

## **The Multi-Cat Household: Why can't they all get along?**

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### **Introduction**

Although cats are social animals, the multi-cat household is often a source of feline stress, intercat conflict, and subsequent behavior problems. With most owners having more than one cat,<sup>1,2</sup> it should be a significant consideration in the care of our feline patients. Conflict can be prevented through owner education of feline social behavior, advising about cat adoptions and how to introduce cats, and how to set up the home to provide for the essential needs of each cat. Signs of intercat conflict within the home are often subtle, but recognizing cats that don't like each other is important to develop areas within the home where all cats feel safe.

### **Why don't all cats just get along?**

As solitary hunters and survivors, cats are territorial animals, needing to protect their physical and social environment.<sup>3</sup> They are also 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 (food, space, etc).<sup>4,5</sup> In the wild, females that are usually related live in colonies, and collaboratively nurse and rear kittens. Males often have a larger home range or territory and hunt solitarily.

Cats in the colony do not welcome unfamiliar cats. If a cat continues to come around the colony on a regular basis, it may become familiar and 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).

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>6</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). If kittens have positive experiences with other kittens and cats during this period, they are more likely to accept other cats later in life.

### **How to tell if cats like each other**

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>7</sup> Allogrooming occurs preferably on the head and neck. Affiliates also nose-touch, and sleep together or partially on top of another. Cats are more likely to allogroom a related cat rather than one that is not related.<sup>4,8</sup> Adopting an already socially bonded pair, such as siblings, is preferable to adopting cats from different social groups. If it is not possible to adopt related cats, adult cats are more likely to accept kittens than mature cats.<sup>8</sup>

### **Preventing conflict in cats**

In the wild, cats reduce potential fights by dispersing or avoiding each other.<sup>3</sup> In the multi-cat household however, the territorial cat usually has insufficient and inadequate space. Inter-cat conflict and behavior problems often occur because household cats don't have needed resources in different location so that they can avoid a cat if wanted.<sup>9</sup>

Hiding is a coping behavior that cats display in stressful situations and when cats want to avoid interactions with other cats or people. Even cats that like each other (affiliates) like to spend time by themselves; in a study of 60 pairs of neutered, indoor-only cats, cats spent approximately 50% of their time out of each other's sight.<sup>3</sup>

Just because cats come together to eat or sleep, 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. Examples are feeding the cats in one location and cats preferring to all sleep on the bed. Feeding cats in different parts of the home prevents competition for food – and regurgitation is often resolved too because cats don't feel threatened and don't eat as fast. If provided with good quality resting areas in multiple locations, cats are more likely to rest or sleep alone.<sup>7</sup>

Providing multiple resources with easy access and out of view of other resources increases the cats' sense of control and reduces stress.<sup>9</sup> 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 to prevent cats from seeing each other reduces competition for resources, bullying, and stress.<sup>9</sup>

### **Communication to prevent intercat conflict**

The primary goal of cat communication is to prevent altercations and active fighting with other cats over food and territory.<sup>7</sup> This is done primarily through scent marking of territory and posturing. Fighting only occurs when other means of communication have failed.

Olfactory communication allows cats to communicate remotely by marking their territory with a long-lasting signal.<sup>10</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.

The synthetic feline facial pheromone analog, Feliway, 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>11,12,13</sup> Feliway Multicat is a newer product available in the US only, which is a copy of the pheromone from the intermammary glands and is supposed to help with appeasement in multiple cat households.

Most feline vocal communication is meant to bring cats together or to communicate with people. This is a medium-range communication, and can also protect cats without physical conflict. 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 is also important in cats with body posturing and facial expressions diffusing tension, and is another reason that physical aggression rarely occurs in cats that have lived together for awhile.

Tactile communication usually only occurs when cats like each other (see “How to tell if cats like each other”).

### **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 physically. The more obvious behavior problems or signs of stress-associated sickness are also often misinterpreted.

Many cats in multiple cat households learn to avoid, and even “time share”, using the same resting areas and other resources, but at different times. Unfortunately, some cats never learn to cope effectively; they have decreased activity, are less vocal, and may hide in closets or under beds.<sup>14</sup> These cats may be unable to perform normal cat behaviors and spend wanted time with owners. 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.

Behavior problems occur secondary to intercat conflict, with the most common being marking. Urine, fecal, and scratch marking may occur with increased stress in multicat households.<sup>15</sup>

### **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 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 to educate owners to make introductions very gradually, and ensuring a sense of control for each cat through the provision of multiple resources in different locations. Reward positive and calm behaviors, and isolate cats again if any fear is noted.

The speaker's preferred method of introduction is to set up a separate room before bringing home the new cat so that it has its own safe space with all resources, including safe hiding spaces such as a cardboard box on its side or cat bed. The existing cat(s) should have their preferred area in the home, also with multiple resources in different locations. Add synthetic feline pheromones to all cat areas, including both the new cat's space and that of the other cat(s). Once cats are comfortable with the scents and sounds – usually several 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. It is important to remind clients that patience and time are our friends with introductions. Weeks to months can make a lifetime of difference.

### **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, and

enhance their welfare.

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