



Aggression in Cats

Aggression in any form is a serious problem for cat owners and is can be extremely dangerous. While some forms of aggression can be treated with behavior and/or environmental modification, some types do require a visit to your veterinarian. Any sudden change in behavior may be an indication that your cat has a medical condition, so do not hesitate to call your veterinarian for an opinion. It can be difficult to determine which type of aggression your cat is displaying at first as it is overwhelming and there may be more than one type being displayed.

Keep In Mind:

- Do not attempt to break up a cat fight physically as this increases your risk for getting injured.
- If the fighting is constant, don't assume they will "work it out". They need your help to peacefully coexist, or the problem will escalate!
- Do not punish the cats. Punishment can result in the cat/s associating you with something negative, which will only make your situation worse.
- In some cases a veterinary behaviorist may be needed to aid in solving behavioral/medical issues.

Play Aggression:

This type of aggression is common in young cats but can also show in adult cats under certain circumstances. High-spirited play, pouncing and nipping among other behaviors are normal kitten behaviors that can be dangerous if not corrected. If not corrected, this can lead to a much bigger and stronger adult cat that does the same behaviors.

In this situation the best method of addressing the behaviors is prevention and finding appropriate outlet for the play. Remember to never use your hands, arms or any other body part as a toy as it may encourage your cat to nip, bite and scratch. If you have previously played this way, switch to using a wand/fishing pole type of toy instead which will keep your body at a safe distance from any teeth or claws.

Territorial/Inter-cat Aggression:

It may surprise you to know that cats can be extremely territorial, and they can take what we humans think nothing of, to be a very severe intrusion of their territory. Territorial aggression may be brought on by seeing other cats in your yard which your cat deems to be her territory. It can also be brought on by a new pet in the home or when an existing cat reaches social maturity. Inter-cat aggression can show up due to two unaltered cats of the same gender fighting over a male/female cat outside or something as simple as not having enough resources for both cats to share.

When bringing home a new pet, make sure to follow suggested guidelines for acclimating him/her to the home and to the other pets. If you feel you may have rushed the introduction, or if the inter-cat



aggression is severe, you can always re-introduce them. If you need to separate two cats fighting, first distract them with a noise. You can try to direct one of the cats into a safe room with a nearby object (pillow, throw blanket, etc.) or toss a blanket over the aggressor. This should give the other cat (victim of the attack) time to escape to a safe room. If this was a rare occurrence, possibly sparked by the appearance of an outside animal, keep the cats separated until they both return to normal behavior. When both exhibiting their normal behaviors, reintroduce them with something positive such as interactive play.

Petting-Induced Aggression:

If your cat has ever nipped or bitten you while you were petting him, you may be wondering why he seemed to enjoy the attention one moment and changed his mind the next. Some cats have a certain threshold for physical interactions and you may be unknowingly exceeding that limit. If your cat has shown any signs of petting-induced aggression it is a good idea to always pay attention while petting her and look for any signs of budding agitation including the thumping or twitching of the tail, ear position changing, twitching of the skin on her back and any turning of her head towards your hand.

You can reduce her agitation by the use of positive reinforcement paired with shortening the petting and adjusting the heaviness of your touch. For example: if your cat tends to get agitated after 10 minutes of petting, pet her lightly for 5-6 minutes and as long as there were no signs of aggression reward her with a tasty treat. Also be mindful if she seems increasingly agitated while being pet in any particular spot as this could be a sign of a medical condition or injury.

Redirected Aggression:

Often a case of redirected aggression seems as if your cat has become aggressive “out of the blue” or “for no reason”. Although you may not initially see it or ever see it, there is a reason and you will need to play detective to find it. This type of aggression is directed towards a person or a pet that did not cause the aggression, much in the way humans often take their frustration/anger out on a family member after a difficult day at work.

It is important to identify the source of stress and remove it if possible. Unfortunately it is not always possible to either identify the stressor or remove it, so the first course of action is to let the cat calm down. She may need to be separated from the immediate area/family or other pet for several hours or days depending on severity. Cats are sensitive to change and anything including a new piece of furniture being brought into the home, loud visitors and seeing animals outside the home among other things can trigger this type of aggression. It is important that you attempt to find out the cause so you can work on addressing the behavior effectively.

Fear Aggression:

Although some cats may be more prone to having a fearful personality, such as a kitten or cat without human socialization early on, the cause of your cats fear may an isolated object or situation. It is important to observe your cat to find a trigger(s) for his behavior and in this case journaling can be of help. Your cat may be fearful because he has not previously been exposed to something or he associates an object/person/situation with a prior negative experience. It is important not to attempt to console or comfort your cat physically while he is fearful as this could lead to injuries on your part and an exacerbated fear on his.



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Changing fearful behavior is often not a quick fix and requires patience as each cat responds differently. If able to identify the trigger, you will need to remove the trigger if possible and change your cat's perception of that trigger. Often a combination of play therapy, desensitization techniques and other behavior modifications will lessen or eliminate the fearfulness over time. In some cases, cats can remain extremely sensitive to their surroundings and may require medication from a veterinarian in order for the aforementioned techniques to be able to work.

Pain Induced Aggression:

If your cat's aggression comes on suddenly and his behavior has changed recently, it is important to have your pet seen by a veterinarian. In the meantime you can avoid petting your pet to avoid causing further discomfort and risking injury. Your vet should be able to diagnose any medical cause and treat the pain, once that has been dealt with you can begin desensitizing your cat to learn that petting or any touch no longer produces pain but rather treats and enjoyable feelings.

Predatory Aggression:

Predatory aggression may be linked with play aggression in young cats. A young cat that has never had an appropriate outlet for natural cat behaviors such as stalking, pouncing, nipping, etc. may have found the only outlet was other pets or even humans. While this type of aggression is often directed at prey animals, the lack of 'prey' may send your cat in search of the next best thing- you or another pet.

Teaching your cat appropriate ways to release his predation will reduce the chances of you or a child becoming the target. It is important to include play with a wand/fishing pole type of toy that simulates prey as part of your daily routine. The play needs to simulate a hunt, so it is important that you not only mimic the motions of prey but also wind down the game to simulate an injured prey. Reward your cat for a job well done with a meal, as in the wild he would eat his catch.