

BASIC INFORMATION

Description

During an incidence of causal play, the cat may suddenly begin biting and scratching. The playfulness escalates to an unacceptable level of aggressiveness. The aggressiveness is most often directed toward other cats or humans but may occasionally be directed toward dogs.

Causes

Inadequate or inappropriate socialization of kittens to people and other cats may be a cause. Cats that are bottle-raised have not been taught what is appropriate during play by their mother or littermates. They may not realize that their behavior is unacceptable.

When people use their hands or feet as toys, they may inadvertently teach the cat that it is acceptable to bite or claw those appendages. Genetics may also play a role, because some cats seem to become more aroused than normal when they play.

Clinical Signs

The cat may stalk, chase, and leap onto people, then bite or claw them. The bites can be deep. Prior to the attack, the cat may assume a predatory posture. It may stare at the person or other animal, the pupils may dilate, and the tail may twitch. Moving targets are attacked more often than stationary ones. An episode of apparently normal play between two cats may escalate into fighting.

Diagnostic Tests

The diagnosis is usually made from a careful and thorough history. It is necessary to distinguish this form of aggression from dominance aggression between cats, redirected aggression by a highly aroused cat that cannot reach its preferred target, and intolerance of petting. The circumstances that precipitate these other disorders and the clinical signs associated with them may seem similar, but careful scrutiny of the circumstances and signs often reveals characteristic differences.

TREATMENT AND FOLLOW-UP

Treatment Options

Providing adequate amounts of exercise and time for play helps to prevent this form of aggression. Make sure the cat has a variety of toys. Gently correct young kittens when their behavior becomes unacceptable, and redirect them to playing with their toys.

Discourage cats from batting at your hands or feet during play. If a predatory body posture is seen, stop playing with the cat and avoid any jumping, running, or shouting. Interrupt play between cats that appears to be escalating into more aggressive wrestling or fighting.

For cats that become highly aroused, medical therapy with fluoxetine, sertraline, clomipramine, amitriptyline, or other similar agents may be tried. During the initial phase of therapy, people who may be targets of the attacks should wear protective clothing until the cat's behavior can be trusted.

Follow-up Care

Recheck visits are often scheduled to monitor the cat's response to modifications made to its environment and to any medications used. Some cats can be weaned from medications within 1-3 weeks, whereas others require long-term therapy. Laboratory tests may be recommended to monitor for drug side effects if they are used for a prolonged period. It is important to report any escalation in the cat's aggression to our veterinarians. Some aggressive cats can do serious harm to people.

Prognosis

Prognosis is generally good if appropriate, consistent intervention is applied to the situation. In some cats, the signs resolve completely. In other cats, play aggression can be triggered by anyone who does not follow the steps needed to interrupt and de-escalate the situation. All people who come into contact with these cats should be warned of their behavior and taught the most effective methods of interacting with them.

Be honest with our veterinarians about your feelings toward the cat. If you are afraid of the cat, then discuss other options, such as placing the cat in a different home.