

# Multi-Cat Household: Introducing a New Cat and Intercat Aggression

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Many cat owners think that the more cats, the merrier. Although many cats may be content together, cats routinely don't accept a newly adopted cat into the household, which results in many of the recently adopted cats being returned to shelters. Intercat aggression in cats that live in the same home is often subtle, but it commonly occurs leading to feline stress and behavior problems. The behavior problems often lead to surrender or euthanasia of a once beloved pet. Even if the cat remains in the home, a decline in the cat's physical and emotional welfare is likely.

Is ownership of multiple cats or introducing a new cat to the home a veterinary responsibility? We joined this profession to help animals, but we have been educated primarily to in the treatment of medical and surgical issues and behavioral concerns are a prominent issue to owners. Fortunately, animal welfare has recently been incorporated into our oaths, and all major veterinary organizations have developed welfare statements to help understand the needs of a species different from our own. Animal welfare means how an animal is coping with the conditions in which it lives. Welfare includes health, comfort, safety, and prevention from unpleasant states such as pain, fear, and distress. It also includes the ability for a species to express innate behaviors. Protecting an animal's welfare means providing for its physical, social, and emotional needs.

We must understand that species to be able to provide for its' welfare. Understanding the cat is essential to help clients make educated decisions about adoption and introduction of a new cat to a household, and as well as the essential needs of each cat in a multi-cat household to prevent stress and resolve many negative welfare issues.

## Understanding the cat

### Cats as solitary hunters

As solitary hunters of multiple small prey each day, cats have protective mechanisms to maintain their physical health and avoid danger. Cats do so by maintaining their familiar territory in which they have a sense control over their physical and social environment.<sup>1</sup> Having a sense of control - even if it is not exerted - reduces stress and increases a sense of safety.<sup>2</sup> It is only if there are sufficient resources that cats may choose to either be with other cats or not.

A change in the household such as the addition of a new cat or an existing cat becoming socially mature can lead to a lack of sense of control and increased fear. Some cats are so frightened that they refuse to pass or come near a "bully" cat, and may avoid litter boxes, eat rapidly, and do other abnormal behaviors because they don't have easy access to the resources they need. This often results in sickness or behavior problems. By understanding the cat's needs and educating clients about them, we can reduce feline stress.

To protect selves, cats possess heightened fear responses in response to fear.<sup>3</sup> If a suspected threat enters their territory (e.g., a new cat), they respond to the confrontation primarily by avoiding or hiding, with fighting occurring only as a last resort.<sup>4</sup> Fear responses are normal feline protective behaviors.

### Cats as communicators

The primary goal of cat communication is to prevent altercations and active fighting with other cats over food and territory.<sup>5</sup> This is done primarily through scent marking of territory and posturing. Fighting only occurs when other means of communication have failed.

### Olfactory communication

Olfactory communication plays an important role in social behavior. It enables hunting cats to communicate remotely by marking a territory as their own with a long-lasting signal.<sup>3</sup> The sebaceous glands located around the lips and chin deposit the cat's scent on objects, other cats, and/or people. The interdigital sebaceous glands leave olfactory signals through scratching, and the perianal area most commonly leaves the scent through spraying, but can also occur with urination and middening (fecal marking). Spraying is usually a normal olfactory communication among cats, although inter-cat conflict in the household can induce spraying.

Unfamiliar scents can frighten and arouse cats. Providing familiar scents such as that of a favorite person can help a cat adapt to new situations. The synthetic feline facial pheromone analog, Feliway<sup>®</sup>, mimics the natural pheromone that is deposited when a cat rubs its face on objects, and has been shown to provide a calming effect in unfamiliar or stressful environments or situations.<sup>6,7,8</sup> The new product, Feliway Multicat, is now available in the US only, and is supposed to be helpful for introducing a new cat and reducing intercat conflict in multicat households.

### Vocal communication

Feline vocalizations are a medium-range communication, and can also protect cats without physical conflict. Most vocalizations bring cats together; the trill and meow are friendly greeting calls. Cats hiss, growl, or shriek as a threat to others to protect themselves and their territory when olfactory communication has not worked to keep cats at a long-range distance from others.

### ***Visual communication***

Cats communicate with a range of subtle body postures, facial expressions, and tail positions to diffuse tension and avoid physical contact with unfamiliar cats. Body postures help us identify a fearful cat from a short-range distance. Facial signals change more quickly than body postures, and provide more immediate indications of a cat's fear and aggression level.<sup>5</sup>

### ***Tactile communication***

Affiliate cats engage in tactile communication (see The Social Cat).

#### **The social cat**

Cats are social animals, but their social structure differs significantly from that of people and dogs. The feline social system is flexible, meaning that cats can live alone or in groups called colonies if there are sufficient resources.<sup>9,10</sup> Females, usually related, live in colonies and collaboratively rear and nurse kittens. Males often have a larger home range or territory and hunt solitarily.

Within the colony, cats will choose preferred associates or affiliates. These cats demonstrate affection towards each other by allorubbing (rubbing against each other) and allogrooming (grooming each other) to maintain the colony odor.<sup>5</sup> Allogrooming occurs preferably on the head and neck. Affiliates also engage in other behaviors that help us recognize that they like each other; these include nose-touching, and sleeping together or partially on top of another. Cats are more likely to allogroom a related cat rather than one that is not related.<sup>9,11</sup> Adopting an already socially bonded pair, such as siblings, is preferable to adopting cats from different social groupings. If it is not possible to adopt related cats, adult cats are more likely to accept kittens than mature cats.<sup>11</sup>

The sensitive period for socialization to humans and other animals is the time during which particular events will most likely have long-term effects on development<sup>12</sup>; for kittens, this is between 2 and 7 weeks of age (much earlier than it is for puppies, which is between 7-14 weeks of age). If kittens have positive experiences with other kittens and cats during this period, they are more likely to accept other cats later in life.

Colony members do not welcome unfamiliar cats into their colony, and usually show aggression toward these strangers. If these unfamiliar cats continue to come around the colony and become familiar, they may gradually be integrated into the colony. This gradual process of increasing familiarity should occur when we introduce a new kitten or cat into a household with already existing cat(s). Educate clients about cats needing to feel safe and with a sense of control in the environment, and that the cats may never become affiliates.

#### **The territorial cat and needed resources**

In the wild, cats reduce potential fights by dispersing or avoiding each other.<sup>1</sup> This is often not possible in the multi-cat household. Inter-cat conflict and behavior problems often occur because household cats don't have multiple resources in multiple places, and therefore cannot avoid the other cat(s).

Hiding is a coping behavior that cats may display in response to stimuli or changes in their environment. It is commonly seen in stressful situations and when cats want to avoid interactions with other cats or people.<sup>13</sup> In a study of 60 pairs of neutered, indoor-only cats, cats spent approximately 48-50% of their time out of each other's sight.<sup>1</sup>

Just because cats come together for feeding or to sleep on the same bed, it doesn't mean that they like each other or that stress isn't occurring in the feline household; in many households, cats come together because the primary resources are placed in one location. Cats are more likely to rest or sleep alone<sup>5</sup>; multiple comfortable resting areas should be provided.

Multiple resources with easy access, and out of view of other resources must occur. This includes hiding places and use of vertical space to allow cats to be apart if they so choose. Vertical space increases overall space and provides for the cat to oversee the environment. Litter boxes, food, and water stations that are placed in different locations so that individual cats don't need to see each other reduces competition for resources, bullying, and stress.<sup>12</sup> Serious consideration should be taken before adopting a new cat if cats already exist in the home. Clients should be educated to let cats choose their own affiliates, and be made aware that the greater number of cats in a household, the greater the chance of behavior problems.

#### **Introducing a new cat**

Most owners introduce cats by putting them together right away. Although some cats adapt quite readily, the majority have a more difficult time. How cats are introduced can make a tremendous difference in the stress of all the household cats, and making the new cat feel comfortable.

There are several different suggested methods for how to introduce a cat, but the most important principles are the following:

- The owner(s) must have patience and make introductions very gradually
- Increase familiarity
- Provide a sense of control
- Multiple resources, and each resource in multiple places
- Reward the positive
- If a problem occurs at any time, start over

The speaker's preferred method: Prior to bringing home the new cat, set up a separate room so that the new cat can have its own safe space with all resources. Add synthetic feline pheromone analog to all cat areas, including both the new cat's space and that of the other cats. Ensure that the rest of the home has all the resources needed and that each of these resources is found in multiple places.

Confine the new cat into the separate room so that the other cats can first become familiar with its scents and sounds. Spend quality time with the newcomer, but also with all the other cats. Provide safe hiding places for the new cat in its space so that it can hide if desired; this is an important coping strategy for a cat.

Once cats are comfortable with the scents and sounds – usually days to weeks – start to play and feed the most enticing food on each side of the door. Calm and curious behavior should be rewarded with special treats. Encourage them to paw at toys under the door.

Bedding or a towel with the scent can be swapped to see how the cats react. If things are going well, open the door a crack so that cats can see each other. This can easily be done with rubber door wedges on each side of the door or a hook and eye. It is important to remind clients that patience and time are our friends with introductions. Weeks to months can make a lifetime of difference.

#### **Multi-cat households**

There may be many social groupings in a multi-cat household; in fact, each cat may be its own social group. Many cats do not get along well in multiple cat households, but people often don't recognize the problem because the cats don't fight. The more obvious behavior problems or signs of stress-associated sickness are also often misinterpreted.

People also often misinterpret cats liking each other when they come together to eat or sleep; the behavior may also occur when the primary resources are all in one location. Many cats in multiple cat households learn to avoid, and even "time share", using same resting and other areas, but at different times. By understanding the cat's communications and body postures, we can recognize the subtle signs of the aggression. Providing multiple resources with easy access, and in multiple locations that are out of view of other resources, gives the cat choice and a sense of control. Resources include food, water, toileting, resting, and elevated areas. Vertical space increases overall space and allows the cat to monitor its environment. Litter boxes, food, and water stations that are placed in different locations so that individual cats don't need to see each other reduces competition for resources, bullying, and stress.<sup>12</sup>

#### **Conclusion**

Veterinary professionals who educate cat owners about the social nature of the cat and its need for sufficient resources and space reduce potential behavior problems and feline stress. Cats are fascinating and allowing them to be cats greatly enhances their quality of life and welfare.

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