



FACTSHEET

Feline Aggression

There are a number of reasons for feline aggression and a number of different ways your cat may be displaying aggression. Below is a general guide to different aggressive behaviours, reasons they might be displayed and tips on how you can minimise these aggressive behaviours recurring.

Pain aggression

As cats cannot speak to us and tell us what is wrong with them, they will often let us know something is wrong by being aggressive. Pain aggression can occur if your cat is suffering from an illness or if your cat has been injured. Always look at the circumstances surrounding the aggressive behaviour to try to establish the cause. In any case of feline aggression you should always take your cat to the vet for a check up to eliminate the possibility of illness causing this behaviour. Once your vet has established there is no medical cause for the aggressive behaviour you can then take steps to stop the behaviour.

Play aggression

Play aggression is usually seen in kittens and young adult cats. It involves the cat playing and becoming so excited by the play that the play then turns rough and can lead to scratching or biting. In most cases this type of aggression will dissipate with age and is usually a consequence of a kitten being hand reared or being an only kitten. In these cases the kitten has never learnt how to play gently with social kitten play so they don't know they are causing harm.

If your cat is showing signs of play aggression it is important to avoid play with your hands as this can cause more injury to you. As soon as the play starts to get rough or aggressive, try to distract the cat by clapping or firmly saying 'no' or using a water pistol to spray the cats' paws. Never spray the face of the cat as this may cause the cat to become more aggressive. You can also try getting a squeaky toy and when the play starts to get aggressive, squeak the toy and throw it away from you. This will encourage the cat into a game of fetch and distract them.

Ensure your cat has a variety of toys to play with. Try rotating the toys to prevent boredom. If you have catnip toys, monitor how your cat reacts to these as some cats become more aggressive when catnip is introduced. You should also avoid

initiating rough play at any time with your cat as this will give them a message that rough play is accepted.

Remember to never smack or hit your cat as this can cause them to return the behaviour. As with any form of behaviour modification, it is very important to be consistent when trying to change the behaviour, and be patient as many cats will naturally calm down between one and two years old.

Inter-cat aggression

Inter-cat aggression can often be seen in multi-cat households. As with humans, not all cats will get on well together all the time. In many cases the aggression may be a territorial behaviour between the cats. It is very important that you give the cats space of their own. Ensure each cat has their own litter tray and somewhere they can retreat and have a time out if they need to.

If you notice the aggression is becoming overwhelming for one cat more than the other, try giving the more dominant or aggressive cat a forced time out by placing them in a closed room for a few hours. Make sure you provide some stimulation for them in the room like toys or a scratch post, so the cat can let out some of the aggression. You may even want to consider getting a cat enclosure outdoors so you can separate the cats if you need to.

Be sure to provide the cats with stimulation at all times to avoid boredom as this can also cause aggression. Provide a variety of toys and scratch posts throughout the house. You may also want to place some of the scratch posts under a window so the cat can sit and look outside. It is also a good idea to place a bell on your cats so one cannot sneak up on another. Give each cat their own feed area and water bowl to avoid aggression at feed times.

If the aggression is happening between an older cat and a kitten, with the kitten being the instigator, try to record when the aggressive behaviour occurs. As kittens are still learning how to play they may be 'rough' playing and this may be seen as being aggressive. In these cases it is very important the kitten has an abundance of toys and it is a good idea to rotate these so the kitten isn't bored. The kitten may need time out each day to give the adult cat their own time. Make sure the adult cat has places to go to escape the kitten. Ensure both cats are desexed. In most cases, the kitten will outgrow the rough behaviour.

Try not to pat the cat being the aggressor immediately after the aggressive behaviour as this may reinforce the behaviour. Don't show aggressive behaviour towards an aggressive cat, like shouting or roughly handling the cat, as this will only cause the cat to be more aggressive. It is also important to make sure you are not causing the cat to be aggressive for attention. Try to give all the cats in your household the same amount of love and attention.

When you notice any aggressive behaviour occurring try to distract the cats by clapping or giving a squeaky toy; this will give the less dominant cat time to escape if need be. If this doesn't work, give a short sharp spray with a water bottle at the cat's paws. Never aim at the cat's face.

In cases where the aggression is ongoing, a pheromone diffuser like 'Feliway' might be needed. The diffuser replicates the scent expelled by a cat when they rub their cheeks against items showing they are happy. The smell is almost undetectable to humans but relaxes the cat and gives them a sense of happiness. Patience is important in these cases as it may take weeks or months for the behaviour to be modified. In severe cases, 'Feliway' might be needed indefinitely to prevent the behaviour from recurring.

If the behaviour continues after trying all the tips mentioned you may need to consult your vet about behaviour modifying medications.

Fear aggression

As cats cannot tell us what is wrong they often show us by being aggressive. A cat will show us with body language if they are in a fearful state and these signs are a warning that we should try not to handle the cat. Signs you should look for in a fearful cat are:

- Ears back on the head
- Pupils very large
- Mouth may be slightly open
- Rapid breathing
- Cat may be trying to make themselves look small
- Fur may be risen
- Cat backs away from touch.

If your cat shows these signs, avoid handling them and give them some time alone. In many cases, this behaviour will occur if a cat has recently been introduced to a new household or if an unknown person enters the home. In these situations make sure your cat has places to hide. This will reassure the cat they are safe. Try placing some tasty food out for them, like warm chicken; this will reassure them the environment is a happy one. Avoid trying to force the cat to do anything they don't want to do as this may cause the aggression to be worse. Avoid punishment as this will only escalate the behaviour. Try rewarding the cat with a tasty treat and a loving pat when they do come to you as this will reinforce a safe environment.

Patience is very important in fearful cats. Your cat may never stop showing fearful behaviour but if the behaviour is monitored correctly by you, your cat will still be a very happy cat when with you. The use of a pheromone spray or diffuser such as Feliway might be helpful in calming the cat. Our fact sheet on 'Shy Cats' has more information on helping cats become confident.

Redirected aggression

Cats can show aggressive behaviour towards you or a family member when another stimulus has caused the cats to become aggravated. This is called redirected aggression. This behaviour is often shown when the cat is bored or if an outside stimulus, such as another cat, has caused the initial response. It is very important in these cases to try to establish what caused the initial aggression in your cat. In many cases, it could be a neighbourhood cat getting into your yard and spraying or marking that is causing distress to your cat.

Try providing a number of toys and a few scratch posts so the cat has an outlet for the aggression. Large scratch posts with levels are great for this as the cat can run up it and scratch their scent all around it, letting off the aggression as they go. Try to avoid touching the cat until they have calmed down. Reward your cat with a treat when they stop showing aggressive behaviour.

If you notice the cat shows the behaviour after a certain stimulus try to remove the stimulus. Some examples may be:

- If your cat becomes aggressive when you are patting them try to limit the time spent patting them. Try to pat them in small bursts rather than in one long stretch. Also be aware that some cats don't like the sensation of being petted at all
- If you notice the behaviour occurs when your cat is at one spot in the house, avoid letting the cat spend time in that area
- If you notice faeces or urine spraying outside the home try cat-proofing your yard (see our stray cat fact sheet and 'cat-proof fencing' guide).

Most importantly, don't show aggression to your cat in response to aggressive behaviour as this will only cause the cat to become more aggressive. Ensure you have taken the cat for a vet check to rule out illness causing the behaviour.

The use of a pheromone spray or diffuser such as Feliway might help your cat to be calmer. This could be needed long term if the cause of the aggressive behaviour cannot be established. Providing an outdoor enclosure or safe area for your cat so they can feel less threatened also might help.

In all cases of feline aggression, it is very important to monitor when the cat shows the aggressive behaviour so you can try to establish the cause. Some breeds are more likely to show aggressive behaviour than others. It is most important that you are diligent with treating the problem and that you are patient with the cat.