

5 Common Cat Behavioural Issues

and how to solve them



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Cats make amazing companions, however over the course of their lives, and as circumstances change, your cat may develop some behaviours that need to be managed. It can be disheartening and overwhelming, but that's not to say those problems can't be solved.

Although cats all have their own special personalities, they are also similar in many ways, so the behavioural problems you may experience are often consistent with other households.



Here are five of the most common cat behavioural issues and how you can help resolve them...

Scratching Furniture/Carpet

Scratching of furniture and carpet is a common problem often reported by cat owners. No-one wants their expensive couch in tatters, or to explain to their landlord why the carpet is damaged. Scratching is a normal cat behaviour and shouldn't be discouraged – you just need to offer lots of alternatives.

Follow these tips to help your cat transfer their scratching to more appropriate surfaces:

Make sure you have a quality scratching post that is high and sturdy enough for your cat to stand on their back legs and stretch up to scratch. If the post is too short or not stable, the cat will not use it (the couch won't tip over and is therefore a safer choice).

Place the post right beside the piece of furniture your cat likes to scratch. Consider using a specially formulated pheromone spray product (available from vets, pet stores and online), or try some catnip to help redirect your cat to the scratching post. When you see your cat showing interest in the post, even if it's just a sniff, reward them with a tasty treat. During playtime, wave a wand toy over the post as further encouragement.

Once the cat is using the post more regularly, you can slowly move it into another position.

As for carpet, it is important to realise that **some cats prefer horizontal scratching.** Offer a horizontal scratcher (lots of options in pet stores or online) – or even a carpet square or sisal door mat – and place it in the areas they normally scratch the carpet.

If your cat has a safe outdoor 'catio' or cat enclosure, they may enjoy scratching on a sturdy tree trunk. **Offering choice is very important.**

Inappropriate Toileting/Marking

Another very common behavioural problem cat owners report is toileting outside of the litter box. This can be extremely frustrating, but there's usually a reason your cat has decided the litter box is a 'no-go zone'. You've just got to figure out what it is. Firstly, rule out any medical issues with a trip to the vet. Sudden changes in toileting behaviour can signal a number of health problems, including urinary tract infections, and in some cases these can become very serious, very quickly.

Once any medical issues have been ruled out, consider if your cat is toileting outside the litter box or marking. These are two very different issues.

Marking is most often done by spraying urine against vertical surfaces such as walls and furniture. If this is happening, your cat feels unsafe in their environment and is busy marking their territory as a way of saying "stay away, this is mine". Look for reasons your cat may suddenly feel threatened – is there a stray cat hanging around? Has someone new moved into the house? Have you introduced a new pet? Have you made major changes to the house such as new carpet or furniture? Find the cause and you can start work on making your cat feel secure again. This may include discouraging stray cats from visiting your property, providing positive associations with new house members and making sure your cat has everything they need to feel safe. Talk to your vet or a cat behaviour consultant for guidance.

If it's not territorial marking, then toileting outside the litter box is most often a sign your cat does not like the toileting options available. This can be for any number of reasons, including cleanliness, location, insufficient availability, size of box and type of litter.

Follow these tips to try and cover all bases:

Keep the litter boxes clean. Just like humans, cats like to go to the toilet in a clean space. The general rule is to clean litter boxes at least once daily, preferably more often, and completely change the litter at least weekly. Provide one litter box per cat, plus one extra, all in different locations.

Try changing the litter type. Sand-like, clumping and non-perfumed litter is generally most preferred by cats, but offer a variety of types to gauge your cat's preference. Make sure there is a depth of at least 3cm to provide opportunities for digging and covering. Cats' litter preferences may change as they age, and older cats often prefer softer types of litter.

Consider moving your cat's litter boxes to quieter spaces in the house with minimal traffic. Just like us, they prefer to do their business with a little privacy. If you have more than one cat, also make sure the boxes are in locations where they can't be ambushed by another cat with no escape. Once they are consistently using their boxes, you've found their preferred locations.

Look at the size of the litter boxes. Some cats need more room to move and older cats may need a lower entry point. Hooded litter boxes should be avoided as they tend to enclose any smells and don't give cats the chance to survey their surroundings.

If your cat has toileted outside of their litter box, clean the entire affected area thoroughly with a non-ammonia-based disinfectant, dry it well (hairdryer, sunlight), and apply an enzymatic, biodegradable odour neutralising agent. Cats tend to 'top up' areas, so it is important to clean the area well to reduce the likelihood of your cat repeatedly toileting in this area.





Aggression

Aggression in cats is a serious issue and can be directed towards other cats or people in the home. There are a variety of reasons your cat may be acting out and not playing nicely: illness, feeling overcrowded, lack of socialisation, maternal protection and changes in the environment can all contribute to your cat feeling less than sociable.

Try the following tips to help resolve this problem:

Firstly, if this is a new issue, take your cat to the vet to make sure your cat isn't suffering from any pain or illness. They may be acting out as a sign of frustration because they are having trouble coping with the pain.

Aggression towards people

Make sure your cat has plenty of enriching toys to keep themselves entertained – toys they can scratch and bite instead of your hands.

Put aside time each day to play with your cat and entertain them, cats enjoy regular short bursts of play. Use toys which encourage the natural behaviours of hunting, stalking and catching prey.

When playing with your cat, use safe toys: things that are dangly and long, and items you can throw, to keep your hands out of the action.

Don't encourage your kitten or cat to play with your hands and feet. It's not so bad when they're kittens, but as they get older the scratches and bites become harder and can land you in hospital.

ALWAYS supervise children playing with cats. Cats can get overstimulated with too much high-energy play and can lash out as a result. Encourage children to have short bursts of play using wand-toys or throwing toys/balls, and to intersperse this with periods of calm. Teach children that when cats are sleeping, eating or toileting, they should be left alone.

Aggression between cats

Make sure there is plenty of room and enough resources for everyone. Cats like their own “stuff” and don’t often like to share. Providing each cat with lots of choices of resting places, toys, food and water bowls, and litter boxes can help to eliminate aggression between your cats. Make sure there are lots of hiding places, plenty of vertical space and eliminate any areas where cats can be ambushed with no escape.

Use a pheromone diffuser or spray. This synthetic form of cat pheromones can help to calm cats, particularly in multi-cat households.

Get your cat(s) desexed. Hormones can play a role in aggression, so desexing can help to calm things down.

DON’T try to break up a cat fight by getting in the middle of it. To stop your cats from fighting, you can try to distract them by clapping your hands and using your voice to make high pitched sounds, or placing a barrier between them such as a large piece of strong cardboard. Then separate them for a while to see if things calm down. A careful re-introduction may need to take place.

DO take your cat to the vet and/or consult a cat behaviour specialist if their aggressive behaviour continues and you can’t resolve it. They will be able to give you some guidance on how to tackle the issue with management strategies and possibly medication.





Excessive Meowing or Yowling

Some cat breeds are known to be ‘chattier’ than others, particularly the Siamese and Orientals, so if your cat is one of these, you may just have to get used to a genetically predisposed talkative feline friend.

If the meowing suddenly happens for no apparent reason, there may be a medical issue involved, so a check-up at the vet is recommended.

Those two things aside, cats generally meow at their owners in the pursuit of something – attention and food being the most common requests. This generally isn’t something they are born with – it’s what is called a ‘learned behaviour’. They have learned that repeated meowing will get them what they want. If you give in, you are reinforcing that behaviour.

The solution?

You will need to have an iron will so that you can completely ignore the meows and teach them meowing does not get them what they want. They will be persistent – never underestimate their perseverance – and you will need to be equally persistent. At the same time, reward them when they are quiet with some special treats – this will reinforce the quiet behaviour. This works particularly well if you can pinpoint when they usually start vocalising and reward them for not starting.

It’s also a good idea to consider the age of the cat when it comes to vocalising at night. Young cats may meow for attention at night if they are not tired. Make sure they are sufficiently stimulated and tired out through things such as routine playtime before bed, and leave some puzzle feeders out to keep them busy. Older cats may vocalise if they become disoriented at night, so leave a light on for them.

Other considerations:

If you're trying to transition your cat from being an indoor/outdoor cat to 100% indoors – firstly, well done – you've made a great choice for your cat's health. Secondly, this is a big transition for your cat, so they may meow at the doors and windows as they don't yet understand why they can't explore the great outdoors. If your cat is used to going outside, remember that transitioning your cat indoors will need to be a gradual process as your cat adjusts to this new lifestyle.

Yowling during mating season can become very annoying and persistent. Your best cure for this is to have your cat desexed. Not only will this stop your cat from going in heat and trying to find other cats to mate with, but there are also many health benefits to desexing your cat.





Counter Surfing

Another common behavioural issue is cats being on counter tops, particularly in the kitchen. Having cats walking over surfaces we prepare food on is not hygienic, and if they steal food it can be frustrating – and possibly dangerous due to the potential hazards of burns, scalds and possible poisoning.

Follow these tips to help your cat learn that counter tops are not so appealing:

When not in use, keep counter tops clean and clear of food items. If you constantly leave food out uncovered and unsupervised, what curious cat isn't going to want to jump up and assess the offerings? Once they consistently see that there's nothing on offer up there, they will most likely lose interest.

Curious cats often just want to see what's happening up on the counter, so place a cat tree or raised resting space near the kitchen where they can watch from a distance. Encourage them to use this perch when you're preparing food in the kitchen by giving them tasty treats for staying put.

DON'T punish them for getting on the counter with spray bottles or the like. These are not effective for teaching cats and can ruin your relationship. Reward them for what you want them to do instead.

DO wipe benches down prior to preparing food and, if you leave food unattended, make sure it is well covered and cat-proof.





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Credits:

Thanks to Andrea Carne (Cattitude – Cat Behaviour Consultant)
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