

Health and welfare information about your cat from Vetlexicon Felis.



Aggressive cats

Living with a cat that loves nothing better than to ambush your legs, or attack you when you try to stroke it can be very unpleasant and often extremely painful! Treatment of aggressive behavior can be very successful; however, it does require understanding of why the cat is motivated to show aggression.

Why is my cat aggressive towards people?

The two main reasons for aggression to develop in cats are because of fear, or because they have learnt an inappropriate way of interacting with their owner. Fear aggression is a defense strategy, which occurs when the cat is feeling threatened. Play behavior can be termed aggressive when it is directed at an inappropriate target, eg human hands and feet.

How does fear aggression develop?

In order to learn that different situations are normal and safe, cats have to experience them very early in life. Things that are not encountered early on will be more likely to be scary to a cat when it encounters them later in life. Cats that were not well socialized with people as young kittens (between 2 and 8 weeks of age) will be less likely to approach people and may feel threatened by contact with people. Other cats may become fearful due to a bad experience with people later in life. Individual cats can feel threatened by different 'levels' of interaction with people, eg one cat might feel threatened by a person approaching, while another enjoys close contact but feels threatened when picked up. If a cat shows aggression and the person moves away or puts them down, then that aggressive behavior has been successful. Consequently, every time a person approaches and the cat shows aggression, the aggressive behavior becomes increasingly established as a successful response to this 'threat'.

What is inappropriate play?

Aggressive behavior is often sudden and unpredictable and can include attacking people by grabbing them with claws and biting them. Sudden movement, such as passing feet, or occasionally high-pitched sounds may trigger this behavior. Generally this type of behavior in adult cats develops through inappropriate play behavior in kittens. If owners allow kittens to play with their fingers or feet; the kittens will grow up thinking that this is the normal way to interact with people. This behavior is further reinforced by the reaction of the 'victim', such as running around screaming; the movement and noise reinforces both play and predatory behavior in kittens and adult cats. In addition to the excitement of the play, some cats find this behavior a very successful method of getting attention from their owners - it certainly gets a response every time!

Is there any other reason why my cat is being aggressive?

Aggression can also arise from frustration or 're-directed' aggression. The latter occurs when a cat becomes aroused by something, eg another cat, but is unable to attack it and takes this aggression out on the closest moving object; commonly the owner. Rarely aggressive behavior is caused by a medical condition (such as seizure activity), and sometimes an underlying medical condition (such as high thyroid hormone levels) makes aggressive behavior more likely. Cats in pain show a defensive response to being touched with may appear aggressive.

How can I treat my cats fear aggression?

If your cat is aggressive through fear you must be careful not to appear threatening to the cat when you interact with it or approach it. This will prevent further reinforcement of the aggression so that your cat learns that it can relax around people. It is then possible to start a 'desensitization and counter-conditioning program' using food rewards. Place some tasty food next to your cat's hiding place then sit far enough away that your cat will tolerate their presence, and venture out to eat the food. Slowly your cat will learn to associate your presence with something good. In very small stages, the food treat should be moved closer to where you are sitting so that your cat is encouraged to approach. Finally try to stroke your cat once before giving it a food reward then gradually build up the number of times you stroke your cat. Cats that are poorly socialized to people are unlikely to ever become cuddly lap cats, but by following this program the cat will learn to tolerate the presence of humans instead of being fearful and showing aggression if approached.

Encouraging appropriate play

To stop cats from playing aggressively owners must change the consequences of the aggression. Because these cats find the reaction of their victim (screaming and running around) so rewarding they are likely to continue the behavior. Therefore, you must not reward ambushes by being exciting, which means ignoring the cat's attack. You may need to wear protective clothing at all times in the house so you do not get injured and can easily ignore the attacks. You must also stay perfectly still when your cat is playing aggressively and must not talk to, or even look at it, as the cat may find any response rewarding. Your cat will soon learn that it no longer gets a response by pouncing on you so will gradually stop the behavior. You should also start to use your attention as a reward for good behavior; praising your cat when it is playing with its own toys or in an acceptable fashion, eg with fishing rod toys. In this way the cat's aggressive behavior can be redirected onto more appropriate targets. Environmental enrichment puzzle feeders, climbing and hiding spaces, and scratching posts may also help to reduce this behavior by occupying the cat's time in a more constructive way.