



# What to Do if Your Cat is Aggressive with People

It is distressing to have an animal you lavish with love show her appreciation with bites and scratches. Here are several scenarios to explain why cats can be aggressive toward people, along with solutions to keep you from visiting the first-aid kit.

## Play aggression

To a cat, play is all about prey. Body postures of play aggression are the behaviors a cat shows when searching for and catching prey. She stalks her target from behind a door or under a chair. She crouches, twitches her tail, flicks her ears back and forth, then pounces, wrapping her front feet around the prey, chewing it and kicking it with her back feet.

We enjoy watching these cat antics, but kittens don't know when to stop. Their rough play can result in scratches and little bites that don't break the skin. You must teach your cat when enough is enough; otherwise, as she gets older, the scratches may get deeper and the bites harder. (Note: In cases where a cat's bite has broken the skin, seek medical advice; a cat bite can be a serious matter.)

### Solution:

- Use a fishing pole type of toy to keep her away from your body when playing with her.
- If she starts chewing or scratching any part of your body, immediately say "uh-uh," and redirect her to a toy. If she continues to chew or scratch after you say, "uh-uh," stop playing immediately. Never hit her or yell, or she'll become afraid of you.
- Don't resume playing until she has calmed down; then use the toy.

Some cats are easily overstimulated, and their play can escalate into true aggression. Pay close attention to your cat's body language; if she's getting too intense, stop playing immediately and give her time to cool off.

## Petting aggression

Sometimes when you're petting your purring cat, she might bite you out of the blue. This behavior isn't well understood even by experienced animal behaviorists, but it's thought that some cats just have very sensitive spots or a very limited tolerance for being touched.

Cats vary in how much they'll tolerate letting you pet or hold them. There are usually warning signs that they're reaching their limit, but their signals can be subtle and hard to detect.

**Look for:**

- Restlessness
- Tail twitching
- Ears turning back or flicking back and forth
- Turning or moving her head toward your hand
- A sharp meow, low growl, or a hiss
- She may even put her teeth on you lightly to tell you to stop.

When you see any of these signals, it's time to stop petting the cat immediately and let her sit on your lap, or go her own way. Never yell or hit; any kind of physical punishment almost always makes the problem worse, as it makes the cat more likely to bite. She might fear you and/or associate petting with punishment.

**Solution:**

If you have a cat who doesn't like being petted, you could try to win her over with food rewards.

Before your cat shows any of the behaviors described above, offer her a special tidbit of food. Pet her lightly for a short time while, offering her treats. She'll come to associate being stroked with more pleasant things.

Stop petting before you see the signs of irritation. If you keep petting until the cat reacts badly, you've defeated the purpose. Each time you work with your cat, try to pet him for slightly longer periods using the food.

## **Redirected aggression**

Redirected aggression occurs when a cat is aroused (in a bad way) by an animal or person, but has no outlet for her naturally aggressive feelings.

The cat gazing out the window may have seen another cat outside, which makes her want to defend her territory. When she can't get to that cat, she attacks the first thing that crosses her path. She's so worked up about that strange cat that she's not aware that she has redirected her aggression to you.

**Solution:**

Observe your cat closely before approaching her. Does she:

- Stare so hard out the window that she doesn't know you're there?
- Not respond when you call her?
- Jerk her tail back and forth?
- Growl, hiss, or meow loudly?

Don't mess with her! Clap your hands loudly to break her fixation, or just walk away and let her calm down by herself. You may also be attacked if you try to interfere with two cats fighting. Don't get in the middle of it. Use a squirt bottle or pillow to break up the fight and distract the cats.

## **Territorial aggression**

Cats are by nature very territorial, but usually cats only feel the need to defend their territory from other cats.

Once in a while you'll come across an extremely dominant cat who thinks she owns the house. Such a cat may, for example, try to prevent you from entering or leaving a room. If you're visiting a friend with a cat like this and notice that the cat is displaying the signs of aggression listed above, steer clear.

### **Solution:**

If your cat becomes territorially aggressive and tries to control your access to places in your home, give her a squirt with the water bottle to let her know who's boss.

## **Other explanations**

If your cat's behavior has started suddenly, there could be a medical issue causing it. Take her to the vet for a check-up; if she gets a clean bill of health, she needs behavior modification.

If her behavior improves when she's confined to one room, her aggression may be due to stress in her environment (loud kids, other cats or pets).

## **When nothing works**

If you've tried everything to resolve your cat's aggression, but she's not responding, consult your vet and the animal behaviorist to see what your options are.

If her aggression is stress-induced (caused by loud noises, young children, other cats or pets, etc.) and you can't find ways to relieve that stress, it may be time to reevaluate her presence in your home. She might be better off in a calm home with no other pets. However, you should be extremely cautious about placing her in a new home; you don't want to pass your problem on to someone else.

*Adapted from material originally developed by applied animal behaviorists at the Dumb Friends League, Denver, Colorado. All rights reserved.*

## **About Napa Humane**

The Humane Society of Napa County and SPCA, known as Napa Humane, is a non-profit organization incorporated in 1973. Recognizing that companion animals are an important part of

healthy communities, we've grown to consider Napa Humane a community service organization. Our programs and services are designed to address the needs of animals – and also to provide support, education, and assistance for all the people who care for and about them.

Napa Humane is a private and independent organization that is supported by private donations by individuals and businesses, bequests, and fees for service. We receive no government funding, tax dollars or funding from national animal welfare organizations.

### **Our Mission**

To promote the welfare of companion animals through protection, advocacy, education, and by example.