

Aggression is very common in cats — they can become aggressive when they have had enough petting, when they are picked up, when they are frightened, and even when they are playing.

This is a natural response and one that may be hard to change. It is important that you learn how to read your cat's moods and body language and know what things cause him to become aggressive so you can avoid an aggressive attack. In some cases, you may be able to use behavior modification to change your cat's behavior. Below are several types of cat aggression and the recommended treatment.

Never physically punish a cat for showing aggression. This will only make the situation worse. Cats that are physically punished will only become more aggressive.

Fearful or Defensive Aggression

The best way to deal with defensive aggression is to remove the fearful stimuli. If the fearful stimuli cannot be removed, you can work to slowly change your cat's feelings about it using counter conditioning. To do this, pair an extra special treat (tuna, chicken, etc.) or a fun play session with the presence of the scary thing. Do this over and over until a new association is formed. If it is a dog your cat is afraid of, make sure your dog is never allowed to chase the cat.

Play Aggression

Cats are naturally aggressive in play because their play mimics aspects of the hunt — stalk, chase, attack. Learn to anticipate when your cat becomes playfully aggressive (whenever you walk by the dresser, when you dangle your hand over the side of the chair, or when you move your feet under the covers) so that you can redirect the attack onto a toy. Have a small toy ready and the second before your cat attacks you — toss the toy away from your cat. Cats have motion sensitive vision if they see something move fast across their line of vision, they will chase it.

You can also interrupt a playful attack with a loud noise or water gun but be careful because this method may cause your cat to become afraid of you. If it happens that you were unable to interrupt and prevent an attack — scream "OUCH" as loud as you can and remove yourself from the room.

Play Therapy

It is important to play with your cat on a regular basis to provide him with an outlet for his playful energy. Toss a ball or wadded up piece of paper for your cat to chase, use a fishing pole type toy like a feather dancer to stimulate him to chase and pounce, or provide interactive toys like round a bouts or treat dispensers. If your play session occurs at about the same time every day (cats love routine), your cat will start to anticipate the fun and reserve play for this time.

Redirected Aggression

Cats often redirect their aggressive feelings about one thing (a cat outside the window) onto someone else (you or another pet). A cat can stay agitated for a long time, sometimes up to 24 hours, and in this state they often attack the first thing that comes their way. It is important that you do not interact with your cat when she looks agitated. Just leave her alone until she has calmed down. If your cat becomes agitated by cats outside the window, try preventing visual access using blinds or shades.

“Don’t Pet me anymore” Aggression

Some cats have a very low threshold for tolerating petting. Your cat may be fine for five pats but on the sixth one he attacks. We don’t really know what causes this reaction but it most likely has to do with the sensitivity of their skin. The important thing to do to prevent such an attack is to learn your cats threshold level and don’t exceed it.

The body signals that tell you that your cat is becoming agitated with petting include: ears back, tail twitching or skin on the back twitching. When you see these signs — stop petting. You can work to increase your cat’s petting tolerance by pairing pats with food treats. Pat five times — give a treat — pat six times — give a treat, etc. until you have slowly increased the number of pats he will tolerate.

Inter-cat Aggression

This is a common form of aggression because cats are very territorial animals that usually prefer to live alone due to their solitary nature. Adults are less likely to accept new cats into the household and will usually show aggression to the newcomer. Aggression between cats can also be status or rank related. They may simply be trying to work out who is the boss. Sometimes resident cats, which usually live peacefully together, will start to attack each other. This breakdown of peaceful coexistence could have been triggered by just about anything.

Examples of things that could have occurred are: one cat just came back from the vet’s office and smells funny; one cat redirected aggression onto the other after seeing a strange cat outside and they continue to fight; one cat is sick and easily agitated. You may be able to help get the cats back to a peaceful coexistence by providing food treats, play sessions and cuddle times only when the cats are in each other’s presence.

Sometimes aggression is a sign of illness or pain. If your normally loving cat suddenly starts showing aggressive behavior, you may want to consult with your veterinarian.