

# Cat: Aggression toward People



## Why Cats Act Aggressively

Aggression is the most serious behavioral issue in cats and is more common than one may think. It's a symptom of an underlying problem, and it always needs to be taken seriously. Aggressive behavior can be seen in cats of any breed, size, age, or gender, and it can stem from many different motivations. The most common include:

Fear/defense  
Pain/discomfort

Petting induced  
Play

Territorial  
Redirected

## What Aggression May Look Like

**Irritated, over-stimulated:** Pupils dilating, ears turning back, tail twitching or waving. In this situation, the cat may growl or put her teeth on you as a warning to stop. Intense play such as this can quickly turn to overstimulation in some cats, resulting in biting and scratching.

**Nervous, insecure, fearful:** Ears sideways or back, pupils dilated, tail low or tucked between legs. Low body posture, wants to hide, turns away.

**Frightened, startled:** Ears back and flat against head, whiskers back, back arched, fur standing on end, tail erect or low. May yowl, growl, hiss, or spit.

**Fearful, aggressive:** Crouched position, ears flattened, whiskers back, tail between legs or wrapped around body, pupils dilated. May meow loudly, growl, hiss, or spit.

**Aggressive, offensive:** Ears back, pupils very constricted, tail up or down with fur standing on end. Hard stare or growl, hiss or swat.

Even mild forms of aggression, when not properly addressed, can evolve into serious aggression. This is why it's important to assess and tackle any change in your cat's behavior right away. To address aggression, you should work with a professional who looks at the context in which it happens, rather than using a punishment technique.

## Aggression toward Family

When cats swat, scratch, or bite family members, the top three reasons are fear, play, and petting-induced aggression. These forms of aggression often happen when the cat is either reached for or petted. Other possible explanations include handling issues (discomfort/pain/frustration). As we gain more knowledge on aggression it seems unlikely that feline hierarchal and social behavior rules apply between species (cat to human), which makes a social or dominance aggression highly unlikely.

## Aggression toward Strangers

When a cat is uncomfortable around strangers, or certain strangers (such as men, kids), it's usually because there is an underlying fear. The stranger may be a kind, gentle person; this is irrelevant to the cat. It is always best to give the cat time to approach the stranger rather than reaching out or touching a fearful cat, especially when she is hiding.

Handling issues are also common. Many cats are naturally reluctant to have their bodies touched or manipulated in certain places or in certain ways. If cats are not taught early on to accept and enjoy handling, they may scratch, hiss and/or bite in this context.