

## Cats: Biting and Scratching

By Susan Carney

Does your cat play too rough, bite during play or lay in wait and attack your ankles as you walk by?

Studies carried out by the University of Pennsylvania and the Animal Medical Center in NYC indicate that the **primary trigger** for these roughhouse antics is routinely leaving a cat alone for extended periods of time with no opportunity for interaction and feedback.

If you live with a cat and are away from home all day (i.e. at work) chances are your cat will sleep most of the day. You come home tired and your cat is getting up and looking for something to do. Remember, cats that spend time outside sleep a lot too but they often get more activity and play through the hunting and stalking they do with small animals and birds. The best remedy for this is to redirect the play/aggression to something other than you and then get the cat to play with these objects when you are not present.

One of the best methods, to encourage play with toys is to use the toys when you are home. Leave your scent on the toy by rubbing it between your palms. Tie it to a string and drag it or throw it and let the cat chase, stalk or fetch it. Many times when a toy is pleasantly associated with you and the good times you shared with your cat, it will also become the focus of attention when you are not home.

### Great toys

Try a toy other than a catnip mouse; something that rolls or dangles. Toys that your cat can bat about and **larger** stuffed catnip toys are good for wrestling with and your cat can “maul” them as if they were hunting. Select the toys carefully and pull off any bells, eyes or ornamentation before you give it to your cat.

Pole toys (similar to a fishing rod with toy tied at the end) allow for distance during play and more jumping and chasing. Distance keeps you safe while still allowing the cat to have fun with you (but not at your expense).

### Biting during petting

If your cat bites when or shortly after being petted, chances are the reason is the same as above. A cat that is alone for an extended period can get over-stimulated and excitable during petting. Also, cats that spend time in a shelter not getting regular petting can quickly become over stimulated in a new home.

Try keeping your petting sessions short and quick. For example pet twice and quickly walk away. Leaving your cat wanting more. Then pet again later in the day. Before you know it, each petting session will end without a bite or scratch and your cat will still be pleased. You can try making your sessions longer and longer after about a week, starting by adding just 5 seconds at a time. Alternatively, pet once and let the cat come to you for more...still keeping the session short and walking away.



If it is a big problem, try petting your cat with a pole toy, wand toy or a feather. That way you are at a slight distance and your hand cannot be bit or scratched.

As your cat resorts to biting less and less you can again extend your petting time by 5, 10 or 15 second.

### **New cat biting and scratching**

Recently introduced cats are usually nervous about touching the first few days or weeks. When bringing a new cat into your home. **Leave it alone!** Handling a new cat in the first few hours can be too much. If you must, offer a pointed finger first. If the cat sniffs and moves in toward you, its ready and you can lightly pet it around the head and shoulders only.

Short frequent petting sessions are key. Do not reach for, or restrain, a cat that is not actively soliciting you; this gesture is perceived as an aggressive move. Watch the cat carefully for signs of intolerance or over-stimulation. Signs are ears back, twitching tail or a “frozen” posture. Stop handling before the cat begins to bite or claw you. Stop petting at once; leave the scene if you have to. Your best reaction to unacceptable behavior is to ignore it by walking away or stopping any attention.

Finally, never dangle your fingers, scuff your feet or wiggle your toes while engaging in play with your cat. Body parts are not toys; if you permit biting/clawing sometimes but not others, you are giving the cat mixed messages.

Consistency and timing are everything in training. This approach will help to minimize and ultimately correct biting and scratching problems while allowing the cat to develop a healthy relationship with you. As always, you can give us a call at 603-772-2921 Ext. 112 for further assistance.

