

Dealing With Feline Aggression

Before tackling your cat's aggressive behavior, discuss your concerns with a veterinarian. Aggression can be caused by seizures or illness including thyroid disease or heart disease. Professional advice from veterinarians and pet trainers can also help determine if your cat's behavior should be managed with medication in addition to training.

Aggression While Playing: Kittens normally replace most of their social behavior with aggressive play at about 12 weeks of age and again at around 8 months. Aggression at these ages is believed to be a part of learning to hunt and defend territory. It may also serve to disperse the kittens to new territories as they reach maturity. In pet cats, this aggressive play may be directed toward human family members.

To prevent the problem, don't encourage kittens to play with your hands or feet. Direct all attempts to play to appropriate toys. If your cat insists on playing with you and ignores toys, stand up and walk away. When this behavior is not encouraged and appropriate play is rewarded with our attention, the behavior will resolve as the kitten matures. It's also important because aggressive adult cats often lose their homes. It's cute now but it won't always be cute.



Hormonal Aggression: Some aggressive behavior is hormonally driven. In these cases, neutering is the solution. Some female cats are only aggressive when they are in heat and some intact cats are only aggressive when they are exhibited at shows. If your cat cannot be neutered, you may consider medication from your veterinarian that can be used to calm your cat during these infrequent episodes. Medications range from tranquilizers that prevent most behavior by keeping the cat sedated to mood altering medication that prevents certain types of aggressive behavior by changing the cat's brain chemistry. These medications have side effects. However, they may be necessary to prevent injury to people in certain situations.

Aggression Between Cats: If your cat is aggressive to other cats in the neighborhood even though he or she has been neutered, make your yard unattractive to other cats. Cat repellents may help or you can buy a scarecrow. It is OK to spray cats with water if they come into your yard. It will upset them but it will not hurt them unless it is unusually cold outside. You can build an outdoor enclosure for your cat or install cat fencing so that cats cannot jump over – in or out. You may want to consider making your cat an indoor cat to prevent all contact with stray animals.

If your cat is suddenly aggressive to a companion animal or is not accepting a new member of the household, use the procedure described for introducing a new cat to your household. You may be able to help both cats establish a territory and decrease their aggression toward each other. (See *Displaced Aggression* next.)

Displaced Aggression: If the aggression has occurred suddenly between cats that previously got along, it is most likely to be related to a specific incident. A common cause is one cat returning after being absent from the home or a strange cat outside creates tension for the indoor cats and they fight with each other because the intruder is out of reach. This can also occur if the aggressor is injured or startled and fights with the other cat.

Cats are not rational when they are aggressive. It's not about social dominance as it is with dogs. Reprimanding an attacking cat doesn't work. It would be like reasoning with a person who has had too much to drink. In these cases, you may not have to resort to separate territories if you separate the cats and rub each with a towel in turn so that they become re-acquainted with each other's scent while they are relaxed.

Aggressive Exercise: Cats are predators. Much of their natural activities are suited for catching the food they need to survive. In our homes, where we provide food, much of the cat's day is spent sleeping. However, your cat will need to burn off extra energy by playing. Sometimes this play involves predatory games that include aggression. Punishment will not stop aggression that results from extra energy because the exercise is rewarding in itself.

You can redirect your cat's energy to outlets that are more acceptable to you. Hide treats around the house in areas where you want to encourage your cat to play such as around his scratching post. Offer a catnip filled sock, a ping-pong ball in the dry bathtub or a paper sack to encourage him to play and get exercise. Some cats enjoy chasing a flashlight beam. You may also buy motorized toys or fishing pole toys.

If your cat is stalking and chasing your feet, keep a spray bottle of water handy and spray him when he attacks. Tossing an appropriately weighted beanbag at your cat right before he pounces is also a good distraction. If he is persistent, offer him catnip in a closed room with appropriate toys and leave the room. Keep a few bath towels handy for a few days to drop over him so you can move him safely when he is charged up.

Over Stimulation: If your cat's aggression comes about suddenly while you are petting him, it may be caused by an abnormal sensitivity, especially noticeable at the base of his tail. If stroking your cat leads to him kneading with his front paws and even drooling, he could be getting over-stimulated. His reaction to this situation can be a sudden burst of aggression.

Aggression While Restrained: If your cat is aggressive to you when you are giving medication or clipping nails, you should wrap him in a towel to do these things. To prevent your cat from fearing the towel, you can wrap him in a towel for about 10 seconds, a few times each week. A professional groomer or veterinary technician can trim his nails for you, if necessary.

Aggression in cats is not uncommon. If your cat is unpredictably aggressive or your cat is injuring people, you should speak to a veterinarian and behaviorist about formal training and even medication for your cat.



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