

## **Behavior FAQ: Cats That Bite or Scratch People**

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**Sometimes aggressive behavior may be caused by a medical problem. You should have your veterinarian evaluate your cat for illness or disease as your first step in addressing any aggression problem.**

Unlike some dogs, cats usually don't go out of their way to bite you. If you don't try to pick them up or pet them, they'll generally leave you alone. The rare exception is the territorial cat. While cats can be very territorial toward each other, they seldom react this way to people. If you've been the target of a territorial cat, you know it's a memorable experience. Territorial cats may chase, stalk and threaten people as soon as they arrive because, to them, people are intruders who need to leave what your cat sees as his territory.

Many bites happen if you or someone else is forcing attention on a cat that really isn't interested. Trying to pick up a cat or pet her before she is comfortable with you may cause her to react defensively and bite or scratch you. Cats can become aggressive to people when they are frightened.

Cats will also bite or scratch during play. We see this most often in young cats. People tell us they think their cats have suddenly turned mean. You can unintentionally trigger play-motivated aggression, or make it worse, if you encourage or allow your cat to think that parts of your body are play toys. Teach your cat to play with toys, not your hands, fingers or feet. Never allow your child to tease your cat in any way.

Other cats will show "don't pet me anymore behavior." They'll tolerate petting for a period of time, even seeming to enjoy it, and then suddenly growl, hiss or bite your hand.

Redirected behavior is another common cause of cat aggression toward people. If your two cats are swatting at one another, for example, and you try to intervene, one or both cats may redirect their anger to you.

Scratches and bites from cats can cause nasty infections, so the first step in working with your cat's behavior is to try to prevent injuries by not putting your cat in situations where he is likely to bite. Things will go better if your cat can decide how much contact he wants with you and others, rather than people forcing themselves on him.

Supervise and manage every encounter between your cat and children. Never allow children to try to pick up a cat without adult supervision. Teach your children to gently pick up your cat with one hand on her chest, behind her front legs, and the other hand supporting her rear end. If your cat's legs are dangling free, she can easily use her claws to scratch.

It's also not a good idea to try to punish your cat for biting or scratching as this can really increase his aggressive behavior.

## **FIND A BEHAVIOR CONSULTANT TO HELP**

Many problems are easily corrected through modification training, particularly if problems are addressed early. Find an animal behavior consultant in your area through one of the following Web sites: [American College of Veterinary Behaviorists](#), [International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants](#) or [Animal Behavior Society](#). Learn more by reading “Guidelines for Choosing a Trainer or Behavior Consultant.”