

Understanding Cat Aggression Towards People

Cat owners sometimes have difficulty understanding why their cats, who seem to be friendly and content one minute, may suddenly bite and scratch them the next. Aggressive behaviors are part of the normal behavioral patterns of almost any animal species. Cat bites are seldom reported, but may occur more frequently than do dog bites. Aggressive cats can be dangerous, so attempting to resolve a cat aggression problem often requires assistance from a professional who is knowledgeable about cat behavior.

Types of Aggression

Play Aggression

Play-motivated aggressive behaviors are commonly observed in young, active cats less than two years of age, and who live in one-cat households. Play in cats incorporates a variety of behaviors such as exploratory, investigative, and predatory behaviors. Play provides young cats with opportunities to practice skills they would normally need for survival. For example, kittens explore new areas and investigate anything that moves. They may bat at, pounce on, and bite objects which to them resemble prey.

Aggressive behaviors can be identified as play, based on the type of situations in which they occur, the cats' body postures, and the types of behaviors displayed. Playful aggression often results in scratches and inhibited bites which do not break the skin. Playful attacks often occur when an unsuspecting owner comes down the stairs, steps out of the bathtub, rounds a corner, or even moves underneath the bedcovers while sleeping. The body postures seen during play aggression resemble the postures a cat would show when searching for or catching prey. The cat may freeze in a low crouch before pouncing, twitch its tail, flick its ears back and forth, and/or wrap its front feet around a person's hands or feet while biting. These are all normal cat behaviors, whether they are seen during play or are part of an actual predatory sequence.

Play which involves aggression can be initiated by the owner or by the cat. Owners may also have inadvertently contributed to this problem if they encouraged their young cats to chase or bite at their hands and feet during play.

For more information on rough play in cats, please see our "Managing Your Young Cat's Rough Play" handout.

"Don't Pet Me Anymore" Aggression

It is not uncommon for cats to suddenly bite while being petted. One reason for this reaction can be over petting and the bite is the cat's signal that he has had enough. Cats vary in how much they will tolerate being petted or held. Although owners often describe cats as biting "out of the blue" or without warning, cats generally give several signals before biting. Owners must become aware of their cats' body postures, and cease petting or stop any other kind of interaction before the bite occurs.

Signals owners should be aware of include:

- Restlessness
- The cat's tail beginning to twitch
- The cat's ears turning back or flicking back and forth

- The cat's skin rippling when you pet him
- The cat turning or moving his head toward your hand

When you observe any of these signals, it is time to stop petting the cat immediately and allow him to just sit quietly on your lap or go his own way, whichever he prefers. If your cat continues to solicit attention however, then walk away from your cat. Do not punish your cat, for any kind of physical punishment almost always makes the problem worse. Your cat is then more likely to bite either because he is fearful and/or because petting becomes even more unpleasant if it is associated with punishment.

If you want to try to prolong the amount of time your cat will tolerate petting, use a food reward. When your cat first begins to show any of the behaviors described above (or even before he does) offer him a special tidbit of food such as a tiny piece of tuna or boiled chicken. At the same time, decrease the intensity of your petting. Continue to lightly pet your cat for a short time period while offering him tidbits. Each time you work with your cat, try to pet him for slightly longer time periods using the food. Petting will then come to be associated with more pleasant things and may help him to enjoy petting for longer periods. Be sure to stop the petting before he shows any aggression, not as a result of the aggression, otherwise you could inadvertently reinforce the aggression.

Fearful/Defensive Aggression

This occurs when a cat is attempting to protect himself from an attack he believes he cannot escape. This can occur in response to punishment or the threat of punishment from a person, an attack or attempted attack from another cat, or anytime he feels threatened or afraid. Defensive postures include crouching with the legs pulled in under the body, laying the ears back, tucking the tail, and possibly rolling slightly to the side. Continuing to approach a cat that's in this posture is likely to precipitate an attack. For more information on fearful behaviors in cats, see our handout, "The Fearful Cat."

Redirected Aggression

This happens when the cat is aroused into an aggressive response by one person or animal, but then redirects this aggression onto another person or animal. For example, if two family cats have a spat, the losing cat, still aroused, may walk up and attack the family child.

Territorial aggression

This is not commonly directed at people. Usually cats only feel the need to defend their territory from other cats.

What You Can Do

- Check first with your veterinarian to rule out medical causes for the aggressive behavior. Cats often hide symptoms of illness until they're seriously ill. Any change in behavior may be an early indication of a medical problem.
- For play aggression, provide your cat with scheduled interactive play sessions every day (see our handout: "Play With Your Cat").
- There are products being marketed by reputable companies to help with stress relief in cats. Please note that none of these products are an automatic cure, rather should be used in conjunction with behavior modification techniques. Please see our handout "Stress Relief for Your Pet" for more information
- Seek professional help. An aggression problem will not go away by itself. Working with aggression problems requires in-home help from an animal behavior specialist.



- In extreme cases, consult with your veterinarian about medicating your cats while you're working with them on a behavior modification program. Your veterinarian is the only person who is licensed and qualified to prescribe any medication for your cats. Don't attempt to give your cat any over-the-counter or prescription medication without consulting with your veterinarian. Animals don't respond to drugs the same way people do, and a medication that may be safe for a human could be fatal to an animal. Keep in mind that medication by itself isn't a permanent solution, and should only be used in conjunction with behavior modification.
- Take precautions. Your first priority is to keep everyone safe. Supervise, confine, and/or restrict your cat's activities until you can obtain professional help. You are liable for your cat's behavior.

What Not to Do

- You should never attempt to handle a fearful or aggressive cat. Cat bites and scratches become infected easily. If you do receive an injury from your cat, clean the wound carefully and contact your physician.
- Punishment will not help and will make the problem worse. If the aggression is motivated by fear, punishment will make the cat more fearful, and therefore more aggressive.