



Understanding Cat Aggression Towards People

It can sometimes be confusing why your cat, who seems to be friendly and content one minute, may suddenly bite and scratch the next. There are many reasons why your cat may be acting this way, but it's important to remember that your cat is never acting out of spite or revenge. Below are a few reasons why your cat may be swatting or biting you.

Play Aggression

Play-motivated aggressive behaviors are commonly observed in active, young cats (less than two years of age) and cats who live in one-cat households, although that doesn't mean your senior cat might not feel a little feisty every once in a while! Cat play incorporates a variety of behaviors such as exploratory, investigative, and predatory behaviors. Play provides young cats with opportunities to practice skills they would normally need for survival.

They may bat at, pounce on, and bite objects, which to them resemble prey. Aggressive behaviors can be identified as play based on the type of situations in which they occur, the cats' body postures, and the types of behaviors displayed. Playful aggression often results in scratches and inhibited bites which do not break the skin. Playful attacks often occur when an unsuspecting owner comes down the stairs, steps out of the bathtub, rounds a corner, or even moves under the bedcovers while sleeping. Play which involves aggression can be initiated by the owner or by the cat. Owners may inadvertently contribute to this problem if they encourage kittens to chase or bite at their hands and feet during play. The body postures seen during play aggression resemble the postures a cat would show when searching for or catching prey. The cat may freeze in a low crouch before pouncing, twitch her tail, wiggle her back end, flick her ears back and forth, and/or wrap her front feet around a person's hands or feet while biting and kicking her back legs. These are all normal cat behaviors, whether they are seen during play or are part of an actual predatory sequence.

Overstimulated Aggression

It is not uncommon for cats to suddenly bite while being petted. This behavior is not well understood, even by experienced animal behaviorists. Petting which the cat was previously enjoying, apparently becomes unpleasant. The bite is the cat's signal that she has had enough petting. Although owners often describe cats as biting without warning, cats generally give several signals before biting. Owners must become more aware of their

cats' body language and cease petting or stop any other kind of interaction before the bite occurs. Signals owners should be aware of include:

- restlessness
- the cat's tail beginning to twitch or flick back and forth very quickly
- the cat's ears turning back or flicking back and forth
- the cat turning or moving her head toward your hand

When you observe any of these signals, it is time to stop petting the cat immediately and allow her just to sit quietly on your lap or go her own way, whichever she prefers.

Remember, you don't have to pet your cat when she's sitting on your lap.

Any kind of physical punishment makes the problem worse, as it makes the cat more likely to bite either because he is fearful and/or because petting becomes even more unpleasant if it is associated with punishment.

If you want to try to prolong the amount of time your cat will tolerate petting, use food rewards. When your cat **first begins** to show any of the behaviors described above (or even before he does so) offer him a special tidbit of food such as a tiny piece of tuna or boiled chicken. At the same time, decrease the intensity of your petting. Continue to lightly pet your cat for a short time period while offering her tidbits. In this way, petting will come to be associated with more pleasant things and may help her to enjoy petting for longer time periods. Be sure to stop the petting **before** she shows any warning signs of aggression. Each time you work with your cat, try to pet her for slightly longer time periods using the food.

Fearful/Defensive Aggression

Cats who are fearful may display body postures that appear to be similar to canine submissive postures—crouching on the floor, ears back, tail tucked, and possibly rolling slightly to the side. Cats in this posture are **NOT** submissive; they are fearful and defensive and may attack if touched, pushed, or cornered. For more information on fearful behavior in cats, see our handout *Helping Your Fearful Cat*.

Redirected Aggression

This happens when the cat is aroused into an aggressive response by one person or animal, but then redirects this aggression onto another person or animal. For example, if two family cats have a spat, the losing cat, still aroused, may walk up and bite or swat at the nearest person.

What to Do

- Check first with your veterinarian to rule out medical causes for the aggressive behavior, especially if it's a new change.

- Seek professional help. An aggression problem will not go away by itself. Working with aggression problems usually require in-home help from an animal behavior professional.
- Take precautions. Your first priority is to keep everyone safe. Supervise, confine, and/or restrict your cat's activities until you can obtain professional help. You are liable for your cat's behavior.

What Not to Do

- You should never attempt to handle a fearful or aggressive cat. Cat bites and scratches become infected easily. If you do receive an injury from your cat, clean the wound carefully and contact your physician.
- Punishment will not help and will make the problem worse. If the aggression is motivated by fear, punishment will make the cat more fearful, and therefore more aggressive.

If you need additional help, please contact Homeward Pet Adoption Center's Animal Behavior Manager or another certified professional.