

Cat Aggression Towards People

Does your cat stalk you when you walk down your own hallway at night? Or turn and bite whoever's petting them when just a second before all was purring and contentment? Or hiss, growl, and lash out at guests when they come in unexpectedly? These are all forms of feline aggression.

Aggression is part of the normal range of behavior for cats, just as it is for other animals. If you can understand the cause of your cat's aggression, you can begin to deal with it. As with any sudden changes in your cat's behavior, aggression may be a sign of illness or discomfort - - have your veterinarian check your cat thoroughly if aggression appears suddenly.

Play-Motivated Aggression

Play can be thought of as rehearsal of survival skills -- for cats, that means hunting. The stalking, chasing, pouncing, and biting that cats would use as predators get practiced during play, and anything that moves makes an inviting target. Sometimes we make it worse by playing with kittens with our hands or feet, but when a kitten grows up, the cute little teeth and claws are bigger and more painful.

The remedy for this type of aggression is to redirect your cat to other, appropriate objects for their play, and never encourage them to play with your body parts. A few active play sessions during the day can get your cat tired and give them practice playing with their own toys. Make sure you get your cat active for at least 10 to 15 minutes -- using a fishing-pole-type toy or something your cat can chase until they actually get tired enough to stop the chase and then follow the play session with a few treats.

Overload Aggression

Some cats will turn from seeming happy and peaceful to biting the one who pets them so quickly we barely see it happen. When a cat bites you when they're being petted, they're giving you the message to stop. Some cats can tolerate and even enjoy a lot of petting before getting overloaded, some just a little. Most cats do give signals, even subtle ones, before they progress to biting. Watch for:

- Restlessness. Your cat's body may feel less relaxed and you may feel their muscles tense even if they're otherwise still.
- Twitching tail or ears.
- Moving or turning their head toward your hand.
- Attempts to move away. If your cat tries to go, let them.
- Watch for these signs, and stop petting and interacting with your cat before they get all the way to "Don't pet me anymore!" Don't punish your cat for reacting this way; that can cause fearful or defensive aggression. If you want to help your cat learn to tolerate more petting, you can work them up to it very gradually using delicious food rewards. Start offering your cat tiny pieces of something they love, such as tuna or chicken, while you pet them and before they start showing signs of aggression. Make each session a little longer than the last, and stop before your cat shows signs of restlessness.
- Many cats have an automatic defensive reaction to having their stomach touched, including wrapping their paws around your wrist and kicking with their back legs. Don't assume that your cat wants their belly petted, even if they roll over on their side with their stomach exposed - that's often not an invitation.

Redirected Aggression

This is another fairly common form of aggression among cats -- it can happen between cats in a household, but people can be targets of redirected aggression as well. When a cat is in a state of high arousal because of another cat, another animal, or a frightening noise or experience - even outside a window or at a distance -- they may attack whoever approaches or touches them, even if that person had nothing to do with what upset them originally. Cats who react this way aren't even registering who it is they're attacking, so don't take it personally.

Don't approach a cat that's in a highly aroused or aggressive state -- just leave them alone until their mood improves. This can take longer than you might think, up to a couple of hours. If your cat has engaged in some other behavior, such as eating, grooming, or playing, it's probably all right to approach. To solve this problem you'll need to remove the source of arousal for your cat. This may mean blocking their view to outside cats or solving problems between cats in your household. Don't punish your cat for redirected aggression. If your cat becomes afraid of you, you might end up with fearful or defensive aggression.

Fearful or Defensive Aggression

Any cat who fears for their own safety may react with aggression. Don't approach a cat whose posture is fearful. Signs of fear include crouching; ears pinned back; hissing, spitting, or growling; hair standing up; and tail tucked underneath or very low. Leave any cat showing these signals alone until they engage in some other activity; if you ignore a warning from a defensive cat, you may get hurt. Children should also be taught to leave a fearful cat alone.

Some cats are fearful of strangers, maybe because they grew up without exposure to many people or because of bad experiences in the past. If your cat reacts aggressively to visitors, enlist your friends to help by asking them to be very calm and quiet when your cat is around, and to give your cat food rewards if the cat approaches on their own. With patience, your cat may learn that visitors can mean good things.

You can also try products available on the market for reducing stress in cats. Of particular interest is the product Feliway, which simulates feline facial pheromones and sends an "everything's all right" message to cats. It comes in a spray as well as a plug-in diffuser. You can use the spray on vertical surfaces around where your cat likes to hang out such as doorframes and furniture. It doesn't work with all cats, but many cat owners report excellent results. Look for suppliers online, or check with your local pet store or with your vet.

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