

Feline Aggression

Cats can be aggressive for a variety of reasons, and in a variety of ways. We can see cats that are aggressive to other cats and pets in the home, and cats that are aggressive to people. This can also be a result of underlying medical issues, so we do recommend a thorough exam and testing to rule out a medical cause, especially if this is a new behavior.

Play Aggression:

- This is more commonly seen in younger cats and kittens, but we can see it in some older cats. When cats are young kittens, they tend to roughhouse quite a bit with their siblings. This is actually a good thing, because they learn manners from each other, and when to stop. For kittens who lose their siblings early, they may not learn these life lessons, and so will play too rough with other animals and people.
- If your cat is biting you or bunny kicking you to the point of drawing blood when you are in the act of playing with them, this is play aggression. They don't mean to hurt you, they just don't know how far is too far.
- Some cats will also become aggressive because they are bored, they don't have enough stimulation, and they are trying to get your attention to draw you into play. These cats can benefit by increasing stimulation in the home, or by letting them outdoors in a safe manner to give them something to do during the day. There is a good website on increasing indoor stimulation at www.indoorcat.org.
- To decrease play aggression behavior, there are several things you can do.
 - As soon as your cat goes too far, stop the play and ignore your cat. By ending the play time, you are showing your cat that the last move your cat made was a game ender. If your cat goes after you, trying to reinitiate the play, shut them in a room for a short period of time to end the cycle.
 - Don't play with your cat in such a way that you know will elicit a more aggressive reaction. Examples include, if your cat bites your hand, don't use your hand in play, instead use a toy on a stick or a string. If your cat starts bunny kicking your arm if you rub his belly, don't rub his belly.
 - If your cat tries to bite you after play has ended because they don't want to stop, then end each play session with a treat or something to otherwise distract him.
 - As long as your cat plays nice, you can continue to play with him, and if you need to end the play time before he is ready, but he is not aggressive at all, then reward him with a treat.
 - If your cat is launching himself at people in a misguided attempt to play, then you will need to eliminate places that he can launch from, use squirt guns and spray bottles, and keep thick towels laying around to defend yourself, and then when he is calm, engage him in normal play to wear him out, and praise him and give him treats when he does participate in normal play.

Fear Aggression:

- When a cat is scared of something, they may become aggressive as a way of defending himself. Kind of a "best defense is a good offense". This is seen very commonly in taking your cat to the vet clinic, but this can be seen at home as well, if there is something such as a person or another animal that he is afraid of.
- If your cat is trembling and hunched up, and at the same time is growling and swatting while backed into a corner or hiding under something, this may be fear aggression. If this is the case, leave your cat alone, or find a

way to eliminate whatever he is afraid of, whether it is another pet, person, or something in the home environment.

- Cats need to feel completely safe and secure in their environment, and this includes being able to feel that they are in control of the situation. If they do not feel that control, then they may become afraid, and hence display fear aggression.
 - Making your cat feel in control of their home may include having cat perches up high, and having a “track” of furniture that circles around rooms. Your cat can then move around a room while staying up high and closer to your face and hand level. Also provide multiple ‘hidey holes’ that your cat can snuggle up in and not feel defenseless.
- Fear aggression can take a while to overcome, but it can be eliminated if you can determine the source of the fear and remove it, while making your cat feel that they are safe and secure and in control of their environment.

Displaced Aggression:

- For reasons not completely known to us, cats will routinely exhibit displaced aggression. This is when your cat feels a need to lash out at something, but can’t get at whatever they are upset with. As a result, they will lash out at whatever is closest, which may include you or another pet in the home.
- This can be very hard to prevent, as you don’t always know what is going to set your cat off. Most commonly it is by seeing another cat outside a window, taking either your cat or another cat in your home to the vet, or by hearing other cats fighting.
- If you can pinpoint events that trigger displaced aggression in your cat, anything you can do to prevent them will help, such as covering windows where they can see the ground outside, using scents and/or sedatives when taking a cat to the vet, and not keeping your windows open at night if you have neighborhood cats who vocalize and fight.
 - If you know that bringing a cat to the vet will trigger displaced aggression once that cat gets home, whether they are the aggressor or the victim, it can help to coat all of the cat’s noses in vanilla or peppermint extract before letting them in the same room with each other, so they cannot smell vet smells on each other.
 - Feliway is a feline pheromone that has been shown to have calming effects on cats. You can spray it in the carrier before the vet visit, and in the house before and after the vet visit to try and minimize your cat’s stress and aggression.
- If you cannot prevent the triggers, then this may be when a behavioral medication such as Prozac (fluoxetine) or Elavil (amitriptyline) may be required to slightly sedate your cat, and reduce their aggressive tendencies on a long term basis.
- If your cat displays displaced aggression to people in the home then it becomes a more critical situation. NEVER try to handle a cat who is showing signs of displaced aggression. Instead, either remove yourself from the situation, or use something between you and your cat such as a thick towel or piece of furniture that offers some protection, and try to direct your cat into a room where they can be left alone for an hour, after which they will have forgotten what they were upset about. If this is a regular occurrence, and you cannot prevent the episodes of displaced aggression, then we strongly recommend behavior medications.

Dominance Aggression:

- Some cats need to be the alpha cat in the home to feel in control, or they may have some degree of fear aggression and instead choose to attack other animals in the home before they themselves can be attacked.

- If your cat exhibits dominance over another cat in the home, and especially if the other cat plays the part of the victim and cowers and runs from the aggressive cat, then life can become a nightmare for the victim cat.
- We can treat this to some extent with medications. By treating the victim cat with Buspar, which is an anti-anxiety medication that will make them less afraid of the dominant cat, they will be more likely to stand up for themselves, and many dominant cats will back down if the victim stops running. If that is not enough, then we may also need to treat the dominant cat with anti-aggression medications such as Prozac or Elavil.
- If feasible, it may also help to let the dominant cat outdoors in a safe manner to help them burn off their excess energies, other than on the victim cat.
- If dominance aggression is occurring shortly after bringing a new cat into the home, then there is a good chance that with time, training, and possibly medications, that the cats will learn to coexist peacefully.
- If your cat is acting dominant to a person in the home, behavior modification can be used.
 - Behavior modification for dominance to people consists of showing the cat that the people in question are not inferior. Cats are like dogs in one respect, they can smell fear and weakness. We will commonly hear that the cat is fine with at least one person in the house, but for the people who exhibit fear the cat will show aggression.
 - If you would like more information on how to do this, please talk to us.

Petting Induced Aggression:

- Some cats who may not have been socialized enough as kittens, or who are just loners by nature, may just not want to be petted or handled. They may tolerate petting on the head, but if you pet down the back, bite the person petting. These same cats may roll over when approached exposing the belly as if wanting it to be rubbed, but then lash out and bite when you start to rub the belly. These are “don’t touch me!” cats. They are not normally aggressive cats, but they are not necessarily affectionate cats either. They may snuggle up to you as though they want attention, but then bite when receiving it.
- The best way to address this type of aggression is just to learn what the cat wants petted, and what they don’t want petted, and respect their boundaries. If friends or family come over, it is best to just keep these cats confined in a room until the guests are gone to protect guests who don’t listen to caution.
- It can also help to learn to read cues such as flattened ears, twitching tail, etc., and when noticed, give a reward before the behavior becomes aggressive.

The types of aggression listed above are the most common types of aggression, but they are not the only kinds of aggression we can see in cats. If your cat is displaying aggressive tendencies, and nothing you have tried has worked, please contact us at All Feline Hospital at 402-467-2711 or info@allfelinehospital.com to schedule a consultation as to what we can try to restore peace in your home.