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Cat Behavior Problems – Aggression in Cats, Fear and Territorial to Other Household Cats

What is territorial aggression?

Territorial aggression is aggression that is exhibited toward people or other animals (usually cats) that approach or reside on the pet's property. Aggression can occur toward outside cats or to cats that live in the same household, especially new cats coming into the territory. This can occur with the addition of another cat, or when resident cats reach social maturity at 1 to 2 years of age. Another situation is when one cat is removed from the household (perhaps for routine surgery or boarding), and aggression is exhibited when the cat is brought back into the home. This aggression may be a combination of territorial and fear-based aggression (perhaps the returning cat smells, looks, or acts unfamiliar in some way).



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Territorial aggression can manifest as stalking, chasing, and aggressive encounters, which may lead to injury. At times the aggressor will prevent the victim from having access to certain areas of the home, resulting in a cat that lives on top of furniture, bookshelves, or under beds. This may in part be related to the social relationship (status) of each cat and can lead to other problems such as house soiling and non-litter box use. Although the aggression of one cat to another may be due to territoriality, there are also components of fear, sociability and social status that contribute equally, or perhaps in some cases more, to the aggressive response (see Aggression – Introduction).

What is fear-based aggression?

Fear is a physiologic, behavioral, and emotional reaction to stimuli that an animal encounters. The physiologic reaction results in an increase in heart rate, increased respiratory rate (panting), sweating, trembling, pacing, and possibly urination and defecation.

Behaviorally, an animal will exhibit changes in body posture and activity when afraid. The animal may engage in an avoidance response such as fleeing or hiding. A fearful animal may assume body postures that are protective such as lowering of the body and head, placing the ears closer to the head, widened eyes, and tail tucked under the body. If the animal perceives a threat, the response can also include elements of defensive aggression. Whether an animal fights or flees when frightened depends on its genetic predisposition, previous experience (what it has learned from similar situations in the past) and the environment that it is in. Previous experiences with other cats in the home may influence future responses.

How can territorial aggression be prevented?

Territorial aggression can be prevented or minimized with early socialization, patient and slow introductions of new cats, and providing adequate resources, including litter boxes and food bowls plus sufficient space for climbing, hiding and dispersing. However, when a new cat is introduced (or reintroduced) into a household with existing cats, problems can best be prevented by slowly introducing the new cat to the environment, by keeping the new cat in a separate room with water and kitty litter, and by supervising all interactions. The correct time to begin cat-to-cat interactions can be highly variable. If both cats have had adequate socialization with other cats, and are not too timid or fearful, it may only be a matter of a few days to a few weeks before the cats work things out on their own and are able to share the territory with little or no aggressive displays.



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However, in some homes, the aggression between cats persists. In these cases, a lengthy separation is likely to be required in addition to a more formal desensitization and counter-conditioning program (see Aggression – Treating Intercat Aggression in the Home and Introducing New Cats).

How can fear-based aggression be prevented?

Fear-based aggression may come about when cats are forced into social circumstances due to inadequate resources or different temperament types. In a multiple cat home it is essential that the resources (food, water, litter pans, and resting areas) be adequately distributed through out the home so that each cat has access to them. In some situations a cat may feel confined to one or two locations due to the social interactions with the other cats. If they do not have access to the resources they need in those locations, they may attempt to enter other areas of the home. If they are fearful and anxious, they may respond aggressively when they encounter other cats.

*This client information sheet is based on material written by: Debra Horwitz, DVM, DACVB & Gary Landsberg, DVM, DACVB, DECAWBM
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