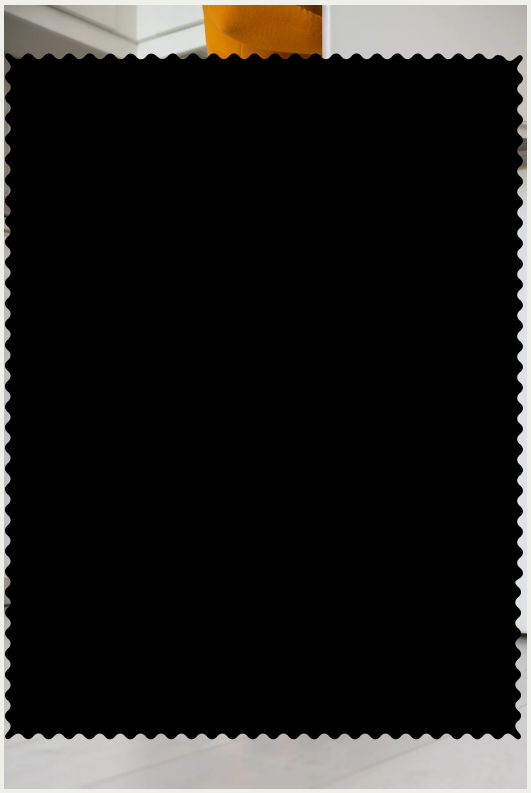

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The Cute Reason Your Cat Loves a Leg Weave

It's not always *just* to get food

by Claire Stares, BA (Hons), MA, PG Dip Clinical Animal Behaviour
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Are you constantly tripping over your cat because the minute you head for the kitchen or staircase, they appear, slinking around your ankles like a boa constrictor? You're not alone.

Leg weaving is a common (and sometimes hazardous!) behaviour that's equal parts endearing and inconvenient – especially when you're balancing a pile of laundry or carrying a mug of hot coffee. Though it may seem that your cat is trying to herd you towards their food bowl, making figures of eight around your feet can be more than just a food-soliciting signal. It's actually a pretty nuanced form of communication that taps into their evolutionary instincts, physical and emotional needs, and social rituals. From scent-marking to attention-seeking, when they start zig-zagging between your legs, they're saying more than just: "feed me". Let's break down what's really going on and how to respond when your cat decides you're their personal obstacle course.



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The science behind cat leg weaving behaviour

To decode this behaviour, you need to think like a cat. Unlike dogs, cats aren't pack animals. But just because they're solitary hunters, it doesn't mean they're antisocial. They've developed their own sophisticated repertoire of nonverbal signals involving body language and scent. Cats rely heavily on scent, using it to define territorial boundaries, identify familiar companions and create a sense of comfort and security. Leg weaving is often accompanied by facial and body rubbing – from your cat's perspective, they're scent-marking you to claim you as part of their territory or social group.

Cats are more socially attuned than many people give them credit for, and leg weaving is one way that they can initiate contact with you on their own terms. Unlike a slow-blink from across the room, leg weaving is a full-body interaction that puts your cat physically close to you. This proximity signals trust and connection, and can reassure them if they're feeling anxious.

There's also an evolutionary twist. Domesticated cats have developed new ways to communicate *specifically* with humans. Adult cats don't typically meow to communicate with other cats, but they learn to meow at humans to express their needs. Leg weaving is a similar mixture of innate behaviour and learned response – an action that's reinforced by cat parents responding with attention, affection or food.



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What your cat is really telling you

So, what *is* the message behind the weaving? If it's happening right before breakfast, lunch or dinner, then yes, your cat is probably announcing, "I'm hungry, feed me". Cats quickly learn to associate certain human routines with the appearance of food. So, they'll start leg-weaving on cue as soon as you climb out of bed and head for the kitchen.

If your cat greets you at the front door with weaving and head bunts, it's their way of saying they missed you. This welcome home ritual is more than just affection – it's a social gesture that mirrors how closely bonded cats interact with each other, walking shoulder to shoulder, rubbing their faces and bodies against one another and intertwining their tails.

Some cats weave around legs when they're feeling ignored or seeking reassurance. It's a gentle but clear signal: "Hey, pay attention to me". Whether they're seeking playtime, petting or just an acknowledgement, this behaviour serves as a polite but persistent nudge to remind you that they're there.

Scent marking: why your cat rubs against your legs

When your cat rubs around your legs, it's more than just a show of affection. As they brush against you, they're depositing pheromones – invisible chemical signals released from scent glands located on their lips, cheeks, chin, forehead, flanks and at the base of their tail. Cats rely heavily on scent to mark territory and identify safe, familiar spaces. In their world, you're part of that territory. By rubbing against your legs, they're essentially declaring, "You belong to me." But this isn't about dominance, it's a gesture of trust, comfort and connection. It's also part of a bonding ritual. By mingling their smell with yours, your cat is creating a shared group scent that reinforces their sense of security and belonging.

Different types of cat leg weaving and their meanings

Once you start paying close attention, you'll likely notice that your cat's weaving patterns can vary significantly depending on the situation, their arousal, mood and needs. Personality, age and previous life experiences can also have an impact. Some cats are naturally more social, demonstrative and physically expressive, while others are more paws-off. Kittens and young adults often weave more frequently due to their higher energy levels, while seniors may engage less, or in subtler ways, depending on their comfort and mobility.

Here's a cheat sheet with some of the most common types of weaving and what they can mean:

Slow and gentle

This is a chilled-out, affectionate cat. They're feeling calm, relaxed, secure and want to be near you. They may be saying hello after waking from a nap or just contentedly enjoying a quiet moment in the sunshine with you.

Fast, tight weaving (often with loud meowing)

This is the classic "feed me now" behaviour. It's their mealtime. Or at least, they *think* it is. This type of weaving is high-energy and usually occurs when you're entering the kitchen or preparing food (theirs *or* yours). It's a combination of anticipation and excitement, and can be very persistent if your cat is hungry.

Weaving with headbutts and/or purring

This is top-tier affection. Headbutting or bunting behaviour is another form of scent marking and social bonding. Your cat is showing you that they trust you, feel safe with you and enjoy your company. They're letting you know that they're all-in on this relationship.

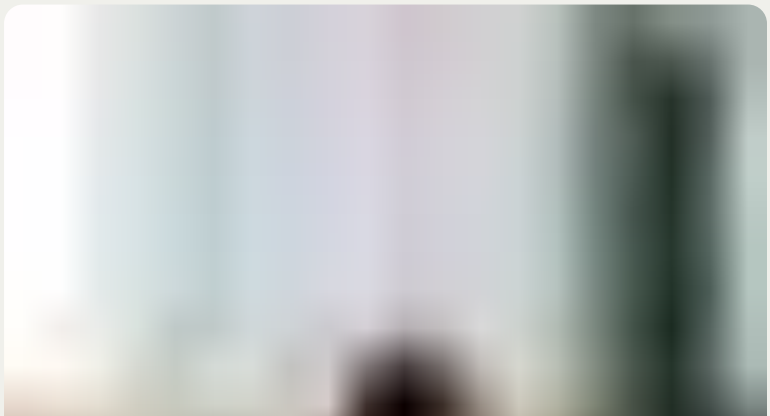
Weaving while you walk

If your cat is shadowing you, weaving around your legs as you move from room to room, they're likely craving attention, need reassurance, or are bored and trying to entice you to play. This is a commonly seen behaviour if cats are under-stimulated and looking for action.

Weaving at the front door

Weaving near entryways is your cat's way of saying "welcome home!" – the feline equivalent of a hug. They're happy to see you. Cats don't offer this kind of close physical contact to strangers or people they feel unsure of.

Recognising these subtle differences can help you respond appropriately, whether that means dishing up a tasty snack, retrieving their favourite toy from under the sofa, offering a head scratch, or simply saying "hi".





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When leg weaving becomes excessive or problematic

Leg weaving is typically a harmless and heartwarming behaviour, but there are times when it can become excessive, inconvenient or even hazardous for you or your cat.

If your cat is constantly underfoot, especially when you're carrying something hot, sharp, or heavy, that's a safety hazard. This is an even bigger concern in homes with babies, children, seniors or anyone with a visual impairment, balance or mobility issues.

On the behavioural side, a change in the context, frequency or intensity of leg weaving behaviour could be a sign that something is affecting your cat's physical, mental or emotional well-being. Sometimes, persistent weaving can be their way of communicating frustration or unmet needs – they want to go outside but you've locked the cat flap, or they want to play but you're on your phone.

Obsessive weaving can be a sign of stress and anxiety. Some cats develop obsessive-compulsive behaviours as a self-soothing or coping mechanism when they are faced with something aversive, their routine is disrupted, their environment lacks physical and/or mental stimulation, or they are experiencing separation anxiety.

If the pattern suddenly changes and they start weaving much more than usual, or suddenly stop altogether, it could indicate an underlying medical condition, such as hyperthyroidism, feline cognitive dysfunction, or osteoarthritis. Bottom line - any significant behaviour change warrants a trip to the vet for a check-up and, if necessary, referral to a qualified behaviourist.

How to respond to your cat's leg weaving

Avoid face-planting. Seriously. Be aware of where your cat is, especially when you're in the kitchen or navigating stairs. And don't assume they'll move. They won't. A little mindfulness goes a long way to avoid accidents. If your cat always comes ghosting around your ankles when they hear you padding to the bathroom in the middle of the night, consider installing motion-activated nightlights. Wear non-slip socks or shoes to reduce the risk of slipping if your cat suddenly darts between your legs, and keep walkways clear, so that if you have to dodge your cat, you don't trip over a rug or power cord.

Next, figure out *why* your cat is weaving. If it's right before a mealtime, the message is pretty clear. If they're circling your legs at another time of day, they might be bored, feeling ignored, or looking for social interaction. Show them some affection or try re-directing their energy with a wand toy.

And remember, it's okay to set boundaries. Anticipate the moments they're likely to start leg weaving and distract them with a toy or food puzzle before the behaviour starts. Consider using positive reinforcement (reward-based) training to teach your cat a behaviour which is incompatible with leg weaving at an inappropriate time. For example, sitting on a designated mat or chair in the kitchen while you prepare food. Cats respond well to consistency and clear signals, especially when they're paired with affection and food rewards.

Other similar cat behaviours and what they mean

Cats have a whole repertoire of physical behaviours they use to express themselves. Here are a few others you may recognise:

Head butting (bunting): it's both scent-marking and a sign of trust and affection.

Kneading (making biscuits): a throwback to kittenhood. Cats knead when they're feeling especially relaxed and safe in your presence.

Tail wrapping around legs or bodies: another affiliative gesture - it's holding hands, cat-style.

Following you around: whether it's curiosity or attention-seeking, your cat wants to be with you or is trying to solicit something from you.

All of these behaviours, including leg weaving, are part of your cat's unique non-verbal language. You don't need to speak cat fluently, but noticing and responding appropriately to these gestures goes a long way in building trust and mutual affection, strengthening the bond between you and your cat. And who doesn't want that?

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Claire Stares is a feline behaviourist with a PG Diploma in Clinical Animal Behaviour from the University of Edinburgh Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies. She's dedicated to helping guardians and their cats overcome behavioural problems and thrive so that they can enjoy life together. A cat lady since babyhood (her first word was cat!), she has over 20 years of experience living and working with cats in homes, rescue environments and veterinary practices. A passionate advocate for training cats for enrichment and cooperative care, she practices what she preaches with her five cats: three rescued Domestic Shorthairs, Bimble, Bertie and Katie, a Siamese called Daisy Mae, and a Maine Coon named Horatio. When there isn't a feline companion asleep on her laptop, she writes books and articles for various publications.

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