

2024 AAFP INTERCAT TENSION GUIDELINES: RECOGNITION, PREVENTION, AND MANAGEMENT

Intercat tension or conflict between household cats is common, affecting between 62.2% and 87.7% of households with two or more cats. Because most signs are subtle, the term “intercat tension” is used in these Guidelines, and is characterized by poor tolerance of other cats and lack of friendly interactions by at least one cat in the household toward another cat(s). Despite being subtle, these signs impact feline wellbeing and quality of life, as well as increase caregiver burden. Using the recommendations outlined in the Intercat Tension Guidelines, veterinary professionals can offer practical advice for recognizing, preventing, and managing many cases of intercat tension.

IMPACT OF INTERCAT TENSION

- Impaired feline health and wellbeing (25–31% of feline behavior cases are due to intercat tension)
- Stress-associated disease
- Relinquishment, rehoming, or euthanasia

UNDERSTANDING FELINE SOCIAL BEHAVIOR

Cats are not solitary creatures but have flexible and varied social systems. Their social behavior is influenced by genetics, experiences, and environment. Although cats may form close attachments with other cats, these bonds are not essential for survival. Unlike free-ranging cats, household cats do not choose their companions, leading to increased intercat tension.

- Social organization is based on familiarity, age, and affiliations, not hierarchy and dominance.
- Cats can be trained, starting with brief sessions. Use positive rewards such as petting, play, or treats.
- Changes in domestication have led many domestic cats to adapt to life with humans.
- Social interactions can be enriching for some cats, enhancing their sociability with humans and other cats. Socialization to people and new situations may be limited in cats from a feral or street background.



WHEN DOES INTERCAT TENSION START?

- 73.3% with the introduction of a new cat
- 23.6% with gradual changes to a previously positive relationship
- 3.1% with abrupt behavior changes to a previously positive relationship

The space limitations in indoor environments are more likely to lead to intercat tension. Safe outdoor options (e.g., escape-proof fenced yards, outdoor cat enclosures, or walking a cat on harness and leash) provide additional space and enrichment, allowing a cat to perform normal behaviors while distancing from other household cats.

- All cats in a social group should have their needs met. These may differ among individual cats within a social group (e.g., higher play drive over another).
- 'Rough-and-tumble' play can look serious but is still play. Hissing and chasing can end social encounters without harming relationships.
- Kitten socialization is best done between 2–9 weeks of age, although some kittens can be socialized between 3–8 months with gradual sessions.
- Cats are not spiteful; instead, internal and external stressors, including pain, illness, and insufficient or disliked resources can cause fear–anxiety or frustration. The resulting behavior is an expression of the emotions that are triggered by the immediate situation, not directed at the person or other cat(s).

HOW INTERCAT TENSION IMPACTS THE FIVE PILLARS OF A HEALTHY MULTI-CAT ENVIRONMENT

Pillar 1

Provide safe places

Stress around the personal space of one or more cats may occur, with competition for safe places. Provide additional safe spaces at cats' preferred heights, and hiding options (e.g., high-sided cat bed or box) to prevent visibility of other cats.

Pillar 2

Provide multiple and separated key environmental resources

Competition for, or limited access to, resources due to behaviors like staring, blocking, and stalking can occur. Provide multiple and separated key environmental resources (e.g., food, water, safe resting areas, litter boxes) with visual barriers and distance between each.

Pillar 3

Provide opportunity for play and predatory behavior

Possible stress surrounding food preparation, competition for food resources, and different play drives can lead to predatory play. Feed cats separately and provide sufficient play as needed for each cat.

Pillar 4

Provide positive, consistent, and predictable human–cat social interaction

Educate caregivers on feline-preferred human interactions and interactive play. Adopting a new cat can disrupt the current human–cat(s) relationship, potentially leading to competition and tension. Disciplining cats can increase their stressors and effect intercat relations.

Pillar 5

Provide an environment that respects the feline senses

Novel sensory stimuli, such as introducing a new cat or a resident cat returning from a veterinary visit, may increase tension. Synthetic feline pheromones work in conjunction with the (re)introduction process.

RECOGNIZING CATS' RELATIONSHIPS AND SIGNS OF INTERCAT TENSION

AGONISTIC



Signs in Decreasing Order: Staring (44.9% of cases) • Blocking • Chasing • Stalking • Fleeing • Tail twitching • Hissing • Wailing • Screaming.

Other Signs Include: Decrease in normal behaviors due to fear-anxiety, such as decreased activity, appetite, and play.

TOLERATION



Interactions are neither friendly nor unfriendly; cats pass each other or share a preferred resource without affiliative or agonistic behaviors. They may timeshare (e.g., share overlapping territories at different times without interacting).

AFFILIATIVE



Relaxed emotional state, ears pointing forward, closed eyes, allogrooming, touching while sleeping, nose touching, rubbing against each other.

MANAGING AND PREVENTING TENSION IN INTERCAT RELATIONSHIPS

Maximizing harmony in a multi-cat home involves getting the environment right. The environmental needs are critical to prevent intercat tension in multi-cat homes, with key resources dispersed throughout the environment and visual barriers between them.

- Prevent high-play drive cats from bothering timid cats by providing two or more play sessions daily of 5 minutes or longer.
- Prevent staring by using solid furniture as visual barriers and utilizing vertical space.
- Provide daily play sessions with the entire group or each social group separately.

Intercat tension cases should aim to decrease **agonistic** behaviors while promoting the welfare of all cats. Simple measures can resolve some cases, while severe cases may require lengthy treatment or rehoming.

Access the 'Step-by-Step Guide: How to Introduce a New Cat to Other Cats in Your Home' for further information: catvets.com/introduction.

Veterinary professionals should recognize, triage, and offer first-line advice for intercat tension cases, referring clients to a veterinary behaviorist when necessary. Rehoming may be the most humane option if cats cannot live together.

APPLYING THE BEHAVIOR FIRST-AID KIT

- 1 **Veterinary examination** to assess for medical condition and pain; veterinarian-client-patient relationship must be established
- 2 **Assess welfare and injury** (human and feline), and separate cats, as required, to prevent risk of additional injury and/or emotional trauma
- 3 **Review daily routines** and identify possible stressors. Stop things from getting worse!
- 4 **Create safe places**; ensure enough places are freely accessible for each cat
- 5 **Use synthetic feline pheromones** in the environment
- 6 **Ensure extensive implementation** of the five pillars of a healthy multi-cat environment; modify the environment accordingly
- 7 **Discontinue reprimanding** the cat(s) or attempting discipline-based training (e.g., yelling at the cat[s])
- 8 **Ensure cats are separated** at feeding time with visual barriers
- 9 **Evaluate** the need for a behavior modification plan with a board-certified veterinary behaviorist
- 10 **Follow-up** with the caregiver in two weeks to evaluate outcomes

STRATEGIES TO REINTEGRATE CATS

Cats are Separated:

Steps for positive reintroduction sessions when cats are separated due to severe tension.

- 1 Let the cats become comfortable in their separate areas but allow individual times to explore other areas of the home.
- 2 Enhance auditory and olfactory contact (e.g., scent exchange via bedding swaps).
- 3 Supervised visual contact (cats see each other at a distance).
- 4 Supervised physical proximity (cats are close to each other).
- 5 Bring cats together under supervision outside reintroduction sessions.
- 6 Keep the cats together, most of the time initially, and then all the time.

Cats are Not Separated:

Key aspects of group sessions for less severe tension cases that don't require separation.

- Sessions are held in different areas of the house, prioritizing calmer areas first but also considering space and furniture suitability.
- Caregivers begin sessions by scattering a variety of toys, including interactive, self-directed, automatic, and stuffed toys.
- Caregiver(s) should be proactive, interacting with each cat one at a time.
- Encourage non-playing cats to observe from safe places or receive petting/brushing if they like it.
- Sessions end with treats offered to each cat. Cats should never eat in close proximity to each other, including during these sessions.
- Note: Intermittent separation during the treatment steps might be beneficial in some cases.

If intercat tension occurs at any point in the reintroduction process, go back a step. Continuing to take steps forward if tension is present can result in long-term tension.

Access the Intercat Tension Guidelines at catvets.com/tension and cat caregiver resources at catfriendly.com/tension.

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