

Fear of Strangers in Cats

By Karen Sueda, DVM

Why is my cat fearful of visitors?

Cats may be fearful of visitors for several reasons. A common reason is lack of experience with visitors when they were kittens. If they were not introduced to different people during their socialization period (3–9 weeks of age), they may be more apprehensive of strangers as adults. Additionally, the arrival of visitors is often accompanied by other scary things such as knocking, large packages or suitcases being moved about, loud talking and laughing. Just like people, some cats simply possess more timid or less social personalities or temperaments. Studies have shown that kittens born to fearful fathers are often fearful themselves.



How can I make my cat more comfortable around visitors?

The first step is to provide your cat with a safe area to go to before the strangers arrive. The safe area should be an out-of-the-way location, such as a back room, where the sound of knocking or the doorbell is muffled. In the safe area, your cat does not have to interact with your guests and, consequently, she can feel calm and relaxed there. Before guests arrive, the room should be set up with a comfortable resting area, water and a litterbox, depending on the duration of their stay.

A few minutes before guests arrive, take your cat to the safe room. Once inside, provide her with a special food treat and an interactive or food-dispensing toy to distract her and create positive associations with the presence of strangers in the house. Most cats should remain in the room until the visitors depart.

Next, you'll need to follow a series of behavior modification steps to help your cat become more comfortable around visitors. Besides treats, toys or other rewards for your cat, you will need the help of a friend or relative to act as the stranger coming to visit. The basic idea is that the "stranger" will stand at a distance from your cat, who will be rewarded for remaining calm in the stranger's presence. Over multiple sessions, you will gradually decrease the distance between them until your cat is able to remain completely relaxed sitting next to the stranger.

Here are the steps to follow:

- 1. Find a starting distance.** Begin at the distance at which your cat does not exhibit any sign of anxiety, arousal or aggression toward the stranger. Your cat should appear completely calm and feel safe at this distance. The actual distance will depend on your cat's temperament and the stranger being presented. For example, the starting distance between a very timid cat and a complete stranger may be larger than the starting distance between a bolder cat and a stranger he has met once or twice.

2. **Do the exercises.** Once the stranger has arrived, ask her to either stand or sit, but she should remain motionless while you remove your cat from the safe room. Place your cat at the starting distance away from the stranger. Watch his behavior and body language very closely.
 - If he remains calm and non-anxious, reward his behavior with treats, play, or petting and attention. Continue this exercise for a few minutes, then place your cat back in the safe room while your friend visits. You can perform several short sessions within the span of the visit.
 - If your cat becomes anxious, move him further away from the stranger until he is no longer fearful. At this distance, reward him for calm behavior, and then end the session. During the next session, start again at the distance that is further away from the stranger. When you attempt to decrease the distance, do so in smaller increments.
3. **Decrease the distance.** After several sessions, your cat will become more accustomed to the innocuous presence of the stranger. Decrease the distance between your cat and the stranger by a few inches. You can do this by moving your cat's bowl of food or luring your cat closer with a treat or toy. Again, you must monitor your cat closely for early signs of anxiety. If he remains calm, gradually and incrementally decrease the distance between your cat and the stranger over many sessions. If he becomes anxious, back up and start again at a distance where he's relaxed.
4. **Add other elements.** Once your cat is comfortable eating or playing near the stranger, you can repeat the exercises with different people or you can add in the element of movement. To add in movement, repeat step one, finding a starting distance at which your cat remains calm or distracted by toys or treats. Rather than asking the stranger to remain motionless, however, ask him to pace slowly back and forth or make another type of movement. The starting distance for a moving stranger may not be the same as for a stationary one. Repeat steps two and three. Other movements, such as standing from a seated position or reaching for your cat, can be desensitized in the same manner. Your cat's ability to generalize and display calm behavior toward all strangers will depend on how often you can repeat these exercises and add in different elements.

You need to be aware that behavior modification exercises take time, and progress may be slow. Just remember that your efforts are helping to improve your cat's quality of life. In some cases, anti-anxiety medication may help facilitate behavior modification. If you have questions about the behavior modification exercises or how to apply them to your cat, please consult with your veterinarian or a veterinary behaviorist.

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