



BEHAVIOR  
SERIES

# Cat Aggression toward People

**C**AT CAREGIVERS SOMETIMES HAVE DIFFICULTY understanding why their cats, who seem friendly and content one minute, may suddenly bite and scratch them the next. Aggressive behaviors are part of the normal behavioral patterns of almost any animal species. Aggressive cats can be dangerous, so attempting to resolve a chronic cat aggression problem often requires assistance from a professional who is knowledgeable about cat behavior.

## Types of Aggression

### Play Aggression

Play-motivated aggressive behaviors are commonly observed in young, active cats less than two years of age and who live in one-cat households. Play in cats incorporates a variety of behaviors such as exploratory, investigative, and predatory behaviors. Play provides young cats with opportunities to practice skills they would normally need for survival. For example, kittens like to explore new areas and investigate anything that moves. They may bat at, pounce on, and bite objects which to them resemble prey.

Aggressive behaviors can be identified as play based on the types of situations in which they occur, the cat's body postures, and the types of behaviors displayed. Playful aggression often results in scratches and inhibited bites which do not break the skin. Playful attacks often occur when an unsuspecting owner comes down the stairs, steps out of the bathtub, rounds a corner, or even moves under the bedcovers. Play which involves aggression can be initiated by the owner or by the cat. Owners may inadvertently contribute to this problem if they encourage kittens to chase or bite at their hands and feet during play.

The body postures seen during play aggression resemble the postures a cat would show when searching for or catching prey. The cat may freeze in a low crouch before pouncing, twitch her tail, flick her ears back and forth, or wrap her front feet around a person's hands or feet while biting. Most play aggression can be successfully redirected to appropriate targets. For more information on rough play in cats, please see "Managing Your Kitten's Rough Play."

### "Don't Pet Me Anymore" Aggression

It is not uncommon for cats to "suddenly" bite while being petted. This behavior is not well understood, even by experienced animal behaviorists. For whatever reason, petting which the cat was previously enjoying becomes unpleasant. The bite is the cat's signal that she has had enough petting. Cats vary in how much they will tolerate being petted or held. People often describe cats as biting "out of the blue" or without warning; however, their signals may be very subtle and hard to detect. You should become more aware of your cat's body postures and cease petting or stop any other kind of interaction before the bite occurs. Signals to watch for include:

- Restlessness
- Tail twitching

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- Ears turning back or flicking back and forth
- Turning or moving her head toward your hand

When you observe any of these signals, it is time to stop petting your cat immediately and allow her to sit quietly on your lap or go her own way. Any physical punishment almost always makes the problem worse, as it makes the cat more likely to bite either because she is fearful or because petting becomes even more unpleasant if it is associated with punishment.

If you want to try to prolong the amount of time your cat will tolerate petting, use some food rewards. Before your cat shows any of the behaviors described above, offer her a special tidbit of food such as a tiny piece of tuna or boiled chicken. At the same time, decrease the intensity of your petting. Continue to lightly pet your cat for a short time period while offering her tidbits. In this way, petting will come to be associated with more pleasant things, and she may enjoy petting for longer time periods. Each time you work with your cat, try to pet her for slightly longer time periods using the food. If you stop petting her when she is aggressive, her behavior has succeeded. She has learned that her aggressive behavior will get her what she wants—the petting stops. Thus, it is important to watch her body language carefully and stop petting before she becomes aggressive.

### Fearful/Defensive Aggression

Fearful cats may display body postures that appear similar to canine submissive postures—crouching on the floor, ears back, tail tucked, and possibly rolling slightly to the side. Cats in this posture are not submissive; they are fearful and defensive and may attack if touched. See “Reducing Your Cat’s Fearful Behavior” for more information on fearful behavior in cats.

### Related topics at [www.petsforlife.org](http://www.petsforlife.org)

- Managing Your Kitten’s Rough Play
- Reducing Your Cat’s Fearful Behavior

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### Redirected Aggression

**Redirected aggression** occurs when the cat is aroused by one person or animal, but then redirects this aggression toward another person or animal. For example, if two family cats have a spat, the losing cat, still aroused, may walk up and attack the family child.

**Territorial aggression** is not commonly directed at people. Usually cats only feel the need to defend their territory from other cats. (Cats are highly territorial, even more so than dogs.)

### What to Do

- Check first with your veterinarian to rule out medical causes for the aggressive behavior.
- Seek professional help. An aggression problem will not go away by itself. Working with aggression problems requires in-home help from an animal-behavior specialist.
- Take precautions. Your first priority is to keep everyone safe. Supervise, confine, or restrict your cat’s activities until you can obtain professional help. You are liable for any injuries caused by your cat’s behavior.

### What Not to Do

- You should never attempt to handle a fearful or aggressive cat. Cat bites and scratches become infected easily. If you do receive an injury from your cat, clean the wound carefully and contact your physician.
- Punishment will not help and will even make the problem worse. If the aggression is motivated by fear, punishment will make the cat more fearful, and therefore more aggressive.

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# Cats: Destructive Scratching

**A**lthough some people think a cat's scratching behavior is a reflection of her distaste for a couch's upholstery, a not-so-subtle hint to open the drapes, or a poorly conceived Zorro impersonation, the fact is that cats scratch objects in their environment for many perfectly normal reasons.

## Why Do Cats Scratch?

Cats scratch for many reasons, including:

- To remove the dead outer layer of their claws.
- To mark their territory by leaving both a visual mark and a scent—they have scent glands on their paws.
- To stretch their bodies and flex their feet and claws.
- To work off energy.

Because scratching is a normal behavior and one that cats are highly motivated to display, it's unrealistic to try to prevent them from scratching. Instead, the goal in resolving scratching problems is to redirect the scratching onto acceptable objects.

## Training Your Cat to Scratch Acceptable Objects

You must provide objects for scratching that are appealing, attractive, and convenient from your cat's point of view. Start by observing the physical features of the objects your cat is scratching. The answers to the following questions will help you understand your cat's scratching preferences:

- Where are they located? Prominent objects, objects close to sleeping areas, and objects near the entrance to a room are often chosen.

- What texture do they have—are they soft or coarse?
- What shape do they have—are they horizontal or vertical?
- How tall are they? At what height does your cat scratch?

Now, considering your cat's demonstrated preferences, substitute similar objects for her to scratch (rope-wrapped posts, corrugated cardboard, or even a log). Place the acceptable object(s) near the inappropriate object(s) that she's already using. Make sure the objects are stable and won't fall over or move around when she uses them.

Cover the inappropriate objects with something your cat will find unappealing, such as double-sided sticky tape, aluminum foil, sheets of sandpaper, or a plastic carpet runner with the pointy side up. Or you may give the objects an aversive odor by attaching cotton balls containing perfume, a muscle rub, or other safe yet unpleasant substances. Be careful with odors, though, because you don't want the nearby acceptable objects to also smell unpleasant.

When your cat is consistently using the appropriate object, it can be moved very gradually (no more than three inches each day) to a location more suitable to you. It's best, however, to keep the appropriate scratching objects as close to your cat's preferred scratching locations as possible.

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Don't remove the unappealing coverings or odors from the inappropriate objects until your cat is consistently using the appropriate objects in their permanent locations for several weeks, or even a month. They should then be removed gradually, not all at once.

### Should I Punish My Cat for Scratching?

NO! Punishment is effective only if you catch your cat in the act of scratching unacceptable objects and have provided her with acceptable scratching objects. Punishment after the fact won't change the behavior, may cause her to be afraid of you or the environment, and may elicit defensive aggression. Used by itself, punishment won't resolve scratching problems because it doesn't teach your cat where to scratch instead. If you do catch your cat in the act of scratching inappropriate objects, punish her in a way that prevents her from associating the punishment with you. Try making a loud noise (using a whistle, shaking a soda can filled with rocks, or slapping the wall) or using a water-filled squirt bottle. If you use other, more interactive techniques, she'll learn to refrain from scratching in your presence but will continue to scratch when you're not around.

### How Do I Trim My Cat's Claws?

To help keep them sharp, cats keep their claws retracted until they're needed. As the claws grow too long and become curved, they can't be retracted completely. You should clip off the sharp tips of your cat's claws on her front feet every two weeks or so. Clipping your cat's claws will also help prevent them from becoming snagged in carpets and fabrics, not to mention your skin!

Before trimming your cat's claws, help her get accustomed to having her paws handled and squeezed. You can do this by gently petting her legs and paws while giving her a treat. This will help to make it a more pleasant experience. Gradually increase the pressure so that petting becomes gentle squeezing, as you'll need to do this to extend the claw. Continue with the treats until your cat tolerates this kind of touching and restraint. It may take a little longer if she's not used to having her legs or paws handled.

Apply a small amount of pressure to her paw—with your thumb on top of her paw and your index finger underneath—until a claw is extended. You should be able to see the pink or "quick," which is a small blood vessel. Don't cut into this pink portion, as it will bleed and be painful for your cat. If you cut off just the sharp tip of the claw, the "hook," it will dull the claw and prevent extensive damage to household objects and to your skin.

There are several types of claw trimmers designed especially for pets. These are better than your own nail clipper because they won't crush the claw. Until you and your cat have become accustomed to the routine, one claw or foot a day is enough of a challenge. Don't push to do all of them at once, or you'll both have only negative memories of claw clippers!

### Should I Declaw My Cat?

Declawing is a procedure whereby a veterinarian amputates the end digit and claw of a cat's paws—similar in scope to cutting off a person's finger at the last joint. The Humane Society of the United States opposes declawing when done solely for the convenience of the owner. Scratching is a natural behavior for cats and can be directed to appropriate items. Declawing can also lead to litter box or aggression problems. However, if you feel that you must either declaw your cat or give her up, we would rather see your cat stay in her home and be your lifelong companion. If you do decide to have your cat declawed, we suggest that you have the surgery done at the same time she's spayed (or neutered, if your cat is a male). Never have rear paws declawed, and be sure to always keep your cat indoors; without claws to defend herself or climb to escape, your cat is in much greater danger outdoors—and the great outdoors is a very unsafe place for cats to begin with.

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# Cat Toys and How to Use Them

**A**LTHOUGH CATS generally have different play styles than their canine counterparts, toys are as much a necessity for cats as they are for dogs. Toys help fight boredom and give cats an outlet for their instinctive prey-chasing behaviors. And when you are the one moving the toy around while your cat fishes for it, chases after it, or jumps in pursuit of it, playtime becomes a bonding experience for you and your cat.

## “Safe” Toys

Our mothers always told us “no playing ball in the house,” but cats can usually participate in that forbidden exercise without knocking down a vase or a lamp (and being grounded for two weeks). Still, there are plenty of factors that may contribute to the safety of the toy they’re batting around.

Many of those factors are completely dependent upon your cat’s size, activity level, and preferences. Another factor to be considered is the environment in which your cat spends her time. Although we can’t guarantee your cat’s enthusiasm or her safety with any specific toy, we can offer the following guidelines.

## Be Cautious

The things that are usually the most attractive to cats are often the very things that are the most dangerous. Cat-proof your home by removing string, ribbon, yarn, rubber bands, plastic milk jug rings, paper clips, pins, needles, dental floss, and anything else that could be ingested. All of these items are dangerous, no matter how cute your cat may appear when she’s playing with them.

Avoid or alter any toys that aren’t “cat proof” by removing ribbons, feathers, strings, eyes, or other small parts that could be chewed and ingested.

Soft toys should be machine washable. Look for stuffed toys that are labeled as safe for children under three years of age and that don’t contain any dangerous fillings. Problem fillings include things like nutshells and polystyrene beads. Remember that rigid toys are not as attractive to cats.

## Recommended Toys

### Active Toys

- Round plastic shower curtain rings, which are fun either as a single ring to bat around, hide, or carry, or when linked together and hung in an enticing spot.
- Plastic balls, with or without bells inside.
- Ping-Pong balls and plastic practice golf balls with holes to help cats carry them. Try putting one in a dry bathtub, as the captive ball is much more fun than one that escapes under the sofa. You’ll probably want to remove the balls from the bathtub before bedtime, or you may lose some sleep, as two o’clock in the morning seems to be a prime time for this game.

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- Paper bags with any handles removed. Paper bags are good for pouncing, hiding, and interactive play. Plastic bags are not a good idea, as many cats like to chew and ingest the plastic.
- Sisal-wrapped toys, which are very attractive to cats who tend to ignore soft toys.
- Empty cardboard tubes from toilet paper and paper towels, made even more fun if you “unwind” a little cardboard to get them started.

### **Comfort Toys**

- Soft stuffed animals, which are good for several purposes. For some cats, the stuffed animal should be small enough to carry around. For cats who want to wrestle with the toy, the stuffed animal should be about the same size as the cat. Toys with legs and a tail seem to be especially enticing to cats.
- Cardboard boxes, especially those a little too small for your cat to fit into.

### **Catnip**

- Catnip-filled soft toys, which cats like to kick, carry, and rub. Catnip is not addictive and is perfectly safe for cats to roll in, rub in, or eat.
- Plain catnip can be crushed and sprinkled on the carpet or, for easier cleanup, on a towel placed on the floor. Catnip oils will often stay in the carpet, and although they’re not visible to us, your cat will still be able to smell them.
- Catnip sprays rarely have enough power to be attractive to cats.
- Not all cats are affected by catnip. Some cats may become overstimulated to the point of aggressive play and others may become relaxed.
- Kittens under six months old seem to be immune to catnip.

### **Get the Most out of Toys!**

- Rotate your cat’s toys weekly by making only a few available at a time. Keep a variety of types easily accessible. If your cat has a favorite, like a soft “baby” that she loves to cuddle with, you may want to leave that one out all the time.
- Provide toys that offer a variety of uses—at least one toy to carry, one to wrestle with, one to roll, and one to “baby.”
- Hide-and-seek is a fun game for cats. “Found” toys are often much more attractive than a toy which is obviously introduced.
- Many of your cat’s toys should be interactive. Interactive play is very important for your cat because she needs active “people time”—and such play also enhances the bond between you and your pet. Cats generally engage in three types of play—“fishing, flying, and chasing”—and all types are much more engaging for cats when you are part of them.

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- **Introducing Your New Cat to Your Other Pets**

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# Reducing Your Cat's Fearful Behavior

**F**IGHT, FLEE, OR FREEZE. No, it isn't the latest game show sweeping the nation. Instead, these three "f's" describe the ways that cats usually respond to objects, persons, or situations they perceive as a threat.

It's normal for you to want to help and comfort your cat when she's frightened. However, that isn't necessarily the best thing to do from your cat's point of view. It's normal for a cat to feel insecure or frightened in a new environment. Often, your new cat will hide for a day or two when you first bring her home. Sometimes a traumatic experience—such as taking her for a car ride to the veterinarian or introducing a new animal into the home—can disrupt her routine and send her under the bed for a few days.

Each cat has her preferred way of dealing with a crisis. You'll notice that your cat probably tends to try one option first, and if that doesn't work, she's forced to try a different option. For instance, if your cat is afraid of dogs and a friend brings his dog to your home to visit, your cat puffs out her fur to make herself look big, then hisses and spits at the dog. If the dog doesn't retreat, your cat may flee the situation, find a hiding spot, and freeze until she deems the situation safe.

Your cat may show the following behaviors when she is fearful:

- Fleeing
- Hiding

- Aggression (which includes spitting, hissing, growling, swatting, biting, scratching, puffing fur and tail, arching back, swishing tail, and flattening ears)
- Loss of control over bladder or bowels
- Freezing

Although some fearful behaviors are acceptable, overly anxious or fearful cats may need help from you in the form of training, patience, and love.

## What Causes Fearful Behavior?

You'll need to observe your cat closely to determine the trigger for her fearful behavior. Keep in mind that just because you know that the person or animal approaching your cat has good intentions doesn't mean your cat shares the same view. The trigger for her fearful behavior could be anything. Some common triggers are:

- A particular person
- A stranger
- Another animal
- A child
- Loud noises

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## What You Can Do

Take the following steps to reduce your cat's anxiety and help her become more confident:

- First, schedule an appointment with your veterinarian for a thorough physical examination to rule out any medical reasons for your cat's fearful behavior. Cats don't always act sick, even when they are. Any sudden behavior change could mean that your cat is ill. Some common symptoms that suggest your cat may be sick are sudden aggressiveness, hiding, and eliminating outside the litter box.
- If your cat is healthy, but hiding, leave her alone. She'll come out when she's ready. Forcing her out of her hiding spot will only make her more fearful. Make sure she has easy access to food, water, and her litter box. Clean the litter box and change the food and water every day so you know whether she is eating and drinking.
- Keep any contact with the fear stimulus to a minimum.
- Keep your cat's routine as consistent as possible. Cats feel more confident if they know when to expect daily feeding, playing, cuddling, and grooming.
- Try to desensitize your cat to the fear stimulus by following these steps:
  - Determine what distance your cat can be from the fear stimulus without responding fearfully.
  - Introduce the fear stimulus at this distance while you're feeding your cat tasty treats and praising her.
  - Slowly move the fear stimulus closer as you continue to praise your cat and offer her treats.
  - If at any time during this process your cat shows fearful behavior, you've proceeded too quickly and will need to start over from the beginning. This is the most common mistake people make when desensitizing an animal; it can be avoided by working in short sessions, paying careful attention to your cat so that you don't progress too rapidly for her.
  - You may need help with the desensitization process from an animal-behavior specialist.

## Related topics at [www.petsforlife.org](http://www.petsforlife.org)

- Cat Aggression toward People

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## A Note about Aggression

If your cat seriously threatens you, another person, or an animal—and the behavior is not an isolated incident—you should seek help as soon as possible from an animal-behavior specialist. Contact your veterinarian or animal shelter for assistance or a referral if you need a specialist. To keep everyone safe in the meantime, confine your cat to an area of the house where all interactions with her are kept to a minimum and are supervised by a responsible person.

Cat bites and scratches are serious and can easily become infected. Bites that need to be treated by a doctor should be reported to your local animal control agency; your cat may need to be quarantined and watched for signs of rabies. If you can't keep your cat separated from the stimulus that triggers her aggressive behavior and you're unable to work with an animal-behavior specialist, you may need to reevaluate the cat's situation in your home. Remember, trying to place an aggressive cat in a new home should be done with extreme caution. The safety of your cat and of the other animals and humans she encounters should be your first consideration.

## What Not to Do

- Do not punish your cat for her fearful behavior. Animals associate punishment with what they're doing at the time they're punished, so your cat is likely to associate any punishment you give her with you. This will only cause her to become fearful of you, and she still won't understand why she's being punished.
- Do not force your cat to experience the object or situation that is causing her fear. For example, if she is afraid of a certain person, don't let that person try to pick her up and hold her; this will only make her more fearful of that person.
- Be cautious in handling your cat when she is frightened. She may accidentally direct her aggression toward you.

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# Discouraging Free-Roaming Cats

**M**ANY PEOPLE HAVE A PROBLEM WITH free-roaming cats who hunt wild birds as they feed or nest in their yards, who use their garden as a litter box, or who upset their pets by invading their territory. You certainly have the right to enjoy your yard and the birds who visit it. However, it's your responsibility to solve your free-roaming cat problem humanely.

## Why Are They Picking on Me?

Although a destructive neighborhood cat can be frustrating, don't take it personally. The cat isn't acting out of spite or picking on you for some unknown reason. He's behaving naturally. The problem, of course, is that he's doing so in places you find inappropriate. The solution lies in making those places undesirable so the cat will behave naturally somewhere else.

Most cats won't eat birds, but they do enjoy the "thrill of the hunt." Cats have preyed upon birds for thousands of years, and there's no foolproof way to discourage this natural instinct.

Another natural feline instinct is to defecate in areas where the cat can cover his scent by burying the waste. Therefore, a cat who spends most of his time outdoors appreciates the soft, pre-dug dirt of your garden—or your child's sandbox—as a handy toilet.

When a cat naps on the hood of your car or in the center of your flowerbed, he's simply sunning himself in a nice, warm spot and doesn't realize the damage he's doing. He won't connect your negative reaction with the place where he naps, and although he may learn to avoid you, he won't avoid the place or stop the activity.

A free-roaming cat may approach your window or patio door and challenge your cat or dog through the glass with body language or vocal insults. The best way to protect your pet from this situation is to keep the outside cat away from the areas that your pet can see by using the techniques described below.

Of course, the ideal solution is for all cat owners to keep their cats safely confined. Unfortunately, not all cat owners are willing to do this, so you'll need to take steps to solve

the problem without harming the cat, the birds, other animals, or your yard and garden. Because each situation is different, you may need patience and ingenuity to find the appropriate deterrent through trial and error.

## Repellents

Repellents and devices designed to startle the cat "in the act" will work best to condition him to avoid the area. Never use poisons. Not only is poisoning animals inhumane and illegal, it's not an effective solution to the problem. Poisons will only rid you of one "pest" and won't deter any others. You'd have no way of knowing or controlling who might find and ingest the poisonous substance.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has registered more than 30 compounds for safe use in repelling domestic cats. Check with any pet supply store or garden supplier for commercial cat repellents. Most commercial repellents are based on the simple mothball compound. Mothballs or moth crystals, encased in cheesecloth bags to help protect the soil, work well to keep cats from digging in garden areas or potted plants.

Keep in mind that the effectiveness of any repellent will deteriorate with moisture and time. Whether you use mothballs or a commercial mixture, you'll need to reapply the solution after each rain, heavy dew, or watering. Check with your garden supplier to be certain that the solution you choose won't harm plants growing in that area, especially if you use fertilizers or other soil additives.

For areas where cats want to dig, ornamental pebbles may be an effective deterrent. Avoid pebbles that are very round or smooth, as they make a great cat bed. Rocks or pebbles should be placed in a way that makes it difficult for them

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to be dispersed. Small-gauge chicken wire can also be buried under a light layer of dirt or mulch, and may even restrain some weeds. The sharp pebbles or rough wire will be uncomfortable to soft paws.

## “Surprise” Devices

To teach a cat to avoid a specific area, you must make that area unattractive to him. The best method is to surprise the cat “in the act” but without the cat knowing that you are the one administering the surprise. Simple devices can effectively booby-trap the area that a cat has found attractive.

- **Sound and Movement:** Scatter dry beans, macaroni, or birdseed on a metal tray; disposable pie pans or cookie sheets work well and are inexpensive. Balance several trays along the fence, porch or deck railing, the windowsill, or around the edge of any vehicle where the cat jumps onto the surface. Birds can still land safely if the trays are balanced properly, but the weight of a cat leaping onto the surface will upset the tray. The cat will be startled by the noise and by the unsteady, collapsing perch. As a variation on this “falling tray” method, set shallow plastic lids filled with water on each end of the tray to add a shower to the noise and movement of the falling tray.
- **Texture:** To keep a cat from jumping onto flat surfaces (railings, vehicles, or decks), criss-cross double-sided tape onto a piece of sturdy plastic—either a heavy, plastic drop cloth or a vinyl tablecloth would work well. Drape the plastic over the surface and secure it with cord, or at least one weighted object, to keep it in position. The sticky tape is annoying to the cat (without causing pain or panic), and the slick plastic not only rattles but also offers no foothold. An alternative to sticky tape would be to use a plastic carpet protector with the knobby side up.
- **Water:** This method works especially well for those areas where birds feed on the ground or where cats are using a garden area as a litter box. When the temperature permits, turn on a water sprinkler during the usual time of disturbance (which may be dawn or dusk if the cat is on your property to hunt). A timing device for the sprinkler, set to a staggered schedule, will help discourage those intelligent cats who would otherwise simply avoid the area at “regularly wet” times of day. A motion-detector sprinkler, designed specifically for deterring cats and other animals from gardens and other areas, is another option.
- **Obstacle:** If your bird feeder or birdhouse is mounted on a post, nail a galvanized metal guard in the shape of an inverted cone to the post to protect the platform.

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## Responsibility

If these suggested remedies fail to provide relief, your next step is to establish who cares for the cat. In many cases, the “problem cat” may be an owned cat who is allowed to roam, or the cat may have no real owner. If the cat belongs to a neighbor, your problem is a shared one. It’s not always easy to discuss neighborhood issues diplomatically. Remember that the cat is your neighbor’s pet, even though he’s a nuisance when he’s on your property. By emphasizing your concern for the cat’s safety, instead of the problems he’s causing, you have a greater chance of gaining your neighbor’s cooperation.

If you’re unable to determine who owns the cat, the problem is in your hands. In some cases it may be difficult to distinguish a feral (semi-wild) cat from a potentially friendly stray, so unless the cat comes to you fairly readily when you squat down nearby and gently call to him, play it safe and don’t touch the cat (if you are able to get close enough in the first place). Even some well-socialized cats despise being picked up by strangers. Assuming you’ve already tried the reconditioning tactics mentioned above without success, you may need to resort to a humane trap.

## Humane Traps

Don’t use anything other than a humane cage trap designed to lure a cat into the cage with food and to safely contain him until he can be moved to another area. Most animal control agencies and humane societies loan or rent out these traps, and some will even deliver or pick them up. Be sure to find out how to set and bait the trap, how to cover the trap, and how often to check the trap.

If you have any reason to believe that the cat has an owner, please think twice before trapping the cat, unless you plan to return him to his owner.

If the cat is feral and unowned, check with your community’s animal care and control agency or local humane society for information on trap, test, vaccinate, alter, release, and monitor (TTVARM) programs in your area.

To trap a stray cat, bait the trap with canned cat food. Place the trap in an area that’s sheltered against the weather. You may hear some alarming noises when the cat realizes he’s trapped. Immediately cover the trap with a sheet, blanket, or towel large enough to cover the entire trap; this will calm the cat considerably and prevent him from injuring himself in the trap. If the cat is confined with no access to water or shelter from inclement weather or predators, it’s important that you remove the trap from the area immediately. Using gloves to prevent scratches or bites, put the trap in a protected area until you can take the cat to an animal shelter or veterinarian (which should be as soon as possible).

Many owned cats, unfortunately, don’t wear collars with identification. An owned cat who is lost may behave fearfully. If the cat is unknown to you, take him to your local animal shelter. He will be cared for there, and his owners will have a better chance of reclaiming him. If he is not reclaimed, you may be able to take the cat yourself if you wish. That way, you can keep him safely confined in your home, where he belongs, with you.



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# Introducing Your New Cat to Your Other Pets

**WOULDN'T IT BE NICE** if all it took to introduce a new cat to your resident pet were a brief handshake and a couple of “HELLO, My Name Is...” name-tags? Unfortunately, it’s not quite that simple, which means you’ll need to have some realistic expectations from the outset.

What are realistic expectations? First, it’s recognizing and accepting that your pets may never be best buddies but will usually come to at least tolerate each other. Second, it’s understanding the need to move slowly during the introduction process to increase your chances for success.

Some cats are more social than other cats. For example, an eight-year-old cat who has never been around other animals may never learn to share her territory (and her people) with other pets in the household. But an eight-week-old kitten separated from her mom and littermates for the first time might be glad to have a cat or dog companion.

Cats are territorial, and they need to be introduced to other animals very slowly so they can get used to each other before a face-to-face confrontation. Slow introductions help prevent fearful and aggressive problems from developing. Here are guidelines to help make the introductions go smoothly.

## Confinement

Confine your new cat to one medium-sized room with her litter box, food, water, and a bed. Feed your resident pets and the newcomer on each side of the door to this room, so that they associate something enjoyable (eating!) with each other’s smells. Gradually move the dishes closer to the door until your pets can eat calmly while standing directly on either side of the door.

## The Old Switcheroo

Swap the sleeping blankets or beds used by all the cats so they each have a chance to become accustomed to the other cats’ scents. You can even rub a towel on one animal and put it underneath the food dish of another animal.

Once your new cat is using her litter box and eating regularly while confined, let her have free time in the house while confining your other animals to the new cat’s room. This switch provides another way for the animals to experience each other’s scents without a face-to-face meeting. It also allows the newcomer to become familiar with her new surroundings without being frightened by the other animals.

Next, after the animals have been returned to their original designated parts of the house, use two doorstops to prop open the dividing door just enough to allow the animals to see each other, and repeat the whole process over a period of days—supervised, of course.

## Slow and Steady Wins the Race

It’s better to introduce your pets to each other gradually so that neither animal becomes afraid or aggressive. You can expect a mild protest from either cat from time to time, but don’t allow these behaviors to intensify. If either animal becomes fearful or aggressive, separate them, and start the introduction process once again with a series of very small, gradual steps, as outlined above.

Note: When you introduce pets to each other, one of them may send “play” signals which can be misinterpreted by the other pet as signs of aggression. If that’s the case, always handle the situation as “aggression” and seek professional help from a veterinarian or animal behaviorist right away.

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## Precautionary Measures

Try to keep your resident pets' schedules close to what they were before the newcomer's arrival. Before bringing a new pet home, check with your veterinarian to be sure all your current pets are healthy. You'll also want to have at least one litter box per cat in separate locations. Make sure that none of the cats are being "ambushed" by another while trying to use the litter box, and be sure each cat has a safe hiding place.

If small spats (hissing, growling, or posturing) do occur between your cats, you shouldn't attempt to intervene directly to separate the cats. Instead, make a loud noise, throw a pillow, or use a squirt bottle with water and vinegar to separate the cats. Give them a chance to calm down before reintroducing them to each other.

## Cat-to-Dog Introductions

You'll need to be even more careful when introducing a dog and a cat to one another. A dog can seriously injure and even kill a cat very easily, even if they're only playing—all it takes is one quick shake to break the cat's neck. Some dogs have such a high prey drive that they should never be left alone with a cat. Dogs usually want to chase and play with cats, and cats usually become afraid and defensive. In addition to using the techniques described above to begin introducing your new cat to your resident dog, take these steps:

### *Practice Obedience*

If your dog doesn't already know the commands "sit," "down," "come," and "stay," begin working on them right away. Small pieces of food will increase your dog's motivation to perform, which will be necessary in the presence of a strong distraction such as a new cat. Even if your dog already knows these commands, work to reinforce these commands in return for a tidbit.

### *Set Up Controlled Meetings*

After your new cat and resident dog have become comfortable eating on opposite sides of the door and have been exposed to each other's scents as described above, you can attempt a face-to-face introduction in a controlled manner. Put your dog's leash on and have him either sit or lie down and stay for treats. Have a second person offer your cat some special pieces of food. At first, the cat and the dog should be on opposite sides of the room. Lots of short visits are better than a few long visits. Don't drag out the visit so long that the dog becomes uncontrollable. Repeat this step several times until both the cat and dog are tolerating each other's presence without fear, aggression, or other undesirable behavior.

### *Let Your Cat Go*

Next, allow your cat some freedom to explore your dog at her own pace, with the dog still on-leash and in a "down-

stay." Meanwhile, keep giving your dog treats and praise for his calm behavior. If your dog gets up from his "stay" position, he should be repositioned with a treat lure and praised and rewarded for obeying the "stay" command. If your cat runs away or becomes aggressive, you're progressing too fast. Go back to the previous introduction steps.

### *Use Positive Reinforcement*

Although your dog must be taught that chasing or being rough with your cat is unacceptable behavior, he must also be taught what is appropriate and be rewarded for those behaviors, such as sitting, coming when called, or lying down in return for a treat. If your dog is always punished when your cat is around and never has "good things" happen in the cat's presence, your dog may redirect aggression toward the cat.

### *Directly Supervise All Interactions Between Your Dog and Cat*

You may want to keep your dog at your side and on-leash whenever your cat is free in the house during the introduction process. Be sure that your cat has an escape route and a place to hide. And until you're certain your cat will be safe, be sure to keep the two separated when you aren't home.

### *Kittens and Puppies*

Because they're so much smaller, kittens are in more danger of being injured or killed by a young energetic dog or by a predatory dog. A kitten will need to be kept separate from an especially energetic dog until she is fully grown, except for periods of supervised interaction to enable the animals to get to know each other.

Even after the cat is fully grown, she may not be able to be safely left alone with the dog. Usually, a well-socialized cat will be able to keep a puppy in his place, but some cats don't have enough confidence to do this. If you have an especially shy cat, you might need to keep her separated from your puppy until he matures enough to have more self-control.

## When to Get Help

If introductions don't go smoothly, seek professional advice immediately from a veterinarian or animal-behavior specialist. Animals can be severely injured in fights, and the longer the problem continues, the harder it can be to resolve. Punishment won't work and could make things worse. Luckily, most conflicts between pets in the same family can often be resolved with professional guidance.

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# Managing Your Kitten's Rough Play

**I**F **PLAYING WITH YOUR KITTEN** evolves from peek-a-boo to professional wrestling in a matter of seconds, follow these tips to keep playtime interesting and reduce the number of trips to the first-aid kit. Cats incorporate a variety of behaviors into their play, such as exploratory, investigative, and predatory behaviors—skills they would normally need for survival. As you've probably already learned, kittens like to explore new areas and investigate anything that moves, and may bat at, pounce on, and bite objects that resemble prey. It's not always easy for cats to draw the line between acceptable play and overly aggressive behavior, so play-motivated, aggressive behaviors are common in young, active cats less than two years of age and in cats who live in one-cat households.

Kittens learn how to inhibit their bite from their littermates and their mother. A kitten who is separated from her family too early may play more roughly than a kitten who has had more valuable family time. In addition, if humans play with a young kitten using their hands or feet instead of toys, the kitten is liable to learn that rough play with people is okay. In most cases, it's not too difficult to teach your kitten or young adult cat that rough play isn't acceptable. Here are some tips.

## Encourage Acceptable Behavior

Redirect your kitten's aggressive behavior onto acceptable objects like toys. Drag a toy along the floor to encourage your kitten to pounce on it, or throw a toy away from your kitten to give her even more exercise chasing the toy down. Some kittens will even bring the toy back to be thrown again. You can also try toys that your kitten can wrestle with, like a soft stuffed animal that's about her size, so she can grab it with both front feet, bite it, and kick it with her back feet. This is one of the ways kittens play with each other, especially when they're young. It's also one of the ways they try to play with human feet and hands, so it's important to provide

this type of alternative play target. Encourage play with a "wrestling toy" by rubbing it against your kitten's belly when she wants to play roughly—and be sure to get your hand out of the way as soon as she accepts the toy.

Since kittens need a lot of playtime, try to set up three or four consistent times during the day to initiate play with your kitten. This will help her understand that she doesn't have to be the one to initiate play by pouncing on you.

## Discourage Unacceptable Behavior

You need to set the rules for your kitten's behavior, and every person your cat comes in contact with should reinforce these rules. Your kitten can't be expected to learn that it's okay to play rough with Dad, but not with the baby.

Use aversives to discourage your kitten from nipping. You can either use a squirt bottle filled with water and a small amount of vinegar, or a can of pressurized air to squirt your kitten when she starts getting too rough. To use this technique effectively, you'll need to have the spray bottle or can handy at all times—it's absolutely essential to use the aversive while the rough behavior is occurring. So

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either place a spray bottle in each room, or carry one with you as you move around the house. In some cases, you may want to apply taste aversives to your hands. If you have sensitive skin, you can wear gloves and put the aversive on the gloves. The possible disadvantage to this method is that your kitten may learn that hands with gloves taste bad and those without gloves don't. Remember that aversives will work only if you offer your kitten acceptable alternatives.

Redirect the behavior after using the aversive. After you startle your kitten with the aversive, immediately offer her a toy to wrestle with or chase. This will encourage her to direct her rough play onto a toy instead of a person. We recommend keeping a stash of toys hidden in each room specifically for this purpose.

Withdraw attention when your kitten starts to play too roughly. If the distraction and redirection techniques don't seem to be working, the most drastic thing you can do to discourage your cat from rough play is to withdraw all attention. She wants to play with you, so if you keep this limit consistent, she'll eventually figure out how far she can go. The best way to withdraw your attention is to walk to another room and close the door long enough for her to calm down. If you pick her up to put her in another room, then you're rewarding her by touching her, so you should always be the one to leave the room.

*Please Note:* None of these methods will be very effective unless you also give your kitten acceptable outlets for her energy—by playing with her regularly using appropriate toys.

## What NOT to Do

Attempts to tap, flick, or hit your kitten for rough play are almost guaranteed to backfire. Your kitten could become afraid of your hands, or she could interpret those flicks as playful moves by you and play even more roughly as a result. Picking up your kitten to put her into a "timeout" may reinforce her behavior because she probably enjoys the physical contact of being picked up. By the time you get her to the timeout room and close the door, she may have already forgotten what she did to be put in that situation.

*A Note about Aggression:* Don't encourage your playful kitten to bite or scratch any parts of your body. Instead, provide appropriate toys for her to bite and scratch. If she continues to bite or scratch you, call your veterinarian, animal shelter, or an animal-behavior specialist for humane suggestions on how to redirect her behavior to appropriate objects. Also, be sure to thoroughly clean all bites and scratches and apply an antibiotic ointment. If you receive a bad bite, you should seek medical attention immediately.

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## Related topics at [www.petsforlife.org](http://www.petsforlife.org)

- Using Aversives to Modify Your Cat's Behavior

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# Introducing Your New Cat to the Litter Box

**M**OST OF US KNOW CATS are finicky eaters, but they can also be pretty picky when it comes to the other end of the digestive process—making use of a litter box. Fortunately, the following suggestions should keep your cat from “thinking outside the box.”

## Location, Location, Location

Most people are inclined to place the litter box in an out-of-the-way spot to minimize odor and prevent cat litter from being tracked throughout the house. But if the litter box ends up in the basement—next to an appliance or on a cold cement floor—your cat may be less than pleased for a number of reasons.

A kitten or an older cat may not be able to get down a long flight of stairs in time to get to the litter box. If the litter box is located in an area that she seldom frequents, she may not even remember where it is, especially during the first few weeks she’s welcomed into your home. If a furnace, washing machine, or dryer suddenly comes on and startles your cat while she’s using the litter box, that may be the last time she risks such a frightening experience. And if your cat likes to scratch the surface surrounding her litter box (which some cats do), she may find a cold cement floor unappealing.

So you may have to compromise. The litter box should be kept in a spot that affords your cat some privacy yet is also conveniently located. If you place the litter box in a closet or a bathroom, be sure the door is wedged open from both sides to prevent her from being trapped inside or locked out. Depending on the location, you might consider cutting a hole in a closet door and adding a pet door.

## Pick of the Litter

Research has shown that most cats prefer fine-grained litters, presumably because they have a softer feel. The new scoopable (clumping) litters usually have finer grains than the typical clay litter and are very popular. But high-quality, dust-free, clay litters are relatively small-grained and may be perfectly acceptable to your cat.

If you suspect your cat has spent part of his life outdoors and is likely to eliminate in your houseplants, try mixing some potting soil with your regular litter; pellet-type litters or those made from citrus peels are not recommended. Once you find a litter your cat likes, stick with it. Buying the least expensive litter or the brand that’s on sale any given week could result in your cat not using the litter box.

Many cats are put off by the odor of scented or deodorant litters. For the same reason, it’s not a good idea to place a room deodorizer or air freshener near the litter box. A thin layer of baking soda placed on the bottom of the box will help absorb odors without repelling your cat, and odors shouldn’t really be a problem if you keep the litter box clean. If you find the litter box odor offensive, your cat probably finds it even more offensive and won’t want to eliminate there.

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## What's the Magic Number?

You should have at least as many litter boxes as you have cats. That way, none of them will ever be prevented from eliminating in the litter box because it's already occupied. You might also consider placing litter boxes in several locations around the house, so that no one cat can prevent the other cats from getting access. We also recommend that you place at least one litter box on each level of your house.

It's not possible to designate a personal litter box for each cat in your household, as cats may use any litter box that's available, and that means a cat may occasionally refuse to use a litter box after another cat has used it. In this case, all of the litter boxes will need to be kept extremely clean and additional boxes may be needed.

## An Undercover Operation? Potential Problems of Covered Litter Boxes

Some people prefer to provide their cats with a covered litter box, but doing so may introduce some problems.

You may forget to clean the litter box as frequently as you should because the dirty litter is "out of sight, out of mind." A covered litter box traps odors inside, so it will need to be cleaned more often than an open one. A dirty, covered litter box is to your cat what a portapotty is to you!

A covered litter box may not allow a large cat sufficient room to turn around, scratch, dig, or position herself in the way she wants.

A covered litter box may make it easier for another cat to lay in wait and ambush the user as she exits the box; on the other hand, a covered litter box may feel more private, and timid cats may prefer it.

To discover which type of litter box your cat prefers, you may want to experiment by offering both types at first.

## Keeping It Clean

To meet the needs of the most discriminating cat, feces should be scooped out of the litter box daily. How often you actually change (replace) the litter depends on the number of cats you have, the number of litter boxes, and the type of litter you use. Twice a week is a general guideline for clay litter, but depending on the circumstances, you may

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- Solving Litter Box Problems

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need to replace it every other day or only once a week. If you clean the litter box daily, scoopable litter may only need to be changed every two to three weeks. If you notice an odor or if much of the litter is wet or clumped, it's time for a change. Don't use strong smelling chemicals or cleaning products when washing the litter box, as doing so may cause your cat to avoid the box. Some cleaning products are toxic to cats. Washing with soap and water should be sufficient.

## Liner Notes

Some cats don't mind having a plastic liner in the litter box, while others do. Again, you may want to experiment to see if your cat is bothered by a liner in the box. If you do use a liner, make sure it's anchored in place, so it can't easily catch your cat's claws or be pulled out of place.

## Depth of Litter

Some people think that the more litter they put in the box, the less often they will have to clean it, but that's a mistake. Most cats won't use litter that's more than about two inches deep. In fact, some long-haired cats actually prefer less litter and a smooth, slick surface, such as the bottom of the litter box. The fact is the litter box needs to be cleaned on a regular basis, and adding extra litter is not a way around that chore.

## "Litter-Training" Cats

There's really no such thing as "litter-training" a cat in the same way one would houstrain a dog. A cat doesn't need to be taught what to do with a litter box because instinct will generally take over. The only thing you need to do is provide an acceptable, accessible litter box, using the suggestions above. It's not necessary to take your cat to the litter box and move her paws back and forth in the litter; in fact, we don't recommend it, as such an unpleasant experience is likely to initiate a negative association with the litter box.

## If Problems Develop

If your cat begins to eliminate in areas other than the litter box, your first call should always be to your veterinarian. Many medical conditions can cause a change in a cat's litter box habits. If your veterinarian determines that your cat is healthy, the cause may be a simple behavior problem that can be resolved by using behavior modification techniques. Punishment is not the answer, nor is banishing your cat outdoors. For long-standing or complex situations, contact an animal-behavior specialist who has experience working with cats.

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# Solving Litter Box Problems

**IF YOU'RE HAVING A HARD TIME** persuading your cat to head for the litter box when it's appropriate, it may be time to draw a line in the sand. Most cats prefer eliminating on a loose, grainy substance, which is why they quickly learn to use a litter box. But when their preferences include the laundry basket, the bed, or the Persian rug, you may find yourself with a difficult problem. By taking a closer look at your cat's environment, you should be able to identify factors that have contributed to the litter box problem and make changes that encourage your cat to head for the litter box once again.

A common reason why cats don't use the litter box is an aversion to the box, such as dislike of a covered box or dissatisfaction with the depth of the litter. Two other common reasons your cat may avoid the litter box are a preference for a particular type of litter not provided in the box or a preference for a particular location where there is no box.

Sometimes the problem is a combination of all three factors. To get to the answer, you'll need to do a little detective work—and remember, the original source of the problem may not be the reason it's continuing. For example, your cat may have stopped using the litter box because of a urinary tract infection, and then developed a surface preference for carpet and a location preference for the bedroom closet. If that's the case, you'll need to address all three of these factors to resolve the problem.

Cats don't stop using their litter boxes because they're upset at their human caregivers and determined to get revenge for something that offended or angered them. Because humans act for these reasons, it's easy for us to assume that our pets do as well. But animals don't act out of spite or revenge, so it won't help to punish your cat or give her special privileges in the hope that she'll start using the litter box again.

## Medical Problems

It's common for cats with medical problems to begin eliminating outside of their litter boxes. For example, a urinary tract infection or crystals in the urine can make urination very painful—and both are serious conditions that require medical attention. Cats often associate this pain with the litter box and begin to avoid it. So if your cat has a house-soiling problem, check with your veterinarian first to rule

out any medical problems as a cause of the behavior. Cats don't always act sick even when they are, and only a trip to the veterinarian for a thorough physical examination can rule out a medical problem.

## Cleaning Soiled Areas

Because animals are highly motivated to continue soiling an area that smells like urine or feces—and because cats' sense of smell is so much stronger than humans'—it's important to thoroughly and properly clean the soiled areas.

## Aversion to the Litter Box

Your cat may have decided that the litter box is an unpleasant place to eliminate if:

- The box is not clean enough for her.
- She has experienced painful urination or defecation in the box due to a medical problem.
- She has been startled by a noise while using the box.
- She has been ambushed while in the box either by another cat, a child, a dog, or by you, if you were attempting to catch her for some reason.
- She associates the box with punishment (for example, someone punished her for eliminating outside the box, then placed her in the box).

## What You Can Do

Keep the litter box extremely clean. Scoop at least once a day and change the litter completely every four to five days. If you use scoopable litter, you may not need to change the litter as frequently, depending on the number of cats in the household, the size of the cats, and the number of litter boxes.

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If you can smell the box, then you can be pretty sure it's offensive to your cat as well.

Add a new box in a different location, and use a different type of litter in the new box. Because your cat has decided that her old litter box is unpleasant, you'll want to make the new one different enough that she doesn't simply apply the old, negative associations to the new box.

Make sure that the litter box isn't near an appliance (such as a furnace) that makes noise, or in an area of the home that your cat doesn't frequent.

If ambushing is a problem, create more than one exit from the litter box, so that if the "ambusher" is waiting by one area, your cat always has an escape route.

If you have multiple cats, provide one litter box for each cat, plus one extra box in a different location.

## Surface Preferences

All animals develop preferences for a particular surface on which they like to eliminate. These preferences may be established early in life, but they may also change overnight for reasons that we don't always understand. Your cat may have a surface preference if:

- She consistently eliminates on a particular texture—for example, soft-textured surfaces such as carpeting, bedding, or clothing, or slick-textured surfaces such as tile, cement, bathtubs, or sinks.
- She frequently scratches on this same texture after elimination, even if she eliminates in the litter box.
- She is or was previously an outdoor cat and prefers to eliminate on grass or soil.

### What You Can Do

If you recently changed the type or brand of your cat's litter, go back to providing the litter that your cat had been using. If your cat is eliminating on soft surfaces, try using a high-quality scoopable litter.

If your cat is eliminating on slick, smooth surfaces, try putting a very thin layer of litter at one end of the box, leaving the other end bare, and put the box on a hard floor.

If your cat has a history of being outdoors, add some soil or sod to the litter box.

To discourage your cat from using a certain area, cover the area with an upside-down carpet runner or aluminum foil, or place citrus-scented cotton balls over the area.

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- Removing Pet Stains and Odors
- Reducing Urine-Marking Behavior in Dogs and Cats

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## Location Preferences

Your cat may have a location preference if:

- She always eliminates in quiet, protected places, such as under a desk, beneath a staircase, or in a closet.
- She eliminates in an area where the litter box was previously kept or where there are urine odors.
- She eliminates on a different level of the home from where the litter box is located.

### What You Can Do

Put at least one litter box on every level of your home. (Remember, a properly cleaned litter box does not smell.)

To make the area where she has been eliminating less appealing to your cat, cover the area with an upside-down carpet runner or aluminum foil, place citrus-scented cotton balls over the area, or place water bowls in the area (because cats often don't like to eliminate near where they eat or drink) or put a litter box in the location where your cat has been eliminating. When she has consistently used this box for at least one month, you may gradually move it to a more convenient location at the rate of an inch—seriously!—per day.

## Everyone Makes Mistakes

If you catch your cat in the act of eliminating outside the litter box, do something to interrupt her like making a startling noise, but be careful not to scare her. Immediately take her to the litter box and set her on the floor nearby. If she wanders over to the litter box, wait and praise her after she eliminates in the box. If she takes off in another direction, she may want privacy, so watch from afar until she goes back to the litter box and eliminates, then praise her when she does.

Don't ever punish your cat for eliminating outside of the litter box. By the time you find the soiled area, it's too late to administer a correction. Do nothing but clean it up. Rubbing your cat's nose in it, taking her to the spot and scolding her, or inflicting any other type of punishment will only make her afraid of you or afraid to eliminate in your presence. Animals don't understand punishment after the fact, even if it's only seconds later, and trying to punish them will often make matters worse.

## Other Types of House Soiling Problems

**Marking/Spraying:** To determine if your cat is marking or spraying, consult a veterinarian or animal behaviorist.

**Fears or Phobias:** When animals become frightened, they may lose control of their bladders or bowels. If your cat is afraid of loud noises, strangers, or other animals, she may soil the home when she is exposed to these stimuli.

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# Positive Reinforcement

## Training Your Cat

**WE ALL LIKE TO BE PRAISED** rather than punished. The same is true for your cat, and that's the theory behind positive reinforcement. Positive reinforcement means giving your pet something pleasant or rewarding immediately after she does something you want her to do. Because your praise or reward makes her more likely to repeat that behavior in the future, it is one of your most powerful tools for shaping or changing your cat's behavior. It's more effective to teach your pet what she should do than try to teach her what she shouldn't.

Correct timing is essential when using positive reinforcement. The reward must occur immediately—within seconds—or your cat may not associate it with the proper action. For example, when your cat uses her scratching post, you can throw a piece of dry cat food for her to chase as a reward. Many cats enjoy chasing (hunting) their food and it's good exercise too. But if you throw the food when she has stopped scratching the post and is walking toward you, she will think she's being rewarded for coming to you.

Consistency is also an important element in training. Everyone in the family should reward the same desired behaviors.

### Using Positive Reinforcement

Positive reinforcement may include food treats, praise, petting, or a favorite toy or game. When your pet is first learning a new behavior, such as clawing the scratching post instead of your couch, she should be rewarded every time you catch her using her scratching post. You may even help shape her behavior of using the scratching post by spraying it with catnip (if she reacts positively to catnip) or enticing her with a toy that you dangle on the post. Taking your cat over to the scratching post,

positioning her paws on the post, and raking them along the post to show her what she's supposed to do will likely have the opposite effect of encouraging her to use the post. She may interpret your actions as frightening and uncomfortable. It's important to look at the world from her point of view.

Once your cat reliably offers the desired behavior, you may reward her with treats intermittently, for example, three out of every four times she does the behavior. Then, over time, reward her about half the time, then about a third of the time, and so on, until you're only rewarding her occasionally with a treat. Continue to praise her every time. Your cat will learn that if she keeps offering desired behaviors, eventually she'll get what she wants—your praise and an occasional treat. You won't be forever bound to carry a pocketful of goodies, but it's fun to surprise your cat from time to time.

### The Pros and Cons of Punishment

Punishment can be verbal, postural, or physical and is meant to make your pet immediately associate something unpleasant when she does something you don't want her

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to do. The punishment makes it less likely that the behavior will occur again. To be effective, punishment must be delivered while your pet is engaged in the undesirable behavior—in other words, “caught in the act.” If the punishment is delivered too late, even seconds later, your pet will not associate the punishment with the undesired behavior. The punishment will seem unpredictable to her.

Remember, cats do not act out of spite or revenge, and they don't have a moral sense of right and wrong. Never use physical punishment that involves discomfort or pain as this may cause her to bite, defend herself, or resort to other undesirable behaviors. Holding your cat's neck skin and shaking her may result in a frightened cat who scratches or bites to defend herself. And punishment might be associated with other stimuli, including people, that are present at the time the punishment occurs. For example, a cat who is punished for getting too close to a new baby may become fearful of, or aggressive toward, that baby—or toward other babies. That's why physical punishment is not only bad for your cat, it's also bad for you and others.

Punishment delivered by you may erode your cat's trust and frighten her. That's why punishment is most effective when it does not come directly from you. For example, if your cat enjoys scratching the couch, you may apply special double-sided tape to those surfaces. Cats rarely like sticky paws. Your cat will perceive the couch, instead of you, as delivering the punishment. In this way, too, your cat is more likely to avoid the undesirable behavior when you're not around. However, it is critical that while discouraging undesirable behaviors, you help your cat understand what you want her to do and provide appropriate outlets for her normal cat behaviors.

One of the reasons that cats are such fun companions is that when they're not sleeping, many of them enjoy playing. Playing helps your cat develop physically and behaviorally. Providing appropriate play outlets for your cat can reduce undesirable behaviors. Be sure your cat has safe toys to play with by herself, and don't underestimate the power of playing with your cat to strengthen the bond between you and enhance the quality of life for both of you.

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## Related topics at [www.petsforlife.org](http://www.petsforlife.org)

- Cat Toys and How to Use Them

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BEHAVIOR  
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# Reducing Urine-Marking Behavior in Dogs and Cats

**M**UCH LIKE THE MINERS DURING THE GOLD RUSH, dogs and cats are territorial animals. They “stake a claim” to a particular space, area, or object. They let other people and animals know about their claim by marking it using a variety of methods at different levels of intensity. For example, a dog may bark to drive away what he perceives to be intruders in his territory. A cat may mark a valued object by rubbing her head against it.

Some pets may go to the extreme of urinating or defecating to mark a particular area as their own. Urine-marking is not a house soiling problem. Instead, it is considered territorial behavior. Therefore, to resolve the problem, you need to address the underlying reason for your pet’s need to mark his territory in this way. Before this can be done, however, take your pet to the veterinarian to rule out any medical causes for his behavior.

## House Soiling or Urine-Marking: How to Tell the Difference

### Your Pet May Be Urine-Marking If ...

- The problem is primarily urination. Dogs and cats rarely mark with feces.
- The amount of urine is small and is found primarily on vertical surfaces. (Dogs and cats do sometimes mark on horizontal surfaces.) Leg-lifting and spraying are dominant versions of urine-marking, but even if your pet doesn’t assume these postures, he may still be urine-marking.
- Any pet in your home is not spayed or neutered. Intact males and females are both more likely to urine-mark

than are spayed or neutered animals. However, even spayed or neutered animals may mark in response to other intact animals in the home.

- Your pet urinates on new objects in the environment (a shopping bag, a visitor’s purse), on objects that have unfamiliar smells, or on objects that have another animal’s scent.
- Your pet has conflicts with other animals in your home. When there’s instability in the pack hierarchy, a dog may feel a need to establish his dominance by urine-marking his territory. If one cat is intimidating another cat, the bullied cat may express his anxiety by urine-marking.
- Your pet has contact with other animals outside your home. A cat who is allowed outdoors may come home and mark after having an encounter with another cat outside. If your pet sees another animal through a door or window, he may feel a need to mark his territory.
- Your dog marks frequently when you walk him.

### What You Can Do

- Spay or neuter your pet as soon as possible. Spaying or neutering your pet may stop urine-marking altogether. However, if he has been urine-marking for a long time, a pattern may already be established.

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- Resolve conflicts between animals in your home. (For help, see “Canine Rivalry” and “Feline Social Behavior” and “Aggression between Family Cats.”)
- Restrict your pet’s access to doors and windows through which he can observe animals outside. If this isn’t possible, discourage the presence of other animals near your house. (See “Discouraging Free-Roaming Cats.”)
- Keep your cat indoors. He’ll be safer, live longer, and feel less need to mark his territory.
- Clean soiled areas thoroughly. (See “Successful Cleaning to Remove Pet Odors and Stains.”) Don’t use strong-smelling cleaners because they may cause your pet to “over-mark” the spot.
- Make previously soiled areas inaccessible or unattractive. (See “Aversives for Dogs” and “Aversives for Cats.”) If this isn’t possible, try to change the significance of those areas to your pet. Feed, treat, and play with your pet in the areas he is inclined to mark.
- Keep objects likely to cause marking out of reach. Items such as guests’ belongings and new purchases should be placed in a closet or cabinet.
- If your pet is marking in response to a new resident in your home (such as a roommate or spouse), have the new resident make friends with your pet by feeding, grooming, and playing with him. If you have a new baby, make sure good things happen to your pet when the baby is around. (See “Preparing Your Pet for Baby’s Arrival.”)
- **For dogs:** Watch your dog when he is indoors for signs that he is thinking about urinating. When he begins to urinate, interrupt him with a loud noise and take him outside. If he urinates outside, praise him and give him a treat. When you’re unable to watch him, put your dog in confinement (a crate or small room where he has never marked) or tether him to you with a leash.

## Related topics at [www.petsforlife.org](http://www.petsforlife.org)

- Aversives for Cats
- Aversives for Dogs
- Canine Rivalry
- Discouraging Roaming Cats
- Feline Social Behavior and Aggression between Family Cats
- Nothing in Life Is Free
- Preparing Your Pet for Baby’s Arrival
- Successful Cleaning to Remove Pet Odors and Stains

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- **For dogs:** Practice “nothing in life is free” with your dog. (See “Nothing in Life Is Free.”) This is a safe, non-confrontational way to establish your leadership and requires your dog to work for everything he wants from you. Have your dog obey at least one command (such as “sit”) before you pet him, give him dinner, put on his leash, or throw him a toy. Establishing yourself as a strong leader can help stabilize the hierarchy and thus diminish your dog’s need to mark his territory.
- **For cats:** Try to monitor your cat’s movements. If he sniffs in an area he has previously marked, interrupt him with a loud noise or squirt him with water. It’s best if you can do this without him seeing you. That way, he’ll associate the unpleasantness with his intent to mark, rather than with you.

## What Not to Do

Don’t punish your pet after the fact. Punishment administered even a minute after the event is ineffective because your pet won’t understand why he is being punished.

## Pets Aren’t People

Dogs and cats don’t urinate or defecate out of spite or jealousy. If your dog urinates on your baby’s diaper bag, it’s not because he is jealous of, or dislikes, your baby. The unfamiliar scents and sounds of a new baby in the home are simply causing him to reaffirm his claim on his territory. Likewise, if your cat urinates on your new boyfriend’s backpack, it does not reflect his opinion of your taste in men. Instead, he has perceived the presence of an “intruder” and is letting the intruder know that this territory belongs to him.

## Dominance or Anxiety?

Urine-marking is usually associated with dominance behavior. Some pets, though, may mark when they feel anxious or upset. For example, a new baby in the home brings new sounds, smells, and people, as well as changes in routine. Your dog or cat probably isn’t getting as much attention as he was used to getting. All of these changes cause him to feel anxious, which may cause him to mark.

Likewise, a pet who is generally anxious may become more so by the presence of roaming neighborhood animals in your yard or by the introduction of a new cat or dog into your household. If your pet is feeling anxious, you might consider talking to your veterinarian about medications to reduce his anxiety while you try behavior modification techniques.

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BEHAVIOR  
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# Removing Pet Stains and Odors

**YOU KNOW HOW IT GOES:** The minute you turn your back, your pet decides that your new carpet is the perfect place to relieve himself. You clean and clean, but you can't get rid of that smell. What can you do?

Well, for starters, you need to find which areas are soiled and then retrain your pet to avoid eliminating in those areas. And to do that, you'll have to clean those areas, and clean them well. Here are the steps you'll need to take:

- Find all soiled areas using your nose and eyes. A black-light bulb will usually show even old urine stains. Turn out all lights in the room, use the black light to identify soiled areas, and lightly outline the areas with chalk. Black lights can be purchased at home supply stores.
  - Clean the soiled areas appropriately to remove the odors.
  - Rule out medical causes for the behavior by visiting your veterinarian.
  - Figure out why your pet is urinating or defecating in inappropriate areas. (For help, see our tips sheets "Solving Litter Box Problems," "Housetraining Your Puppy," and "Reducing Urine-Marking Behavior in Dogs and Cats." These tips sheets can be found at [www.petsforlife.org](http://www.petsforlife.org).)
  - Make the areas unattractive or unavailable. (For help, see our tip sheets on dog aversives and cat aversives. These tips sheets can be found at [www.petsforlife.org](http://www.petsforlife.org).)
  - Make the appropriate "bathroom" area attractive. (For help, see our tips sheets "Positive Reinforcement: Training Your Dog (or Cat!) with Treats and Praise," "Housetraining Your Puppy," and "Solving Litter Box Problems." These tips sheets can be found at [www.petsforlife.org](http://www.petsforlife.org).)
- Teach your pet the appropriate place to eliminate by using positive reinforcement techniques.
  - To be successful, you need to follow all these steps. If you fail to completely clean the area, your retraining efforts will be useless. As long as your pet can smell his personal scent, he'll continue to return to the "accident zone." Even if you can't smell traces of urine, your pet can. Your most important chore is to remove (neutralize) that odor with the following steps.

## To Clean Washable Items

Machine wash as usual, adding a one-pound box of baking soda to your regular detergent. It's best to air dry these items if possible.

If you can still see the stain or smell the urine, machine wash the item again and add an enzymatic cleaner (available at pet supply stores) that breaks down pet-waste odors. Be sure to follow the directions carefully.

If your pet urinates or defecates on the sheets or blankets on a bed, cover the bed with a vinyl, flannel-backed tablecloth when you begin the retraining period. It's machine washable, inexpensive, and unattractive to your pet.

## To Clean Carpeted Areas and Upholstery

For new stains, those that are still wet, soak up as much of the urine as possible with a combination of newspaper and paper towels. The more fresh urine you can remove before it dries, especially from carpet, the easier it will be to

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remove the odor. Place a thick layer of paper towels on the wet spot and cover that with a thick layer of newspaper. If possible, put newspaper under the soiled area as well. Stand on this padding for about a minute. Remove the padding and repeat the process until the area is barely damp.

If possible, put the fresh, urine-soaked paper towel in the area where it belongs—your cat's litter box or your dog's designated outdoor "bathroom area." This will help remind your pet that eliminating isn't a "bad" behavior as long as it's done in the right place.

Rinse the "accident zone" thoroughly with clean, cool water. After rinsing, remove as much of the water as possible by blotting or by using a "wet vac."

### **For Stains That Have Already Set**

To remove all traces of heavy stains in carpeting, consider renting an extractor or wet vac from a local hardware store. This machine operates much like a vacuum cleaner and is efficient and economical. Extracting/wet vac machines do the best job of forcing clean water through your carpet and then forcing the dirty water back out again. When using these machines or cleaners, be sure to follow the instructions carefully. Don't use any chemicals with these machines; they work much more effectively with plain water.

Once the area is really clean, use a high-quality pet odor neutralizer available at pet supply stores. Be sure to read and follow the cleaner's directions for use, including testing the cleaner on a small, hidden portion of fabric first to be sure it doesn't stain.

If the area still looks stained after it's completely dry from extracting and neutralizing, try any good carpet stain remover.

Avoid using steam cleaners to clean urine odors from carpet or upholstery. The heat will permanently set the stain and the odor by bonding the protein into any man-made fibers.

Avoid using cleaning chemicals, especially those with strong odors such as ammonia or vinegar. From your pet's perspective, these don't effectively eliminate or cover the

urine odor and may actually encourage your pet to reinforce the urine scent mark in that area.

If you've previously used cleaners or chemicals of any kind on the area, then neutralizing cleaners won't be effective until you've rinsed every trace of the old cleaner from the carpet. Even if you haven't used chemicals recently, any trace of a non-protein-based substance will weaken the effect of the enzymatic cleaner. The cleaner will use up its "energy" on the old cleaners instead of on the protein stains you want removed.

If urine has soaked down into the padding underneath your carpet, your job will be more difficult. In some cases, you may need to take the drastic step of removing and replacing that portion of the carpet and padding.

### **To Clean Floors and Walls**

If the wood on your furniture, walls, baseboard, or floor is discolored, the varnish or paint has reacted to the acid in the urine. You may need to remove and replace the layer of varnish or paint. If you do so, make sure the new product is safe for pets. Employees at your local hardware or home improvement store can help you identify and match your needs with appropriate removers and replacements. Washable enamel paints and some washable wallpapers may respond favorably to enzymatic cleaners. Read the instructions carefully before using these products and test them in an invisible area.

### **Retrain Your Pet**

Finally, in conjunction with cleaning, be sure to teach your pet where you want him to eliminate. To do this, make the "accident zone" unattractive and the appropriate "bathroom" area attractive, and see our related tip sheets at [www.petsforlife.org](http://www.petsforlife.org). The retraining period may take a week or more. Remember, it took time to build the bad habit, and it will take time to replace that habit with a new, more acceptable behavior. Treat your pet with patience and give him lots of encouragement!

### **Related topics at [www.petsforlife.org](http://www.petsforlife.org)**

- **Housetraining Your Puppy**
- **Positive Reinforcement: Training Your Dog or Cat with Treats and Praise**
- **Reducing Urine-Marking Behavior in Dogs and Cats**
- **Solving Litter Box Problems**
- **Using Aversives to Modify Your Cat's Behavior**
- **Using Aversives to Modify Your Dog's Behavior**

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BEHAVIOR  
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# Solving Aggression Between Family Cats

**I**F THE BATTLES between your feline family members are anything like the struggle between Cain and Abel, there are a few things you can do to prevent the “sibling rivalry” from reaching biblical proportions. Of course, it’s almost impossible to guess how well any particular pair or group of cats will ultimately tolerate each other: Some unusually territorial cats may never adjust to sharing their house and may do best in a one-cat family. But many aggression problems between cats can be successfully resolved, even if the two don’t end up best friends when all is said and done. You’ll need to commit time and effort to solve aggression problems between cats—don’t give up without consulting the appropriate experts.

## Common Types of Aggressive Behaviors Between Cats

### Territorial Aggression

Territorial aggression occurs when a cat feels that his territory has been invaded by an intruder. Cats are very territorial—much more so than dogs—and female cats can be just as territorial as males. The behavior patterns in this type of aggression include chasing and ambushing the intruder, as well as hissing and swatting when contact occurs. Territorial problems often occur when a new cat is brought into a household, when a young kitten reaches maturity, or when a cat sees or encounters neighborhood cats outside. It’s not uncommon for a cat to be territorially aggressive toward one cat in a family yet friendly and tolerant to another.

### Inter-Male Aggression

Adult male cats normally tend to threaten and sometimes fight with other males. These behaviors can occur as sexual challenges over a female or to achieve a relatively high position in the cats’ loosely organized social hierarchy. This type of aggression involves much ritualized body posturing, stalking, staring, yowling, and howling. Attacks are usually avoided if one cat “backs down” and

walks away. If an attack occurs, the attacker will usually jump forward, directing a bite to the nape of the neck, while the opponent falls to the ground on his back and attempts to bite and scratch the attacker’s belly with his hind legs. The cats may roll around biting and screaming, suddenly stop, resume posturing, fight again, or walk away. Cats don’t often injure one another this way, but you should always check for puncture wounds, which are prone to infection. Neutered males are much less likely to fight in this way—yet another great reason for having your animal sterilized.

### Defensive Aggression

Defensive aggression occurs when a cat is attempting to protect himself from an attack he believes he cannot escape. This can occur in response to punishment or the threat of punishment from a person, an attack or attempted attack from another cat, or any incident that makes the animal feel threatened or afraid. Defensive postures include crouching with the legs pulled in under the body, laying the ears back, tucking the tail, and rolling slightly to the side. These responses are not the same as the submissive postures dogs show because they’re not intended to “turn off” an attack from another cat. Continuing to approach a cat in this posture is likely to precipitate an attack.

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## Redirected Aggression

This type of aggression is directed toward another animal, or even a person, who didn't initially provoke the behavior. For example, an indoor cat sitting in the window may see an outdoor cat walk across the front yard. Because he can't attack the outdoor cat, he may instead turn and attack the family cat sitting next to him in the window.

## What You Can Do

- If your cat's behavior changes suddenly, your first step should always be to contact your veterinarian for a thorough health examination. Cats often hide symptoms of illness until they're seriously ill, and any change in behavior may be an early indication of a medical problem.
- Spay or neuter any intact pets in your home. The behavior of one intact animal can affect all of your pets.
- Start the slow introduction process over from the beginning. You may want to talk to an animal-behavior specialist for help implementing these techniques.
- In extreme cases, consult with your veterinarian about medicating your cats while you're working on a behavior-modification program. Your veterinarian is the only person who is licensed and qualified to prescribe medication for your cat, so don't attempt to give your cat any over-the-counter or prescription medication without some guidance. Animals don't respond to drugs the same way people do, and a medication that may be safe for a human could be fatal to an animal. Also keep in mind that medication, by itself, isn't a permanent solution and should only be used in conjunction with behavior modification.

## Related topics at [www.petsforlife.org](http://www.petsforlife.org)

- [Introducing Your New Cat to Your Other Pets](#)

## What NOT To Do

- If your cats are fighting, don't allow the fights to continue. Because cats are so territorial, and because they don't establish firm dominance hierarchies, they won't be able to "work things out" as dogs sometimes do. The more often cats fight, the worse the problem is likely to become. To stop a fight in progress, make a loud noise (like blowing a whistle), squirt the cats with water, or throw something soft at them. Don't try to pull them apart.
- Prevent future fights. This may mean keeping the cats totally separated from each other while you're working on the problem, or at least preventing contact between them during situations likely to trigger a fight.
- Don't try to punish the cats involved. Punishment is likely to elicit further aggression and fearful responses, which will only make the problem worse. If you attempt to punish either combatant, you may even become a target for redirected aggression.

Because their social organization is somewhat flexible, some cats are relatively willing to share their house and territory with multiple cats. It's not uncommon for a cat to tolerate some cats, but not get along with others in the house. But the more cats who share the same territory, the more likely it is that some of your cats will begin fighting with each other.

When you introduce cats to each other, one of them may send "play" signals which can be misinterpreted by the other cat. If those signals are interpreted as aggression by one of the cats, then you should handle the situation as "aggression" and seek professional help right away.

There are many factors that determine how well cats will get along with one another, but even animal-behavior experts don't fully understand them. What we do know is that cats who are well socialized (those who had pleasant experiences with other cats during kittenhood) will likely be more sociable than those who haven't been around many other cats.

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BEHAVIOR  
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# Understanding Your Kitten's Behavior and Development

**T**HE APPLE DOESN'T FALL FAR FROM THE TREE, especially for cats. The fact is, well-socialized cats are more likely to have well-socialized kittens. Kittens often mirror their mothers' calm or fearful attitudes toward people; this is a normal part of their socialization. But you can play a vital role, too, by petting, talking, and playing with kitty to help her develop good "people skills."

Kittens are usually weaned at six to seven weeks, but may continue to suckle for comfort as their mother gradually leaves them for longer periods of time. Orphaned kittens, or those weaned too soon, are more likely to exhibit inappropriate suckling behaviors later in life, such as sucking on blankets, pillows, or your arm. Ideally, kittens should stay with their littermates (or other "role-model" cats) for at least 12 weeks.

Kittens orphaned or separated from their mothers or littermates too early often fail to develop appropriate social skills, such as learning how to send and receive signals, what an "inhibited bite" (acceptable mouthing pressure) means, how far to go in play-wrestling, and so forth. Play is important for kittens because it increases their physical coordination and social skills and helps in learning limits. By interacting with their mothers and littermates, kittens explore the ranking process ("who's in charge") and also learn how to be a cat.

Kittens who are gently handled by people 15–40 minutes a day during the first seven weeks are more likely to develop larger brains. They're more exploratory, more playful, and better learners. Skills not acquired during the first eight weeks may be lost forever. While these stages are important and fairly consistent, a cat's

mind remains receptive to new experiences and lessons well beyond kittenhood. Most cats are still kittens, in mind and body, through the first two years of life.

## Stages of Kitten Development:

### *0–2 Weeks: Neonatal Period*

- Kitten learns to orient toward sound.
- Eyes begin opening; they are usually open by two weeks of age.
- Competition for rank and territory begins. Separation from mother and littermates at this point can lead to poor learning skills and aggression toward people and other pets.

### *2–7 Weeks: Socialization Period*

- By the third week, sense of smell is well-developed and kitten can see well enough to find her mother.
- By the fourth week, sense of smell is fully mature and sense of hearing is well-developed. Kitten starts to interact with littermates and can walk fairly well. Teeth start to come in.

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- By the fifth week, eyesight is fully mature, and kitten can right herself, run, place her feet precisely, avoid obstacles, stalk and pounce, and catch “prey” with her eyes.
- Kitten starts to groom herself and others.
- By the sixth and seventh weeks, kitten begins to develop adult sleeping patterns, motor skills, and social interaction abilities.

#### **7–14 Weeks: Most Active Play Period**

- Social and object play increases kitten’s physical coordination and social skills. Most learning is by observation, preferably of kitten’s mother.
- Social play includes belly-ups, hugging, ambushing, and licking.
- Object play includes scooping, tossing, pawing, mouthing, and holding.
- Combined social/object play includes tail chasing, pouncing, leaping, and dancing.

#### **3–6 Months: Ranking Period**

- Kitten is most influenced by her “litter,” which may now include playmates of other species.
- Kitten begins to see and use ranking (dominance or submission) within household, including humans.

#### **6–18 Months: Adolescence**

- Kitten increases exploration of dominance, including challenging humans.
- If not spayed or neutered, kitten experiences beginnings of sexual behavior. (Spaying or neutering your kitten at an early age will increase the health benefits of the surgery and increase her lifespan.)

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# Understanding Your Talkative Cat

**W**HILE WE HUMANS MAY NOT YET BE ADEPT at holding conversations in cat-speak, cats nonetheless use their language to communicate with us and other animals. Some cats “talk” more than others, but most cats do make noise some of the time, and they expect us to know what they’re saying.

We’re all familiar with the meaning of hissing and growling, but there are many other sounds your cat is capable of making, and a variety of reasons for vocalizing.

## Medical Reasons

If your cat’s behavior changes suddenly, the first thing you should do is take her to your veterinarian for a thorough health examination. Cats often hide symptoms of illness until they’re seriously ill; any change in behavior may be an early indication of a medical problem. A new vocalizing behavior, in particular, may indicate physical discomfort stemming from an urgent need for medical attention. A normally vocal cat who stops talking is also in need of a medical checkup.

## Breed Tendency

Asian breeds, such as the Siamese, are known to be very vocal. If your cat has a pointed face and a long, lean body, chances are she has some Asian heritage, so “talking” may be a part of her character. If your cat’s chatter bothers you, then avoid giving her any attention when she is vocal because this will only encourage the vocal behavior. Instead, give her attention when she is quiet.

## Attention-Seeking Behavior

Some cats “talk” because they know they’ll get a reaction. People may talk back, put out some food, pick up and soothe the cat, or even pick the animal up and temporarily “lock” her in another room. All of these responses will encourage an attention-seeking cat. To discourage this behavior, simply ignore your cat when she does this, and when she is quiet, pour on the love, feed her, or give her some treats. This will teach your cat which behaviors you would like her to continue.

## Your Cat Wants to Go Outside

If your cat was previously an outdoor cat and you plan to keep her safely inside, then good for you! The following are some suggestions to help make the transition easier on both of you:

- **Spay or Neuter Your Cat.** Spaying or neutering will rid your cat of those hormonal urges to go out and seek a mate. This will result in a calmer, friendlier cat.
- **Create a Play Schedule.** Schedule play times during the times your cat would normally be outside. This will distract her from her normal routine and establish another, safer routine.

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- **Provide a Window Seat.** Be sure your cat has a view of the outdoors and a sunny place to lie. Cats like to watch birds, so putting a bird feeder outside a window is likely to make the window a favorite spot for your cat.
- **Run a Scavenger Hunt.** Give your cat a game to play by hiding bits of dry food around the house. Hide the food in paper bags, boxes, and behind open doors. This will give her exercise and keep her busy so she doesn't think of going outside. This is especially good to do right before the family leaves the house for the day.
- **Pay Attention.** Try to give your cat extra love and attention during this difficult transition.
- **Try Aversives.** If your cat still won't give up meowing by the door, try an "aversive." For example, leave a strong citrus scent by the door to help make the area undesirable to your cat. Totally ignore her vocalizations. Whenever she is quiet, give her a food treat and encourage her to play or cuddle.

## Grief

After the death or departure of a person or animal in your cat's life, she may vocalize to express her grief. This can be a normal part of the grieving process. The best thing you can do for her is keep her schedule the same (or as close to it as possible) and spend some extra time cuddling and playing with her. With time, this problem should take care of itself. If your cat does not return to her normal self, consult your veterinarian.

## Transition

If your cat is new to your home or has just gone through a change—such as a person or other animal moving into or out of the home—and she has just started her talkative behavior, be patient. This may be happening due to the transition and will stop on its own if the behavior is not encouraged. Remember, even scolding can be perceived by your cat as attention, and thus encourage the behavior.

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## Related topics at [www.petsforlife.org](http://www.petsforlife.org)

- Aversives for Cats
- Understanding Cat Aggression toward People
- Your Cat: Indoors or Out?

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BEHAVIOR  
SERIES

# Unusual Eating Habits in Dogs and Cats

**IF YOUR PET HAS AN APPETITE FOR** such oddities as socks, rocks, or even feces, chances are you've wondered—and worried—about her unusual eating habits. In this case, your worry may be justified: Not only can your possessions be destroyed or damaged, but objects such as clothing and rocks can produce life-threatening blockages in your pet's intestines.

Eating non-food items has a name: It's called pica. A specific type of pica is stool eating—either the dog's own or that of another animal. It's called coprophagy. Rarely seen in cats, coprophagy is fairly common in dogs, especially those who tend to be highly food-motivated. And although it's not necessarily dangerous to the animal, it probably is unacceptable to you.

## Why Animals Do This

The causes of pica and coprophagy are not known. Many theories have been proposed by various experts, but none has been proven or disproven. One idea is that such behaviors may be attention-seeking behaviors. If engaging in one of these behaviors results in some type of social interaction between the animal and her owner—even a verbal scolding—then the behavior may be reinforced and occur more frequently.

Others think these behaviors may be attempts to obtain a necessary nutrient lacking in the diet, although no nutritional studies have ever substantiated this idea. Pica and coprophagy may also stem from frustration or anxiety. It's even possible that the behaviors begin as play; as the animal investigates and chews on the objects, she eventually begins to eat or ingest them.

Some experts have suggested that coprophagy is carried over from the normal parental behavior of ingesting the waste of young offspring. Others believe that coprophagy occurs more often in animals who live in relatively barren environments, are frequently confined to small areas, or receive limited attention from their owners. It's also possible that dogs learn this behavior from other dogs.

Because pica and coprophagy are not well understood, stopping these behaviors may require assistance from an animal-behavior professional who will work individually with you and your pet.

## Suggested Solutions for Coprophagy

Because the cause of coprophagy isn't known, no techniques or solutions are known to be consistently successful. However, the following techniques may be effective in resolving the problem.

- Treat your pet's food with something that causes her stool to taste bad. A commercial product called 4-BID™ is available through your veterinarian. The same result may be achieved by using the food additive MSG. Based on owners' reports, both of these products work in many cases, but not all. Before using either of these products, consult with your veterinarian.

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- Give your pet's stools a bad taste by sprinkling them directly with cayenne pepper or a commercial product such as Bitter Apple®. For this method to be effective, every stool your pet has access to must be treated so that she learns that eating stools results in something unpleasant. Otherwise, she may discriminate (using scent) which stools have been treated and which have not.
- Keep your dog on a leash any time you take her outside. If you see her about to ingest a stool, interrupt her by clapping your hands, spraying a squirt bottle, or shaking a can (only for pets who aren't afraid of loud noises). Then immediately give her a toy to play with instead, and praise her for taking an interest in the toy.
- Clean your yard daily to minimize your pet's opportunity to eat her stools.
- If your dog eats cat feces from the litter box, install a baby-gate in front of the litter box area. Your cat shouldn't have any trouble jumping over it, but your dog likely won't even make the attempt. Or place the litter box in a closet or room where the door can be wedged slightly open from both sides so that your cat has access but your dog doesn't. Think twice before setting up a booby trap to stop your dog from eating cat feces from a litter box: If it frightens your dog, it's likely to frighten your cat, too.
- Prevent your pet's access to these items.
- If your pet is highly food-oriented, change her diet to a low-calorie or high-fiber diet. This may allow her to eat more food, more often, which may decrease the behavior. Check with your veterinarian before changing your pet's diet.
- If you suspect that anxiety or frustration is the reason for your animal's pica habit, change the behavior by using behavior modification techniques.
- If you catch your pet ingesting items and believe it is to get attention, startle your pet with a loud noise or a spray of water. If possible, avoid letting her know that the startling noise or spray comes from you, and be sure to praise her when she leaves the items alone. You may want to give her something acceptable to eat or chew. Try to set aside 10–15 minutes twice a day to spend with your pet so that she doesn't need to resort to pica to get your attention.
- If you think your pet's pica habit is play behavior, then keep plenty of toys around for her to play with. Cats especially like to play with string, rubber bands, and tinsel, and ultimately ingest them. Keep these items out of reach and provide a selection of appropriate toys. (See "Cat Toys and How to Use Them" and "Dog Toys and How to Use Them.")

### Suggested Solutions for Pica

Pica can be a serious problem because items such as rubber bands, socks, rocks, and string can severely damage or block an animal's intestines. In some instances, the items must be surgically removed. Because pica can be potentially life-threatening, consult both your veterinarian and an animal-behavior professional for help. Here are some other suggestions.

- Make the objects your pet is eating taste unpleasant by applying cayenne pepper, Bitter Apple®, or some other aversive. (For more information on using aversives, see "Using Aversives to Modify Your Cat's Behavior" and "Using Aversives to Modify Your Dog's Behavior.")

### Related topics at [www.petsforlife.org](http://www.petsforlife.org)

- Cat Toys and How to Use Them
- Dog Toys and How to Use Them
- Using Aversives to Modify Your Cat's Behavior
- Using Aversives to Modify Your Dog's Behavior

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### What Doesn't Work:

- Interactive punishment (punishment that comes directly from you, such as verbal scolding) is usually not effective because it may be interpreted by your pet as attention. What's more, many animals learn to refrain from the problem behavior when their owner is present, yet still engage in the behavior when their owner is absent.
- Punishment after the fact is *never* helpful. Animals don't understand that they're being punished for something they did hours or even minutes before. This approach won't resolve the problem and is likely to produce either fearful or aggressive responses from your pet.

Adapted from material originally developed by applied animal behaviorists at the Dumb Friends League, Denver, Colorado. ©2000 Dumb Friends League and ©2003 The HSUS. All rights reserved.



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