

'YOU HAVE A RIGHT TO DEFEND YOURSELF'

If you plan to take your cat for a walk, be aware of possible legal issues that could surface if he's harmed by a dog or if he scratches a person. In the simplest terms, you are legally liable for your cat's actions, whether he's in your home or walking with you, says Jonathan Rankin, an attorney in Framingham, Mass., who specializes in animal law. He recommends that you keep your cat's nails trimmed and fit him with a properly sized harness.

Be cautious, too, about letting strangers pet or pick up your cat

because he may bite or scratch out of fear. "Even if you didn't give permission to someone and they rush up to pet your cat and get injured, you are still on the hook legally," Rankin says.

And if a neighbor's dog bolts out of his house, charges and injures you and/or your cat, you have the legal right to attempt to defend yourself by spraying mace or kicking the canine attacker. If you or your cat gets injured, you can also sue for damages to try to recoup any medical costs incurred.

"If a dog starts to attack you, especially if you are on public property like a sidewalk, you have a right to defend yourself," Rankin says. "The owner of the dog could be found guilty of negligence."

Courts view pets as property, but that mindset is changing, Rankin says. "Courts are becoming more aware that animals mean more to people than a piece of property like a TV or stereo. I predict we will see cases in which animals are seen as family members."