

Why Cats Bite

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While bites from dogs tend to receive a lot of attention, it is rare to see an article or new story on cat bites. Aggressive behavior toward people is probably second only to elimination as the most common behavior problem we see in cats. Cats tend to bite people for different reasons than dogs. Dogs often display territorial aggression toward non-family members. Cats seldom are territorial to people, although territorial aggression toward other cats is very common. The most common types of cat aggression toward people are play motivated and the poorly understood ‘don’t pet me anymore’ behavior.

Owners whose cats display playful aggression often describe their pets as ‘turning mean’ or ‘vicious’. Even though the motivation is play, these bites or scratches can still break the skin and hurt. Because play behavior often resembles elements of predator behavior, this type of aggression usually involves either stalking or hit-and-run attacks. Hands and feet are often the most likely targets, and some bites occur when the cat can spring out and pounce or ambush the owner. Common situations for playful aggression are when the owner gets out of bed, comes around a corner where the cat is lying in wait, steps out of the shower or is playing with the cat who suddenly directs the bite toward a hand rather than a toy. Usually this behavior is easily dealt with by increasing the cat’s opportunities for appropriate play. Cat toys should be provided that encourage all different kinds of play, including stalking, chasing, batting and swatting, pouncing and even carrying small objects in the mouth. Playful behavior directed toward human body parts should never be encouraged or allowed. A brief time out often discourages inappropriate play or even a squirt of water. For the latter to be effective, the owner must have the squirt gun in hand – it’s too late if you have to go search for it.

The ‘don’t pet me anymore’ aggression usually occurs when the cat is being petted and suddenly turns and bites. More often than not, the cat gives some warning, such as flicking his ears, twitching his tail, or making intention movements with his head (quickly turning his head to look at the hand that is petting him). This type of aggression seems to be more common in males than females. Proposed explanations for the behavior are that the petting becomes either unpleasant or sexually arousing, or that the cat is attempting to establish a dominant role with the owner. None of these explanations have been either refuted or substantiated scientifically. Owners can best avoid being bitten by becoming more aware of the cat’s warning signs, and stop petting before the cat bites. Confining petting to just the head may also be helpful. If petting is also paired with a special tidbit, the cat may allow the petting to continue for longer time periods.