

Aggression Among Household Cats

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BASIC INFORMATION

Description

Cats are highly social and form discrete social groups and hierarchies. Intercat aggression can arise in a number of circumstances when cats are expected to live in the same environment. Aggression is common between intact males because of the competition for potential mates. Although this type of aggression is considered normal, it is usually unacceptable in confined cats and is a major reason why domesticated male cats are castrated.

Aggression can also arise when a new (strange) cat is introduced to the environment or when one cat attempts to dominate another.

Causes

Intercat aggression may develop in relation to social maturity issues or environmental changes within the household that are independent of the drive to mate. Cats that live in isolation from an early age or for much of their life may have poor social skills. Aggression is common toward new cats, because they are recognized as foreign to the established social group. The presence of a new cat also upsets the existing social hierarchy and may trigger dominance aggression among cats that got along well previously.

Other environmental disruptions can trigger dominance aggression, including temporary removal of a high-ranking cat from the environment (such as for a hospital stay) and failure of other cats to recognize or acknowledge the cat's prior status when it returns. Disruptive events in the household can precipitate fighting that may alter the normal social balance among cats. Genetic factors may also play a role in dominance aggression.

Clinical Signs

With the introduction of a new cat, the current cats in the household may hiss, spit, or attack the new one. With regard to dominance aggression, cats that got along well previously may begin to behave in a dominant or submissive fashion. The dominant cat approaches the subordinate one with the base of the tail elevated and the rest of the tail drooping. Its walk is stiff-legged. It may stare at the other cat or slowly rock its head from side to side. If the subordinate cat runs, the dominant cat may launch an attack. The victim may hide and actively avoid social encounters with the aggressor.

Diagnostic Tests

Diagnosis of dominance aggression is usually made from a thorough history. It is necessary to distinguish this form of aggression from play aggression and from redirected aggression by a highly aroused cat that cannot reach its preferred target (such as an outside animal). The circumstances that precipitate these other

disorders may seem similar, but careful scrutiny of the events and clinical signs often reveals characteristic differences.

TREATMENT AND FOLLOW-UP

Treatment Options

The following measures are often helpful when introducing a new cat to the household:

- Initially, isolate the new cat in its own room, with its own food and water bowls and litter pan.
- Gradually introduce the cats through a glass or screened door or by cracking a solid door open 1-2 inches.
- Share bedding or cloths rubbed against the cats' faces to familiarize them with each other's scent.
- Once the cats appear to be acclimated to each other, allow them physical access for gradually increasing periods, under close supervision. A harness can be used on one of cats to provide some control.

For dominance and other intercat aggression, the following can be done:

- Separate the cats when they are unsupervised.
- Make sure that all cats have access to enough litter pans and food and water dishes so that they do not have to interact to fulfill their essential needs.
- Rotate cats that get along with both parties in the conflict, so that the aggressive situation does not progress to involve more cats.
- Desensitization and counter-conditioning techniques, as outlined by your veterinarian, can be tried in some neutral location within the house.

For both situations, medical therapy with fluoxetine, sertraline, clomipramine, amitriptyline, or other similar agents may be tried in refractory cases.

Follow-up Care

Repeated consultations may be needed with your veterinarian to monitor the cat's response to modifications made in the environment and to any medications used. Report any escalation in aggression to your veterinarian.

Prognosis

With regard to introducing a new cat, well-socialized, friendly cats may accept each other within hours or days. Poorly socialized cats may require weeks to months, and in rare instances, they may never accept each other.

Prognosis for dominance aggression is poor. Resolution is possible with weeks to months of consistent treatment but does not always occur.