



## Royal Animal Hospital – Cat – Human Aggression

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Cat owners sometimes have difficulty understanding why their cats, who seem to be friendly and content one minute, may suddenly bite and scratch them the next. Aggressive behaviours are part of the normal behavioural patterns of almost any animal species. Some of the many reasons why cats direct aggression towards people are because they:

1. Are fearful and defensive.
2. Are redirecting aggression which was stimulated by something else (e.g. a cat outside) onto their owners.
3. Are playing.
4. Do not want to be petted any longer.
5. View certain people as intruders in their territory.



Cat bites are seldom reported, but may occur more frequently than do bites from dogs. Aggressive cats can be dangerous, so attempting to resolve a cat aggression problem often requires assistance from a professional who is knowledgeable about cat behaviour. This article will discuss only play motivated aggression and the "don't pet me anymore" type of aggression because these types are generally more easily resolved.

### **Play Aggression:**

Play-motivated aggressive behaviours are commonly observed in young, active cats who are usually less than two years of age, and who often live in one-cat households. Play in cats incorporates a variety of behaviours such as exploratory, investigative, and predatory behaviour. Play provides young cats with opportunities to practice skills they would normally need for survival. For example, kittens like to explore new areas and investigate anything that moves. They may bat at, pounce on, and bite objects which to them resemble prey.

Aggressive behaviours can be identified as play based on the type of situations in which they occur, the cats' body postures, and the types of behaviours 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 bed covers 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 after 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 its tail, flick its ears back and forth, and/or wrap its front feet around a person's hands or feet while biting. These are all normal cat behaviours, whether they are seen during play or are part of an actual predatory sequence.

#### How to Handle Playful Aggression:

1. The first strategy is to provide many opportunities each day for your cat to play in an acceptable manner. Active, playful animals must be given outlets for play.
2. Have toys available that are interesting from your cat's point of view and allow your cat to show her own individual style and favorite ways to play. You may need to experiment to see which toys your particular cat prefers. It also is helpful to provide new toys (or at least rotate the availability of the ones you have) once their novelty wears off. Some examples of toys which many cats like are:

- Toys that dangle from a fishing-rod type of pole.
- Toys on strings that can be wriggled or pulled alone. An empty spool of thread.
- Open paper bags or boxes that can be explored.

**CAUTION** - Do not allow your cat to swallow string, rubber bands, ribbons or shiny tinsel which can be found in some toys, this may cause Life-threatening damage to your cat's intestines.

3. Owners should avoid wrestling or using their hands and feet as toys for playfully aggressive cats. This type of play only encourages the cat to grab and/or bite your flesh as part of its normal play. It is better to use a stuffed sock or one of the toys mentioned above to play with your cat.
4. Remote forms of punishment may be used as a means of discouraging inappropriate play only if the cat also has opportunities for acceptable play. Ideas for remote punishment which startle the cat but do not involve you physically interacting with the cat include:
  - Using a squirt bottle filled with water.
  - Using noise making devices such as horns from a bike or boat.
  - Giving the cat a puff of air in the face from a can of compressed air.

Hitting slapping, or scruffing a playfully aggressive cat is not acceptable.

This approach seldom corrects the problem and can have some nasty results. Your cat may become more aggressive, afraid of you, or both. Punishment alone is never an effective treatment. Resolving play-motivated aggression problems must include encouraging the cat to play appropriately and may include remote punishment techniques designed to discourage the cat from showing undesirable play behaviours.

### **"Don't pet me anymore" Aggression:**

It is not uncommon for cats to suddenly bite while being petted. This behaviour is not well understood, even by experienced animal behaviourists. For whatever reason, petting which the cat was previously enjoying apparently becomes unpleasant. The bite is the cat's signal that "enough is enough". Cats vary in how much they will tolerate being petted or held. This type of biting seems to occur more frequently in males than females, although this has not been well documented. Although owners often describe cats as biting "out of the blue" or without warning, cats generally give several signals before biting. Owners must become more aware of their cats body postures, 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.
- 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 NOW and allow him to just sit quietly on your lap or go his own way, whichever he prefers. Any kind of physical punishment almost always 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 some food rewards. When your cat first begins to show any of the behaviours 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 him tidbits. In this way, petting will come to be associated with more pleasant things and may help him to enjoy petting for longer

time periods. Be sure to stop the petting before he shows any aggression. If aggression results in the petting being stopped, then this unacceptable behaviour has been reinforced. Each time you work with your cat, try to pet him for slightly longer time periods using the food.

**Other types of aggression:**

Defensive, territorial, redirected and idiopathic (meaning the cause is unknown) forms of cat aggression can be quite serious and usually require professional help to resolve. You should never attempt to handle a fearful or aggressive cat. Cats who are fearful may display body postures which 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.

Any cat who suddenly becomes aggressive should be taken to your regular veterinarian for a complete check-up. Certain kinds of diseases, illnesses or physical conditions such as abscessed bite wounds can cause cats to show aggression. Medical causes for the behaviour should be evaluated before the problem is assumed to be behavioural. If the aggression is due to a behavioural problem, ask your veterinarian to refer you.