

Aggression is the second most common feline behavior problem seen by animal behaviorists. Although cat aggression is sometimes taken less seriously than dog aggression, an aggressive cat can still be risky to have at home and can pose a real danger to family and visitors.

Cats have 5 potential weapons. Their teeth and all four of their clawed paws can cause severe lacerations which are painful and can easily become infected. Cat Scratch Fever is a serious infectious disease that causes flu-like symptoms, so it is important to handle any cat scratch with problem cleaning.

There are various circumstances that can lead a cat to show aggression, defending their territory, protecting their offspring and/or themselves from danger. Aggression problems in pet cats range from cats that hiss and avoid the target of their aggression to cats that aggressively attack.

## **Understanding Cat Body Language**

Understanding what cats are communicating, through their body language, is essential. It enables you, as the pet guardian, to more accurately “read” your cats and to respond more effectively to behaviour issues. Body language is made up of cats’ body postures, facial expressions, and the position and carriage of certain body parts, like the ears and the tail.

Threats and aggression can be either offensive or defensive. An offensively aggressive cat tries to make themselves look bigger and more intimidating, whereas a defensively aggressive cat adopts a self-protective posture and tries to make himself look smaller. A rule of thumb for all the postures listed is—don’t touch, attempt to reassure or punish cats showing these postures!

### ***Offensive postures include:***

- Stiffened rear legs, with the rear end raised and the back sloped downward toward the head
- Tail is stiff and lowered or held straight down to the ground
- Direct stare
- Upright ears, with the back rotated slightly forward
- Directly facing opponent, possibly moving toward him
- Might be growling, howling or yowling

### ***Defensive postures include:***

- Crouching
- Head tucked in
- Tail curved around the body and tucked in
- Eyes wide open with pupils partially or fully dilated
- Ears flattened sideways or backward on the head

- In an anxious cat, whiskers might be retracted. In a fearful cat, whiskers might pan out and forward to assess distance between himself and the danger
- Turning sideways to the opponent, not straight on
- Open-mouthed hissing or spitting
- Might deliver quick strikes with front paws, claws out

***Overt aggression, whether defensive or offensive, includes:***

- Swatting, striking with paws
- Biting
- Fighting
- Growling, shrieking
- Scratching

**Classification of Aggressive Behavior**

Aggressive behavior problems in cats can be classified in different ways. A good way to understand why your cat is aggressive is to think about the function or purpose of the aggression. If you consider all the reasons why cats behave aggressively, you can determine what motivates your cat to do so and identify what he might gain from his behavior.

***Play***

Play aggression is the most common type of aggressive behavior that cats direct toward their owners. Rough play is common and natural among kittens and young cats, but despite the playful intentions it can cause injury to people when it becomes rambunctious. It's believed that through play with each other, young cats learn to inhibit their bites and sheathe their claws when swatting. The degree to which individual cats learn to inhibit their rough play varies, and those who were orphaned or weaned early might never have learned to temper their play behavior. Other factors that can contribute to play aggression are long hours spent alone without opportunities to play, and if pet parents encourage their cats to chase and attack people's hands and feet in play.

***Petting-Induced***

Petting-induced aggression occurs when a cat suddenly feels irritated by being petted, and then nips or lightly bites the person petting him. Repetitive contact can cause arousal, excitement, pain and even static electricity in a cat's fur. Imagine if someone rubbed your back in the same spot over and over. That could quickly become unpleasant. Your cat might feel the same way: what started out feeling good is now irritating, and he wants you to stop. When your cat signals you to stop petting, the best response is simply to stop. With careful observation of your cat's communication signals, you'll usually see warning signs, such as:

- Quickly turning his head toward a person's hand
- Twitching or flipping his tail
- Flattening his ears or rotating them forward and back
- Restlessness

### ***Pain-Induced and Irritable***

Pain-induced and irritable aggressions are triggered by pain, frustration or deprivation. Even a well-socialized cat can lash out if someone tries to touch their injury.

If your cat is showing aggression that cannot be explained, take them to a veterinary to get them examined for medical problems, especially painful diseases such as arthritis, dental pain and abscesses from fighting.

### ***Between Cats***

The aggression can occur between females or between females and males. The most obvious type of aggression between cats occurs between unneutered males. As males reach adulthood, they often begin to challenge each other for access to mates and territory. Aggression between any cats can be related to physical size and activity (large cats often intimidate smaller or less active cats), to a lack of pleasant social experiences with other cats.

### ***Territorial***

Animals of many species strive to keep out other individuals from their territory. Both male and female cats are territorial, but males may defend larger territories than females. A cat's perceived territory could be the entire house or part of it, and the yard. They will mark their turf by patrolling, chin rubbing and urine spraying. Some of the most common situations that trigger territoriality are:

- A kitten in the household reaches sexual maturity
- A new cat is introduced into the family and household
- Major changes are made in the cat's family or environment (for example, moving or someone moving in)
- Stray or roaming cats in the neighborhood enter a cat's territory

### ***Maternal***

All mothers have instincts to protect their offspring and can be quite aggressive when they detect potential danger. This defensive aggression is most prominent in the first few days after birth. For this reason, it's a good idea to avoid handling kittens during the first few days of their lives.