

8 Sounds Your Cat Uses to Communicate

Chances are if you share your home with a feline, you've heard most if not all of these vocalizations, but do you know what they mean? While cats may make more than 21 different sounds, these eight are the ones you are most likely to hear.

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- If you have feline family members, you know that cats have a rather extensive oral repertoire — at least 21 different vocalizations, according to research
- Some family cats naturally meow more than others, and often their humans inadvertently or intentionally encourage them to be vocal
- There are several different types of feline vocalizations, and it's important to know what's normal for your cat
- There are a number of feline disorders that can cause an increase (or in some cases, a decrease) in vocalization, so a sudden or dramatic change in the frequency or loudness of your kitty's cries should prompt a visit to your veterinarian

While some breeds talk more than others (e.g., the chatty Siamese vs. the relatively quiet Maine Coon), cat guardians who learn to interpret their pet's vocalizations along with their body language are better prepared to understand and meet their kitty's needs.

A very common question many pet parents of super-vocal felines have is, "Why does my cat meow constantly? Is he sick, or is he just trying to drive me nuts?" Even if the crying isn't constant, it can be frequent enough to be of concern, and sometimes it's just plain annoying.

Just as some dogs bark more than others, some kitties tend to meow a lot. If Mr. Whiskers is otherwise healthy and is meowing right at you, he probably wants something, typically food or attention. Cats whose owners answer their meows tend to grow more meow-y over time, until the cat and his human are actually having lengthy chit-chats.

And kitties who learn they get food if they meow will ramp up the behavior — especially around mealtime. Senior and geriatric cats also tend to vocalize more, especially at night.

8 Types of Cat Vocalizations

Cats meow to communicate with other cats as well as with humans, and they actually have a rather extensive range of vocalizations. You may know the difference between your cat's dinnertime meow, for example, and the way she sounds if she's frightened or annoyed.

But many kitty sounds and intonations are more subtle and don't fit a particular pattern, which can make them harder to interpret. Here's a cheat sheet for decoding some common kitty chatter:²

Vocalization	How It Sounds	What It Means	Translation
Meow	The classic mee-yoww	Usually just a shout-out to whoever is around	"Hey there!"
Purr	Similar to a low idling motor; made by contracting the muscles of the larynx	A sign of contentment in most cats; rarely, a sign of anxiety or illness	"Backrub feels great... don't stop!"
Murmur, chirp, trill	Soft rhythmic "thump" made on exhalation	A request or greeting	"Pet me?"
Growl, hiss, spit	Low-pitched, severe, "I mean business" sound	Kitty is feeling fearful, stressed, defensive, or aggressive	"Back off!"
Shriek or screech	High-pitched, loud, harsh scream	Kitty is either in pain or about to cause some	"Ouch!" "Don't touch me!" "Get away from me!"
Chatter	Teeth chattering; jaw vibrating	Feline hunting sound; frustration from being unable to hunt visible prey	"Let me at it... let me at it... let me at it!"
Howl or yowl (aka caterwaul)	Loud, drawn out calls	Cognitive dysfunction in older cats; aggression; distress	"Where are you?" "Where am I?" "Why am I yelling?"
Moan	Long, low, throaty cry	Prelude to vomiting, bringing up a hairball	"Get here quick I'm about to make a mess!"

When to Worry About Your Cat's Meowing

Since you know your pet better than anyone else, it's up to you to learn what's normal for her when it comes to vocalizations so you can immediately pick up on any change in the way she communicates.

Changes in your cat's meow can signal an underlying medical condition, such as laryngeal disease, high blood pressure, or hyperthyroidism. It can also mean she's dealing with a painful and potentially life-threatening problem such as a urinary tract blockage, especially if she cries out while in her litterbox.

In older cats, increased meowing can be the result of cognitive dysfunction, which is essentially a form of dementia. If your senior or geriatric kitty also seems disoriented, he could be vocalizing due to stress or confusion.

When to Make an Appointment With Your Vet

Generally speaking, almost any feline medical condition that results in physical or mental discomfort can cause your cat to vocalize more often or abnormally. If kitty is typically fairly quiet but suddenly gets talkative, or cries when she jumps onto or off high surfaces, or when you're holding or petting her, you should make an appointment with your veterinarian.

This is especially true if you've noticed other changes, such as a decrease or increase in appetite or sleep patterns, eliminating outside the litterbox, a change in the way she walks or sits or rests, a lack of interest in grooming, or a desire to hide away from the rest of the family.

Also keep in mind that a normally talkative cat who suddenly grows quiet can also be cause for concern.

Sources and References

[PetMD February 1, 2023](#)

¹ [Tavernier, C. et al. Feline vocal communication, Journal of Veterinary Science, 2020 Jan; 21\(1\): e18](#)

² [dvm360, April 14, 2015](#)
