



Society for the Friends of Ferals
Helping the Helpless

The Function of Cat Whiskers

DOMESTIC cats are mostly nocturnal. Whiskers apparently help them to identify nearby objects and catch prey, particularly after dusk.

Consider: Cats' whiskers are attached to tissues that have multiple nerve endings. These nerves are sensitive to even the slightest movement of air. As a result, cats can detect nearby objects without seeing them – obviously an advantage in the dark.

Since whiskers are sensitive to pressure, cats use them to determine the position and movement of an object or of prey. Whiskers also help cats to measure the width of an opening before they attempt to go through it. The *Encyclopedia Britannica* acknowledges that “the functions of the whiskers (vibrissae) are only partially understood; however, **it is known that if they are cut off, the cat is temporarily incapacitated.**”

Scientists are designing robots equipped with sensors that mimic cat whiskers to help the robots navigate around obstacles. These sensors, called e-whiskers, “should have a wide range of applications for advanced robotics, human-machine user interfaces, and biological applications,” says Ali Javey, a faculty scientist at the University of California, Berkeley.

