

Fear of Visitors

Cats can develop a fear of people they don't know for many reasons. Companion felines have unique personalities, and some are just more outgoing than others. However, if a cat is calm and friendly with his family but afraid of visitors, it's often because he didn't have enough experience meeting new people when he was very young. To be social and comfortable with all kinds of people, a cat must have frequent opportunities to meet numerous new and different people in low-key, pleasant circumstances while still a kitten, especially between the ages of two and seven weeks. Cats who didn't spend much time with people as kittens—for example, former stray cats—might remain skittish around people their entire lives. Even cats who did meet lots of people when young can be afraid of specific kinds of people that they didn't encounter very often, such as children, tall people or men. Having a bad experience with a person can also make a cat fearful around people. This fear might remain specific to the person involved in the bad experience, or it might broaden to include other people as well.

Other Possible Explanations for Your Cat's Behavior

Any sudden change in your cat's behavior might indicate an underlying medical condition. If you notice any unusual physical or behavioral changes, or if your cat stops eating, see your veterinarian right away to rule out medical problems.

How to Resolve the Problem

Prevention is the best medicine. If you have a kitten, give him lots of chances to meet new people of different ages, sizes, shapes, races and genders. Make sure he also interacts with people who look unique for some reason, such as people in wheelchairs, people wearing hats and glasses, and people with beards. Whenever your kitten approaches a new person, reward him with praise, attention, play sessions or treats.

If you have an adult cat who's afraid of people, the main way to help him relax around guests is to encourage him to approach them very gradually and give him lots of rewards along the way. When visitors arrive, try the following:

- Ask guests to let your cat approach them instead of approaching him.
- Ask your guests to squat or sit down so they seem smaller and less intimidating to your cat. Remaining quiet and avoiding direct eye contact will also make guests seem less scary.
- You or someone your cat loves and trusts can offer him treats or encourage him to play, as far away from visitors as necessary to make him comfortable.
- If your cat doesn't want to come out of hiding, try rattling his food bag or opening a can of his food, which might coax him out. You can also try closing doors before visitors arrive so your cat can't hide in another room.
- If your cat can remain calm enough to eat or play at a distance from visitors, gradually entice him to come closer with treats or toys.
- If your cat will come within several feet of visitors, ask your guests to gently toss treats or toys for him.
- Cats have short attention spans. Your cat might prefer to walk away or go hide after just a few minutes. Let him leave and don't feel discouraged. Just try another short session later.
- Anti-anxiety medication might help ease your cat's fear, especially if you have frequent guests or if your cat is particularly fearful. If you're interested in learning more about medications, contact a board-certified veterinary behaviorist or a Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist (CAAB). Please see our article called [Finding Professional Help](#) for information about how to locate one of these professionals in your area. Always consult with your veterinarian or a board-certified veterinary behaviorist before giving your cat any type of medication for a behavior problem.

Additional Tips

- Provide plenty of perches for your cat, such as cat furniture or cat trees, shelves, or cat beds on top of furniture. Your cat may feel more comfortable observing visitors from an elevated spot.
- Spray Feliway®, a product that mimics a soothing, natural cat odor, all around your house before visitors arrive. You won't be able to smell it, but your cat will, and it might help reduce his nervousness.
- If you cannot feed or play with your cat when visitors arrive, if you are hosting a large or loud event, or if your cat is too afraid to come near visitors, set up a comfortable retreat for him in a quiet room with the door closed. Provide food, water, a bed and a litter box. Let your cat stay in the quiet retreat until the guests leave. During the visit, occasionally go to the quiet room to check on your cat and offer him treats or play—but keep the door closed and ask your guests not to enter. It's a good idea to put a sign on the door as a helpful reminder.

What NOT to Do

DO NOT force your cat to get close to someone he's afraid of. Doing that will only increase his fear, and you or your visitors could get scratched or bitten.