

Curbing Your Cat's Aggression

Most cats are not aggressive towards people, but if you have one that is, it can be a nightmare. Cat bites and scratches are not normally as harmful as those from a dog, but it's still not very nice being attacked by a cat as an adult, and even worse if you're a child.

Although aggressive cats are nowhere near as common as aggressive dogs, there are still more than 20,000 cases of cat-scratch disease in the United States annually. If you are bitten or scratched by a cat, it's important to clean the wounds with an antiseptic solution as soon as possible.

So, why exactly do cats turn aggressive and attack people? Well, there are several reasons:

A cat in pain can tend to lash out. If a normally good-natured cat suddenly strikes out at you for no reason, take it to a vet and have it checked out for illness or injury.

A fearful cat can be dangerous. A mature cat that was never properly socialized when younger, or a cat that has been mistreated at some time in its life, can lash out through fear.

Some cats may start to direct the kind of stalking behaviour normally reserved for prey, at an owners hands or feet. This can be particularly disturbing if it gets directed at small children.

Sometimes an owner can be the victim of re-directed aggression, i.e. the cat attacks the owner when it cannot get at its intended target - another cat it can see or smell.

Cats play status games rather more rarely than dogs, but on occasions you will get an animal that thinks it's Top Cat and indulges in behaviour where it challenges the owner to prove it wrong. Professional help is needed from a cat behaviour specialist to sort this out before it escalates out of control.

Some do's and don'ts to help control cat aggression:

Have the cat looked over by a vet for signs of illness or injury.

Scale down the amount of physical contact with the cat.

When it goes into 'attack mode,' startle the cat with a loud noise etc. as a diversionary tactic.

Play with the cat 'at arms length' by using e.g. a toy on a string held away from the body.

It may be necessary to confine the cat to a cage, particularly if a young child is at risk.

Don't make prolonged eye contact, always look away from the cat's eyes after a few seconds.

Don't use physical punishment. This will only make the cat more aggressive.