



Cat Behaviour Guide

Intercat Tension



Cats can form strong bonds with each other, but sometimes they struggle to get along. This can be stressful for pet parents and may harm the cats' relationship. This guide will help you understand what causes tension between cats (intercat tension) and what you can do to help prevent it.

What is Intercat Tension?

Intercat tension happens when one cat shows unfriendly behaviour or doesn't tolerate being around another cat. This may be as subtle as staring at each other or sitting in a doorway to block the other cat, or as serious as scratching or biting each other.

Tension between cats causes fear, anxiety and stress, and may even lead to illness. Stressed cats might hide more, groom themselves too much or stop using the litter box. Some cats may seem shy, timid or even show aggressive behaviour toward people. If the tension isn't solved it might turn into conflict and fighting, even between cats that used to be friends, leading to injuries and expensive vet visits.

Fighting between cats is one of the most common reasons people rehome a cat. If you can spot the early signs of tension, you can take action to prevent it and stop bigger problems before they start.

Signs of intercat tension:	Signs of friendship:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staring (very common) • Chasing/fleeing • Stalking another cat • Hiding • Guarding/blocking resources (food, beds, etc.) • Avoiding each other • Keeping distance or not relaxing when in the same room • Tail twitching • Hissing/growling/yowling • Swatting or biting, pulling out fur or causes injuries • House soiling • Overgrooming (causing bald spots) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grooming each other (usually on the face or head) • Slow blinking • Sleeping close together, facing each other or touching • Friendly greetings (nose touches, relaxed tails) • Approaching each other calmly • Rubbing against each other • Taking turns and pausing when playing; both initiate play • No injuries or fur flying from wrestling



Why Does Intercat Tension Happen?

In free-roaming groups, cats can just leave if they don't get along with other cats. Our housecats don't get to choose who they live with, and they can't go far to escape uncomfortable situations. If two cats don't get along, they might avoid each other or try to push the other cat away. They may feel frustrated, fearful and anxious when they can't get away from each other, especially when they have to share their space or resources like food or beds.

Causes of Tension

Introducing a new cat into the home is one of the most common reasons for intercat tension to start. While it's exciting to add a new furry friend, it's important to remember that many cats are selective about who they live with or may be happiest being the only pet. Even if your cat has been friendly with another cat before, that doesn't mean they will be friendly with *all* cats. They need time to build a relationship with each new cat they meet.

Sharing resources or not having enough resources, like beds, scratching posts, cat trees, food, water, toys, litter boxes and attention from people may cause tension between cats, especially if they don't get along. Cats may become stressed if they feel like they must compete for resources because they don't have enough options to choose from. Changes in the home or daily routines might also increase stress and make tension worse.

Mismatched play styles or poor socialization with other cats might cause tension and conflict. Energetic cats might be too much for less playful cats or older cats who may have health problems like arthritis. Cats that enjoy playing together usually take turns chasing or "winning" at wrestling. Being chased can be very scary if they are not playing, so it's important to prevent it if you see concerning body language or if you hear hissing or growling. If the cats are fighting or chasing each, remain calm while you separate them. Don't run towards them or yell, which can make the situation even more frightening.

Seeing neighbourhood cats outside the house may make them feel scared or protective of their space. They may feel frustrated because they can't reach the outside cats and then show redirected aggression towards the cats they live with. This might hurt their relationships and make it hard for them to feel safe together. If this happens, you might need to separate your cats and slowly introduce them again once they are calm. Watch how your cats act to make sure they feel comfortable during the reintroduction.

Non-recognition aggression happens when one cat doesn't recognize another cat because their scent has changed. Cats rely on their sense of smell for communication and recognizing each other. If a cat smells different, like after a visit to the vet or a groomer, other cats might think they're a stranger and act aggressively toward them.



Cat Behaviour Guide

Intercat Tension



Tip: When your cat comes home from the vet or groomer, give them a quiet room where they can relax and pick up your normal house smell again. Then slowly reintroduce them to the other cats and watch for signs of tension. Read EHS' behaviour guide "Traveling in a Car with Your Cat" for tips to reduce conflict after returning home from trips.

Health issues might cause pain or discomfort, which can make cats feel defensive and less interested in playing or being around other cats. Taking your cats to the vet for regular wellness checks or when you notice changes in their behaviour can help find and treat health issues early, so your cats stay healthy and happy.

What Can You Do to Reduce Tension?

When you bring a new cat home, take your time to introduce them to your other cat(s) slowly and in a positive way so you can monitor for and prevent tension. If your cats experience intercat tension or conflict, it's best to separate them into their own quiet spaces to prevent further harm to their relationship. Reintroduce them slowly, like they are meeting for the first time, to help them live together peacefully. Check out EHS' guide on "Cat to Cat Introductions" to learn more about how to do this.

Letting cats figure things out on their own might make anxiety and aggressive behaviour worse. If your cats can't be together without fighting, separate them to keep them safe while you figure out what to do. The more they fight, the harder it will be for them to be comfortable with each other in the future. Consider talking to your vet and a qualified behaviour professional to create a plan that works for you and your cats.

Cats need these 5 things to feel safe, secure, and comfortable:

Creating a home environment where your cats feel secure is essential for reducing stress and preventing tension.

A Safe Place: Every cat needs a quiet, safe place to rest because even best friends sometimes need time apart. Give your cats lots of hiding spots or vertical space to climb on, like cat trees, shelves or chairs. You can also use tunnels, boxes or furniture to help stop cats from staring at each other and make it easier for a scared cat to hide or escape if another cat is chasing them.

Multiple, Separated Resources: Cats need their food bowls, water dishes, scratching posts, beds and litter boxes spread out around their home so they can use them easily without competing with another cat. It's important to feed cats in different places where they can't see each other because eating together can be stressful, even for cats that get along. Make sure there are enough resources for every cat to choose between different options that they like. For example, if you have two cats, you should have at least three places where they like to rest, like on a cat tree, a bookshelf and a chair.

Daily Playtime: Provide daily play and activities to keep their minds and bodies active. Some cats need more playtime or enjoy different kinds of games. Give each cat opportunities to do natural cat behaviours like chasing, stalking and pouncing.



Cat Behaviour Guide

Intercat Tension



Consistent and Predictable Interactions: Be a calm, safe, and predictable person for your cats. Startling them with loud noises, squirting them with water or chasing them can make their behaviour worse. They might become afraid of you or think your unpredictable behaviour happens because the other cat is nearby. Positive reinforcement training can help you build a stronger bond with your cat. Teaching them to come when called can be used to separate the cats and positively interrupt tension before a fight starts.

Respect Their Senses: Avoid strong smells from things like candles, air fresheners, cleaning products, lotions or perfumes because they can cover up smells that cats use to communicate and mark their territory. Products like *Feliway*, which have synthetic cat pheromones, can help reduce tension. Give your cats a variety of scratching posts near windows, doors and important resources so they can mark their scent by scratching, which helps them feel more secure.

Having an abundance of resources spread out around the house to meet every cat's needs, carefully introducing new cats, paying attention to how they interact with each other and making changes as soon as you notice tension are some of the most important strategies to help keep the peace between cats. By learning the signs of tension between cats and using these tips, you can help your cats live together more peacefully and feel less stressed at home.

Additional Resources:

For more information, look on our website for our cat behaviour guides "Cat to Cat Introductions" and "Aggressive Behaviour in Cats":

www.edmontonhumanesociety.com/education/resources-for-pet-guardians/behaviour-guides Or visit www.catfriendly.com/tension to learn more.

Did You Know?

You can also ask us behavioural questions by emailing:
askthespecialist@edmontonhumanesociety.com