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Your Cats Are Not Getting Along... Now What?

Cats can live together peacefully if their individual needs are met, but they can also be selective when it comes to which cats they will tolerate. Tension or conflict among cats, or intercat tension or conflict, is a common behavioral issue, with nearly half of multicat homes reporting conflict within the home.^{1,2} Although intercat conflict can certainly make for a tense home life, cat owners can take steps to reduce tension among housemates.

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What Does Intercat Tension Look Like?

You likely have a classic image in your mind of cats getting into a hissing and scratching match. Although intercat conflict can certainly manifest in an all-out brawl between cats, it can also be more subtle. Signs of tension among cats can include:

- Fighting (ie, biting and/or scratching)
- Hissing, growling, and/or spitting
- Swatting
- Body language changes, including arching the back and pinning the ears
- Blocking access to resources like food bowls, beds, and/or litter boxes
- Displacing one another (eg, one cat forcing another out of a bed)
- Freezing and giving each other hard stares
- Chasing one another

In some cases, tension may escalate from subtle signs such as stiffening while giving each other a hard stare into an actual fight, potentially leading to injuries that may require veterinary attention.

So, What Can You Do?

Your veterinary team can help you make a plan to address intercat conflict in your household. It may take a little experimentation to find what works best for the individual cats in your household. The best approach typically incorporates multiple tactics.

Rule Out Medical Conditions

Some medical conditions like hyperthyroidism can lead to increased behaviors that could be interpreted as aggressive. It is important to rule out and treat any medical conditions before focusing on behavioral interventions.² Spaying/neutering your cats is also a key component that can help reduce fighting behaviors among cats.

Provide Sufficient Resources

Each cat should have their own food and water bowls, and there should be ample opportunities for all cats to rest or hide as needed. In addition, providing enrichment opportunities such as scratchers, toys, and cat trees can help cats feel safe and stay entertained. If there is a coveted spot that the cats tend to fight over, try to provide similar opportunities elsewhere in the home.

It is usually best to have at least 1 more litter box than the number of cats in the home. For example, if there are 2 cats in your home, having 3 litter boxes would be the ideal scenario. You can also reduce conflict by having boxes in different rooms or on different levels of the house.

Try a Pheromone Regimen

Plug-in diffusers with feline-appeasing pheromone can help reduce signs of tension.^{3,4} Feline-appeasing pheromone is a synthetic version of the pheromone that lactating mother cats produce to calm their kittens and creates a sense of security. Both Feliway® MultiCat and Feliway® Optimum can help reduce chasing, staring, obstruction of resources, and conflicts. Diffusers should be placed in the rooms in which your cats spend

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most of their time. A reduction in signs of tension may begin to appear within the first 7 days.

Feliway products can also help mitigate other undesirable behaviors such as fearful hiding and stress when faced with changes and/or travel.

Separate & Then Reintroduce Your Cats

Consider separating cats that are exhibiting signs of tension and then slowly reintroducing them to each other. Toys or blankets can be exchanged between the rooms so the cats can familiarize themselves with the scent of the other. Cats should be rewarded with treats or quiet praise for remaining calm while taking in the other cat's scent. Once they tolerate the other's scents in their spaces, the cats can be allowed to sniff each other under a door or through a baby gate to see how they respond. Reintroduction should be done slowly and the cats rewarded each time they display calm behavior. Slowly move them closer over time as their tolerance builds.

Try Medications

If intercat conflict continues despite trying these suggestions, your veterinarian may recommend antianxiety or antidepressant medications such as amitriptyline, fluoxetine, or clomipramine.

Conclusion

The best way to resolve intercat tension is to avoid it in the first place. If you are looking to introduce a new cat into the home, ask your veterinarian for advice. In most situations, conflict can be avoided by properly introducing new cats to each other in an appropriate, stepwise manner, but the above suggestions can help greatly improve tension among cats that already share a space. For help implementing these or other suggestions regarding intercat conflict, reach out to your veterinary team.

References

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