cats Veterinary Hospital in Stamford, Connecticut.

“Trilling is a high-pitched, chirp-like noise made by cats as a greeting to people or other cats. It is associated with a positive, welcoming vibe,” she says.

According to The Humane Society of the United States, cat trilling is how mama cats get their kittens to pay attention or follow them. Merritt is one sassy diva of a cat who loves the spotlight and being around others. How dare any guest not admire her or let her rub their leg in greeting! If I sit down and Merritt is in the general vicinity, I know I should plan on staying put for the next 20 minutes. She will be in my lap, trilling, headbutting and purring away for all of the attention!

So, it makes sense that she would trill, especially in
situations where she’s telling us humans to pay attention! The treat trills I previously mentioned are great examples of the “follow me” (“Hey human, I’m right over here!”) and “pay attention” (“Do NOT feed the treat to my brother first — even though he is silently waiting like a complete angel!”) commands.

How is cat trilling different from meowing? Why trilling and not other cat sounds? Why wouldn’t cats just meow for attention or to say hello? Gabby, my cat who is a bit quieter and doesn’t trill, meows for attention, but the sort of attention he wants is usually negative. Case in point: Gabby will sit by our closed basement door and meow until I come to him. He’s not supposed to be in our basement but he’s escaped down there a few times. And — naughty and smart as he is — he wants to go back.

“Meowing is done with the mouth open, whereas trilling noises are made with the mouth closed,” Dr. Gibbons explains. “Trilling is almost always a positive noise, whereas meowing can have positive or negative connotations.”

What does cat trilling sound like? If my rotary phone-esque “brrring” and the common “rrroooowe” descriptions don’t do cat trilling justice, think of cat trilling as a lot of high-pitched, rolled, Spanish-style “Rs.”

How do cats make that trilling sound? As all cat lovers know, cat anatomy is a fascinating thing. So, what exactly happens when cats make that odd trilling sound?

“The trill is a high-pitched sound because it is made by cats pushing air through their ‘voice box’ with their mouths closed so the air is not being expelled,” Dr. Gibbons says.

Why do some cats trill and others don’t? “The amount of trilling varies with personality,” Dr. Gibbons says. “Some cats are shy or apprehensive, so they do not trill.”

This aligns perfectly with my two cats. Gabby is a quiet, older kitty who shies away from too much attention, whereas Merritt is a younger cat who loves to be the center of attention.

Am I only the one who trills back at my cat — and can she understand me? I can’t be the only cat lady who has conversations “in cat” with my kitty. Because Merritt is so chatty, I started to make similar cat trilling noises back to her. Sometimes, I’ll ask her a question and she will promptly respond in the exact tone of the answer I’d expect.

Me: “Merritt, do you like your new toy?”
Merritt: “Happy trilling sound”
Me: “Merritt, where’s Gabby?”
Merritt: “Confused trilling sound that I take to mean ‘I dunno.’”

Before you think I’m nutty, Dr. Gibbons confirms that she understands my imitations of cat trilling and questions — sort of! “Trilling can be used for cats to communicate with other cats or with people,” she says. “She can definitely understand your tone and that you are great pals!”

So, trill away, cat ladies and gentleman. It may be the closest thing we have to talking to our cats for now!
I don’t know about you, but one of my favorite feline gestures is the cat headbutt. My own cat, Tara, headbutts me constantly when she’s sitting on top of me, and half the time she knocks my glasses off my face when she does it. I don’t mind the temporary inconvenience, because I know what the cat headbutt means.

What does a cat headbutt look like?
This behavior is not when cats stick their heads into another cat’s butt, although that could be another amusing definition. When a cat headbutts, she taps her head against you and rubs her cheeks along whatever body part she’s near. Cats also headbutt objects like walls, chairs and furniture.

Why does my cat headbutt me, and what does it mean?
Cats have scent glands all over their bodies, and they use them to leave marks on objects, including you. According to cat behaviorist Pam Johnson-Bennett, cat headbutting is typically used for bonding and social purposes. “For the cat to place his face so close to yours and engage in this bonding behavior is quite an act of trust,” she says. Pam also explains that this behavior is more properly called cat bunting.

People often inaccurately think that the cat headbutt is just a means of marking territory, but it’s a lot more than that. Scent communication is complex, and while cats do use scent to mark their territory, cat bunting can also be used to create familiarity and show respect.

Pam also says that cat headbutting may be attention-seeking behavior, particularly if your cat butts his head against you and then tucks it down or turns it to the side.

Do cats headbutt other cats as well as people?
Yes. In fact, you’ll often see feline friends rub one another with their heads. Not only does it create the “colony scent,” it helps with bonding as well. It’s a measure of deep trust for another cat to put her head so close to one of her feline companions. So, if you see your cat headbutt another cat, know that it means that they’re buddies.

Cat bunting is also seen in wild cats, so it’s something that comes to cats naturally through millennia of evolution.
Don’t confuse head pressing for headbutting

Head pressing is when a cat presses her head against a wall or a piece of furniture relentlessly. Often accompanied by abnormal vocalization or other odd behaviors like circling and disorientation, cat head pressing is a manifestation of a neurological disorder. “Specifically, head pressing and the symptoms that go along with it usually are caused by problems with the central nervous system,” writes Dr. Eric Barchas. “In other words, head pressing occurs when something goes wrong with the brain.”

Why do some cats headbutt and others don’t?

Every cat is different, so don’t worry if your cat doesn’t headbutt you or her fellow felines. There’s a lot of variation in the frequency and intensity of the cat headbutt. And there are tons of other ways that cats show affection.

Let Catster answer all of your most baffling feline questions like...

- What do my cat’s weird noises mean?
- Why does my cat knead blankets?
- Am I feeding my furry friend wrong?
- When does my cat need to go to the vet?
- Does my cat even like me?!