

Cat Aggression Toward People

By Sheila Segurson, DVM

Is your cat biting or scratching you? Is he stalking and pouncing on you? Is he biting you after you have been petting him for a short period of time or after you touch him in a certain place? Don't despair – there are ways to deal with aggressive behavior in cats.



Below are general recommendations for all feline aggression problems. Before treating your cat's aggressive behavior at home, consult with your veterinarian. Occasionally, medical problems that can cause pain or irritability will lead to aggression; treating these conditions may resolve the aggressive behavior.

Remember, too, that aggression is normal cat communicative behavior. Cats use aggression to tell another cat that they do not wish to interact, to claim their territory or valuable possessions (including food), and in play. It is your job to teach your cat that you would prefer that he communicate in a different manner.

Protecting Yourself

The first step in treating aggression is preventing your cat from harming you. Trim her toenails (or, if necessary for safety reasons, take her to your veterinarian or groomer for a pedicure) so that if she scratches, she will do less damage. Avoid doing things that are likely to cause aggression. For example, some cats behave aggressively when touched on the rear end and other cats do not like being petted when sitting on someone's lap. Write a list of all the triggers that cause your cat to behave aggressively. Don't do these things until you have addressed the problem with behavior modification techniques.

Pay attention to and learn to recognize the signs that occur shortly before your cat attacks. For some cats, this means dilated pupils and a change in ear position. For other cats, it means a rapidly swishing tail or a crouched, tense body posture. Recognize the signs that your cat displays before she behaves aggressively and stop interacting with her before she gets mad – and you get hurt. Ignoring the warning signals, or punishing a cat for aggressive behavior, is highly likely to result in more aggression.

Providing Social Interaction

A common cause for aggression is boredom, often from a lack of social stimulation. Many of our cats live indoors and don't have anyone or anything to play with. In an effort to alleviate their boredom, they choose to "play" with your leg, or sometimes your head while you're trying to sleep. Relieving that boredom and providing your cat with an appropriate outlet for his energy can reduce the likelihood that he will choose to "play" with you in that way.

How can you make your cat's life more exciting? Create a toy box for your cat, but keep it out of her reach. Toys that are available all the time quickly become boring. Cats love

novelty and rapid movement. Rotate the toys in and out of her box every three days, so that she is only allowed to play with the toys for a few days, and then a few new and exciting toys arrive.

Scent is important to cats, and can make a toy more exciting. Carry small toys around with you before you give them to her so that they acquire your scent, or put them outside in the garden so that they acquire the scent of the outdoors. Some cats love the smell of catnip toys. You can buy food-dispensing toys that provide your cat with entertainment without your direct involvement.

Interactive toys (toys that you have to manipulate in order to make them fun, such as a feather attached to a wand and a string) tend to maintain cats' interest for the longest period of time. If you have an active cat, you should play with her for a minimum of 20 minutes twice daily. Don't ever use toys that involve using your hand (or any other body part) as an object of play, since you could encourage aggressive behavior by teaching your cat that it is permissible to play with (i.e., attack) your hands.

Solving the Problem

If you have been diligently avoiding aggressive incidents and playing with your cat regularly for three weeks, and he is still behaving aggressively toward you, it is time to proceed to the next step. Begin by reviewing the list of triggers for aggression that you compiled when you first started working on the problem. Pick the trigger that is least likely to result in aggression – you will use it for your behavior modification plan.

If your cat behaves aggressively when he is touched or picked up, you need to proceed with desensitization and counter-conditioning (see “Using Behavior Modification to Help Your Cat”). Using these techniques, you'll work to resolve the problem in small steps. Remember, this problem has existed for quite a while, so it may take a while to resolve it. Be patient and you'll have a better chance of success.

If your cat is behaving aggressively by stalking you and/or jumping at your legs, you need to teach her that you do not appreciate this behavior. If you see her getting ready to attack, say her name and call her to you. If she listens (and comes to you without attacking you), give her a special food reward (which you should keep in small containers in different parts of the house) or play with her with a special toy. If she does not listen, use remote punishment, such as spraying her with a spray bottle or dropping a large book on the ground to startle her. Your goal is to interrupt her behavior, but *not* to hurt her. Next, leave the room and close the door, giving her a “time out” for several minutes. When you let her out, ignore her for a few minutes, then call her to you. Reward her with a treat or play if she approaches you in a non-aggressive manner.

If you are not successful with the recommendations above, or if your cat is injuring you, please consult with your veterinarian or a behaviorist. The causes of aggression can be very complex and oftentimes an experienced behaviorist can offer detailed, specific recommendations for you and your cat.

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