

Why Is My Cat Guarding His Food?

CatChannel behavior expert Marilyn Krieger, CCBC, discusses resource guarding and ways to help correct it.

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Q: I have two cats, a brother and sister. They are both 12. They have always eaten together and slept together. Lately, it seems like he is trying to (quietly) keep her away from the food. She seems intimidated and she doesn't want to eat with him anymore. I think she is getting some kind of negative vibes from him over the food. What's going on here?

A: From your description, it sounds like your male cat is engaging in a behavior called resource guarding. Cats who resource guard try to keep other animals away from coveted resources, such as food, litterboxes and sometimes their favorite people. In your cat's case, the coveted resource he's guarding is food.

No matter how friendly and bonded your cats are with each other, each cat should have his and her own feeding station. This includes a food bowl and a fresh supply of water. In order to ensure that both cats get their share of the food without conflict, the food bowls should either be on other sides of the room from each other or possibly in separate rooms.

It's not entirely clear why, after 12 years, your cat is now resource guarding. It is possible he engaged in the behavior before and you didn't notice it. Another possibility is that something has changed about the food or the feeding circumstances. Perhaps you are feeding less, have changed brands or are feeding at a different time. Maybe your cat's appetite has changed.

You may want to consider providing both cats with more meals during the day. If they are on diets, divide their regular meals into three to five small meals every day. The cats can be given the same portions of food they usually eat, but instead of two meals, the food can be rationed into three to five small meals each day.

Provide your cats with alternative activities that are more fun than resource guarding. Both of your cats will probably enjoy treat balls that are filled with their favorite, healthy snacks. In order to eat the food, the cats will have to work a little bit, rolling the balls around in order for the food to fall out. Besides a little exercise, treat balls will take the edge off of the hunger between meals. When you first present your cats with the treat balls, show them how they work. Some cats need a little extra encouragement when first learning how to use them.

Another fun activity that your little foodie cats may enjoy is treasure hunts. Just before going to bed, hide small pieces of favorite treats around the house on the cat furniture, perches, shelves and other places the cats like to hang out. Besides providing the cats with a bit of a challenge, treasure hunting for snacks provides exercise and is fun for everyone.