



# Cat behaviour problems

# Contents

## Managing behavioural problems

- Signs of pain and stress
- Nervous cats
- Aggressive cats
- House soiling
- Scratching

## Key points

- Cats generally don't need other cats as friends
- They are not being naughty
- Stress, pain and fear are often the cause of unwanted behaviour
- Adjust the home environment so your cat will be able to express their natural behaviour
- When stressed, it's really important for cats to be able to run away, hide and get up high
- Cats don't like to share resources and need one of everything per cat plus one extra
- If you have concerns about your cat's behaviour always start with a check up with your vet, who may refer you on to a qualified behaviourist (a member of the Animal Behaviour and Training Council (ABTC))
- For guests and hosts of cats undergoing home isolation always contact your authorised veterinarian to discuss any behavioural concerns you might have

If your cat starts to do something that is out of character, the first thing you should always do is book them in for a health check with your vet to rule out any medical problems that could cause this behaviour. Medical disorders are very common causes of behavioural issues, even if the link is not immediately apparent. Always discuss the cat's behaviour and all your observations and concerns with the vet.

**Important information for hosts and guests of cats undergoing home isolation:** The Animal Plant and Health Agency (APHA) have provided guidance on behaviour changes to look out for that may indicate infection with rabies. Guests will have some understanding of what is normal and abnormal for their cat but the experience of travelling to the UK and living in a new household may cause their cats to behave differently. If your cat shows signs of unusual aggression, fear, friendliness, drooling, light and sound hypersensitivity call for official veterinary advice immediately. If you are unable to get in contact with the authorised veterinarian, please contact APHA via the Defra Rural Services Helpline on 03000 200 301. Provide the official vet or APHA with information about the cat, and any animals or people who have been in contact with them. It is important that the APHA are advised that the cat has come from Ukraine and is currently in home isolation. APHA will make an assessment of the situation and give guidance from there.

# They are not being naughty

We want you and your cat to feel safe and at home as soon as possible. During the settling in period your cat may find things a little strange and unsettling. If this happens they may start to behave in ways that are upsetting for you or your hosts. It is important to remember that cats which are nervous, aggressive or act in ways we consider to be inappropriate – such as spraying indoors – behave that way for a reason. These ‘unwanted behaviours’ are usually signs that something – from the cat’s perspective, at least – is very wrong. Punishing your cat will only make matters worse. It often helps to consider the cat’s normal behaviour, needs and motivations. Understanding why they do what they do is the first step to being able to solve the problem. Often a few simple changes to the home environment is all that is needed.

## Signs of pain

Cats are very subtle when it comes to showing pain and they will do their best to hide it. For example, if a cat hurts their leg they may be more likely to change their behaviour (eg hiding more, eating less) than they are to limp. There are many different medical problems that cause discomfort and pain. Keep a close eye on your cat and if you notice any change in their behaviour, such as aggression or hiding away, take them to the vets for a health check to rule out pain as the cause of the behaviour. Treating pain can really improve their quality of life.

Signs of pain include:

- becoming more withdrawn or hiding more than usual
- sleeping more than usual, especially in one place, or slowing down
- becoming less tolerant of people, or being handled
- aggressive behaviour
- hesitating or becoming more reluctant to jump up or down from furniture etc
- being stiff after resting, or showing a preference for using a particular leg when going up and down stairs
- crouching in a hunched up position with squinty eyes
- playing less, or reduced interaction with an owner
- reduced eating or drinking
- increased anxiety or fear
- sleep disturbance
- pacing, circling or restlessness
- a scruffy or matted coat, particularly in hard to reach areas
- vocalisation, especially when moving or using the litter tray
- not using the litter tray

- overgrooming
- some cats will purr when in pain

## Signs of stress

Stress as an immediate response to a threat is normal and healthy as it enables the cat’s ‘flight or fight’ response and allows them to get away quickly. However, ongoing stress, especially from something they cannot run or hide from, can be harmful for your cat’s wellbeing. Just as they can hide their pain, cats will show very subtle signs when stressed, which can be difficult to spot.

Common sources of stress include moving house or a change in routine – eg redecorating or getting new furniture. It can also occur if the litter tray and food bowls are in unsuitable locations, or there aren’t enough. Unfamiliar people visiting the house and the introduction of a new pet, baby, child or partner may trigger stress. A cat may be bullied or intimidated by neighbouring cats or even the other resident cats they live with; indoor cats may be stared at by cats outside through glass windows and doors.

Signs to look out for include:

- becoming more withdrawn or hiding more than usual
- appear to be sleeping more, some cats will actually pretend to be asleep while trying to monitor the cause of the stress
- becoming less tolerant around people or being handled
- hesitating or becoming more reluctant to use important resources eg windowsills, furniture or your lap, or using the litter tray
- crouching in a hunched-up position with squinty eyes, some cats will cringe away from you if you try to approach
- a reduction in play behaviour and interaction with owners
- eating or drinking less
- over-eating
- increased anxiety or fear
- sleep disturbance
- pacing, circling or restlessness
- a scruffy or matted coat
- house soiling
- overgrooming

Many of the signs listed for pain and stress could also be due to many other medical conditions or behavioural problems. Always see your vet if you notice any changes in your cat.

## For more information on recognising stress in your cat watch our YouTube video

- Recognising stress in your cat  
[bit.ly/YouTube-CP-stress-cat](https://bit.ly/YouTube-CP-stress-cat)



## Shy, nervous or timid cats

While most cats settle into new homes well, some remain fearful despite a gentle welcome and time to settle in. Don't be too disappointed if your shy or timid cat tries to run away and hide from you. Showing patience and sensitivity will go a long way to ensure that you have a happy and extremely rewarding relationship with your cat.

### Why is my cat so timid?

Timid behaviour could be due to:

- genetics – an inherited tendency. Some cats are naturally more anxious than others
- poor socialisation – a lack of contact with humans, particularly during their first eight weeks of life. If young kittens are not properly socialised with people, they will be frightened or stressed by human contact
- bad experiences – a previous frightening experience that has made the cat fearful

### What are the signs of shyness, nervousness or timidity?

As cats cannot tell us how they feel, it can be difficult to recognise that your cat wants you to move away. The obvious signs of fear include running away and retreating to hiding places. However a scared cat will also show dilated pupils and/or flattened ears and will cringe and cower from you.

Fear can develop into aggressive behaviour where your cat adopts 'fight' as a tactic instead of 'flight' as a last resort. Usually aggression develops because the cat feels cornered or trapped, or because they have previously learned that flight is unsuccessful. Avoid putting your cat into this situation and ensure they can always get away easily if they want to.

## Managing shy cats

As long as your cat had some positive contact with people when they were a young kitten, there are a number of things you can do to make your timid cat feel more secure. With patience, and by taking things slowly, your cat will learn not to be afraid.

It helps to:

- provide plenty of hiding places for your cat around the house. Cats de-stress quicker if they can hide, preferably in high and dark locations eg behind sofas and under beds. A cardboard box on its side or blankets placed on shelves or wardrobes can help your cat feel safe
- be vigilant to make sure your cat is not being intimidated by other cats through the windows, conservatory or patio doors
- keep all your daily routines consistent where possible. This provides a predictable, reassuring environment for your cat
- use synthetic scent pheromones such as FELIWAY® – these can create a reassuring environment for the cat and may help to reduce stress – they are available from your vet
- sit quietly in your cat's vicinity to allow them to come to you in their own time. Ignore them while you read a book or take a nap so that they don't feel pressurised or anxious about your presence. Do it while they are eating or provide a small treat so they associate your presence with something positive. The time you spend near them can very gradually be built up as they adjust
- let your cat make the first move – direct approaches are extremely threatening so don't force attention on your cat
- blink slowly at your cat, narrow your eyes so they are half open and then turn your face away slowly to reassure your cat that you are not a threat

## As your cat becomes braver, try:

- talking to your cat quietly in a calming tone – it is a great way to bond
- rewarding your cat with a treat when they approach you – at first, give the treat as soon as your cat approaches but gradually increase the time between the approach and the treat. Over a period of weeks, work up to being able to calmly stroke your cat once or twice before giving the treat
- using small toys you can gently throw for them, such as a ball of foil, scrunched up paper or ping pong ball. Fishing rod toys allow the cat to interact without them feeling threatened by close contact

Most importantly, never lose your temper or try to force your cat to interact too quickly as this will just reinforce their previous fears. Build on your successes gradually – eventually your cat will learn to trust you and will be much happier. If you don't feel you are making progress, you may find guidance from your vet or a suitably qualified behaviourist useful.

Overcoming a cat's shyness through patient handling and care often leads to an extremely rewarding and close relationship between owner and cat and is well worth the extra time and effort. **Listen to more about shy cats:**

### **Shy cats | How to help a scared cat**

[bit.ly/YouTube-CP-hiding](https://bit.ly/YouTube-CP-hiding)

## Aggressive cats

Cats are rarely aggressive towards humans but like all of us, they do have their limits. There are many different reasons for aggressive behaviour and sometimes it can be a combination of causes. Here are just a few examples:

**Defensive/fear aggression** – your cat will usually run from a perceived threat but may defend themselves if they can't escape or have previously learned that fleeing is unsuccessful.

**Play and petting aggression** – cats generally prefer to have short but frequent interactions, this is normal for cats. In contrast, people tend to interact less often but with more intensity. This can be a bit much for some cats and many have a limit when it comes to petting or stroking.

**Territorial aggression** – usually occurs when two cats meet on disputed ground, or when one cat is passing through another cat's territory.

**Pain-induced aggression** – a cat suffering from pain will have drastically reduced tolerance levels and this is a very common reason for aggression.

Cats may be more inclined to show aggressive behaviour if they are:

- kept indoors without stimulation, access to essential resources or an outlet for their hunting instinct
- young
- misunderstood by their owner
- not neutered

If your cat is aggressive, particularly if this aggression started recently, seek advice from your vet immediately. If there is no medical reason causing the aggression, then ask your vet for a referral to a suitably qualified behaviourist.

If you have any bites or scratches that break the skin, then clean the wound carefully and seek medical attention.

## For more information, check out our YouTube video

- Why does my cat attack my hand?  
[bit.ly/YouTube-CP-attack-in-play](https://bit.ly/YouTube-CP-attack-in-play)

## Spraying and house soiling

**Spraying** – it is normal behaviour for both male and female cats to sometimes spray short bursts of urine on vertical objects outside to mark their territory and leave information for themselves or other cats to 'read'. However, if your cat starts to spray inside the home, then it is almost certainly a sign that all is not right in their world.

You will know if your cat is spraying because urine spraying is a completely different behaviour from normal toileting. When a cat goes to the toilet to rid the body of waste products, they will generally urinate from a squatting position and usually produce a large puddle of urine in a private or secluded area. In contrast, when they spray, they will back up to a vertical surface in an open location and squirt a spray of urine from a standing position – sometimes while paddling with the back legs and quivering the tail.

## Why does my cat spray urine?

Urine spraying is a normal part of scent marking behaviour. Cats use scent to identify different areas in their territory – this provides them with a 'scent map' of their environment as they move around. For example, cats tend to rub their cheeks in the 'core' part of their territory where they feel safe and relaxed. In contrast, they use urine spray to mark areas of their territory where they feel threatened. It is thought that the scent deposited acts as a 'reminder to self' for the cat to be wary in that part of their territory. When the smell begins to fade, the cat will re-spray to top it up.

## Why is my cat spraying urine indoors?

Cats may spray indoors when they are:

- ill
- stressed by a perceived threat
- stressed by changes in the household eg new baby or building work
- threatened by other cats coming into the household, or by cats in the surrounding neighbourhood – this is the most common reason

Often there is a combination of factors that have led to the development of urine spraying. In some cases, the behaviour can start for one reason and develop or change due to other causes. For example, many owners punish their cat for spraying in the house – this tends to make the cat more anxious and more likely to spray. The best thing you can do is identify what is worrying your cat and address it.

## What can I do if my cat sprays indoors?

If your cat has suddenly started spraying indoors, you should take your cat to have a health check with your vet to ensure there is no underlying medical cause for the behaviour. If the vet deems your cat is healthy, the next stage is to find out what the cat finds threatening and then take action to stop it. This process can be quite complicated, as there are often many factors involved. It is best to ask your vet to refer you to a suitably qualified behaviourist.

Sometimes, spraying can be more easily linked to a specific change in the environment. For example, the addition of a new cat to the household can threaten resident cats and induce spraying. Clues about why your cat has started spraying can be ascertained from the location of the marks, because these will be left specifically where they feel anxious.

Cats may spray on internal doorways and in hallways if this is where they come into close contact with other cats in the household. To overcome this, you can help to prevent conflict and create a sense of security by providing extra litter trays, bowls and places for your cats to sleep, play and scratch – reducing the need for competition. If your cats have to walk past each other because of the layout of your house, you can put up shelving or arrange furniture so they can pass each other at different levels, without direct contact.

## What can I do if my cat sprays on doors and windows?

If your cat is spraying on the cat flap, external doors or windows then it is usually because something outside is worrying them – for example other cats they can see through windows. In this case, making the inside environment feel more secure for them is often helpful. Covering the windows at cat height with a material they can't see through to

restrict their view of other cats outside may help. You could also try to discourage the neighbouring cats from entering the garden, see humane deterrents for ideas.

Visit [www.cats.org.uk/keeping-cats-out](http://www.cats.org.uk/keeping-cats-out)

## For more information on spraying watch this YouTube video:

- Why does my cat spray? [bit.ly/YouTube-CP-spraying](https://bit.ly/YouTube-CP-spraying)

## The importance of scent

Redecorating, changing furniture or moving house removes familiar smells that comfort your cat. To prevent your cat from becoming anxious at unfamiliar scents, it is a good idea to introduce them to a new environment or house gradually, read more about this in the 'Cat introductions' leaflet on [www.cats.org.uk/Ukrainian-leaflets](http://www.cats.org.uk/Ukrainian-leaflets)

## Inappropriate toileting

Inappropriate toileting is different to spraying behaviour and can occur for completely different reasons. If your cat is toileting away from the litter tray, there are many different reasons. Always get your cat vet checked before considering any behavioural interventions, as it is very important to rule out medical reasons for the behaviour. Below are some general guidelines that may help, but if you have all these measures in place and the problem persists, it is worth getting a referral to a qualified behaviourist to help identify the causes.

## Privacy

Toileting is a very vulnerable activity for cats and they will try to choose a quiet, private location for this. If your cat is upset by an incident near to their litter tray, they may instead find a quiet corner indoors to pass their waste. If the tray is positioned in the open where it may be disturbed, the cat may feel too vulnerable to use it and will seek a safer spot instead. A tray may not be used if it is placed next to a noisy washing machine. Remember that cats like to toilet away from where they eat and drink. When placing litter trays, put them in quiet, private areas that are away from busy walkways.

## Litter tray

There are many different types of litter trays available to suit your cat's needs. As a kitten grows up, they will need a larger, adult-sized tray with enough space to manoeuvre. An elderly cat requires a tray with low sides so they can get in and out more easily. Nervous cats may prefer the privacy of hooded litter trays. Each cat is an individual and what might work for one cat, won't necessarily work for another.

Generally, provide one litter tray per cat, plus an extra one. If you are experiencing litter tray problems, you may need to add a few extra trays to this rule. Place the trays in a variety of different locations around the home, both upstairs and downstairs if possible, as opposed to placing them next to each other in a row.

## Litter

Cats often prefer the litter type they used as a kitten. Many cats prefer fine, heavy, sand-like litter, which is similar to the sand African wildcats would have used. This feels soft under their paws and enables them to have a good dig. Avoid scented cat litter, cats have a very sensitive sense of smell and this may put them off using the tray. Provide 3cm of litter as this generally seems to be the preferred depth for cats – not too shallow so they can have a good dig in it, but equally they don't like it too deep either.

## Cleanliness

Cats are renowned for their clean nature so they will not use a dirty litter tray. Remove any deposits once or twice a day and completely clean out the tray once a week. Some cats prefer the deposits to be removed before they will use the tray again, while others prefer one tray for urinating and another for defecating. Hooded litter trays need to be kept extra clean as they can hold the smell inside and be overpowering for your cat's keen sense of smell!

## Never punish for spraying or inappropriate toileting

Although urine spraying or inappropriate toileting can be an unpleasant and distressing problem, you should never punish your cat, eg by shouting at the cat. They are spraying because they feel anxious – punishing them will only make them more likely to spray due to stress. The best thing you can do is to identify what is worrying your cat and address this, starting with a visit to your vet for a health check.

## How do I clean urine from affected areas?

Once a cat has sprayed, if the area is not cleaned appropriately, their sensitive nose will draw them back to spray the same area again, to top up the faded scent. Many household cleaning products contain ammonia which is also found in cat urine, so using these can make the problem worse.

A cheap and efficient cleaning method is to wash soiled sites thoroughly with warm water and a little biological washing powder and then rinse with clean water and allow the area to dry. If the surface is suitable, surgical spirit can be applied after cleaning to remove all lingering traces of urine. It is worth doing a small patch test first to ensure this will not cause any damage.

Carpet is extremely absorbent, and urine often soaks into the underlay and the flooring underneath. If the area is badly soiled over a long period it may be necessary to cut out the section of carpet and underlay and treat the concrete or floorboards underneath before replacing.

## For more information, check out our YouTube videos

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- Why does my cat wee outside the tray?  
[bit.ly/YouTube-CP-not-use-litter-tray](https://bit.ly/YouTube-CP-not-use-litter-tray)

## Scratching

Scratching is a normal behaviour. Cats scratch for two reasons; to keep their claws in good condition and as a communication signal. Scent glands in between the pads of the paws produce a unique smell, which is deposited on the surface that the claws are dragged down. This scent, combined with the visual signal of the scratch marks and discarded claw husks, leaves a reminder signal for the cat and a message for other felines in the area.

## Why is my cat scratching indoors?

Because your cat will have no access to the outdoors, they will have to maintain good claw condition inside the house. They will find one or two suitable scratching sites and continue to use them, whether this is a cat scratching post or the back of your sofa!

If your cat has had to spend their quarantine period in one room due to your host family having a cat, once they are given access to the whole house you may find that your cat starts to scratch throughout the house. This may include areas of conflict like doorways and windows. If this happens it is likely that your cat is scratching for communication reasons and feels insecure in these areas. Just like spraying, the most common reason for scratching indoors is the presence of another cat.

The reason for cats to show this behaviour can change over time. If your cat enjoys attention, they might learn that whenever they scratch the furniture you interact with them, so they will carry on scratching.

## What can I do if my cat scratches the furniture?

If your cat is scratching furniture or wallpaper to maintain their claws you could:

- protect the scratched item by covering with thick, shiny plastic sheeting as this is unappealing to cats
- at the same time, obtain a suitable scratching post and put it next to the area where they scratch



- choose a scratching post with a heavy base so it doesn't topple over or wobble when in use. It should be tall enough to allow your cat to scratch at full stretch – ensure it has a vertical weave to let them drag their claws downwards
- some cats prefer to scratch horizontally (eg cats that scratch carpets or stairs) or diagonally so provide a scratching mat to meet these needs
- once your cat is consistently using the new post, you can gradually move it to a more convenient location if you wish and then remove the plastic sheeting from the furniture or wallpaper
- cats often like to scratch and stretch after they wake up, so you could try placing the scratch post near your cat's bed

Each cat in a household should have a scratching post – positioned in different locations to prevent conflict. Some posts are impregnated with catnip, or you could try rubbing catnip on the scratch post to entice them – placing pieces of food on the post may also help. Playing with your cat little and often throughout the day and providing toys may help redirect their energy away from scratching.

### Scratching to mark territory

If your cat is scratching furniture as a marking behaviour, then try to identify what is worrying the cat in this part of their territory and remedy it – see spraying section above. Follow the advice already given and cover the scratched areas with a protective material and place a scratching post next to them. Don't just provide them with another scratching surface without attending to their feelings of insecurity. You may need guidance from a suitably qualified behaviourist to help identify the cause of their anxiety.

### For more information on scratching watch our YouTube video

Why does my cat scratch the furniture? [binged.it/3Rywb8J](https://binged.it/3Rywb8J)

### Importance of praise

It is important to remember that cats do not scratch just to be naughty. It is a natural behaviour they should be allowed to exhibit. Shouting when your cat scratches your furniture can lead to an increase in frequency as they become more anxious, or learn that scratching can be used for attention seeking. Cats quickly learn that unwanted clawing gets a reaction, but clawing a scratching post doesn't. Make sure you praise your cat when they claw the scratching post and try not to react if they scratch the furniture.

### What is pheromone therapy?

Cats deposit pheromones (which are chemical signals of communication to themselves or other cats) from glands on their faces when rubbing objects such as the corners of walls or furniture. They leave behind different messages, one of these facial pheromones tells the cat that they are in an area they recognise and are safe. Cats regularly re-mark with these pheromones as they go around their home. You can buy a synthetic version of this facial pheromone – FELIWAY® – to help your cat during times of stress. FELIWAY® provides ongoing support and comfort to cats reassuring them and marking the area as safe and secure. It is available from your vet or from the Cats Protection online pet shop – see [www.catsprotectionshop.co.uk](http://www.catsprotectionshop.co.uk) It is available as a plug-in diffuser, which lasts up to four weeks, continuously releasing the comforting pheromone into the local environment, and a spray, that can be used around the home or when travelling, lasting up to 24 hours. Alternatively, you can try using a clean cotton cloth or glove to gently rub on your cat's cheeks to collect the pheromone – and then rub this around on surfaces at cat height, such as onto new furniture, so that it smells familiar. Remember that the pheromone will need to be topped up regularly, until your cat either rubs their cheeks on the item or shows relaxed behaviour. FELIWAY® can be a great support tool for helping stressed cats, however it is always recommended to rule out medical conditions first with your vet and it is important that the reason for your cat's anxiety is also identified and dealt with.

### Help with problem behaviour

The advice given in this leaflet is aimed at encouraging positive behaviours and helping with some behavioural issues. However, it is not individually tailored to a specific cat and the development of behaviours in each cat is unique. The cause of a problem can sometimes be difficult to identify, particularly if it is complex or there are several contributing factors.

If your cat has a behavioural problem, it is recommended to discuss the problem with your vet who can refer you to a suitably qualified behaviourist, such as a member of the Animal Behaviour and Training Council ([www.abtc.org.uk](http://www.abtc.org.uk)). Seek help sooner rather than later as it can be more difficult to rectify long-standing issues. Luckily many problems can be resolved, allowing you to enjoy positive companionship with your cat once more.



For more information, please visit  
[www.cats.org.uk](http://www.cats.org.uk)