

Purrs, chirps, hisses and snarls..... What exactly is your cat trying to tell you?

PURRING 101

The purr is the most common sound issued by cats—and yet one of the least understood. Kittens just a few hours old begin purring as they knead their mother's chest and nurse. The purr sound is made both on the inhale and the exhale, with an instantaneous break between breaths. Built-up pressure created by the opening and closing of the glottis results in a sudden separation of the vocal folds, creating the purr. While purring is often heard when the cat seems content, those familiar with handling cats in pain or near death know that they also purr when under duress, the reason for which is yet unknown.

THE MEANING OF MEOW

The second most common vocalization is the meow. Rarely heard between cats, this vocalization seems tailor-made for communication between cats and humans. Early on, cats notice that meowing brings attention, contact, food and play from their human companions. Some behaviorists suggest that certain cats seem to alter their meows to suit different purposes, and that some guardians can differentiate between, say, the "I'm Hungry!" meow" from the "Let Me Out!" meow.

The meow is the most often used of the vowel patterns—vocalizations produced with the mouth first open and then gradually closing.

- The sound cats make when highly aroused by the sight of prey is called chirping.
- When a cat is frustrated (such as when an indoor cat finds he is unable to get to the birds at the feeder), you may hear him chatter.
- When a neonate kitten is cold, isolated from his mother or trapped, he issues a distress call—also sometimes called an anger wail. As the kitten matures, the distress call is used when play is too rough or the cat finds something else to protest.

A HISS IS JUST A HISS?

All threat vocalizations are produced with the mouth held open. These sounds mirror the cat's intense emotional state. A hiss is uttered when a cat is surprised by an enemy. A high-pitched shriek or scream is expressed when the cat is in pain or fearful and aggressive. Snarling is often heard when two toms are in the midst of a fight over territory or female attention. And a long, low-pitched growl warns of danger.

This article was written by Jacque Lynn Schultz, C.P.D.T., Companion Animal Programs Adviser, ASPCA National Shelter Outreach.

