

Petting-Induced Overstimulation in Cats



Full-body pets can become too much stimulation for a cat. Their bodies have fine whiskers throughout their fur, and are therefore highly sensitive. All of that stimulating energy is usually channeled in what appears to be sudden mouthiness (also called “love bites”) or striking behavior.

Know the warning signs

Often humans misinterpret the cat’s body language leading up to overstimulation as enjoyment when they are actually communicating that they have had enough. Telltale signs include:

- Purring stops
- Twitching skin along the back
- Changing position or stiffening
- A swishing or thumping tail
- Ears go back toward the head (airplane ears)
- Head turns toward your hand
- Growling
- Dilated pupils
- Rolling away

Stop petting your cat at the first of these warning signs. Once you know the signs, you’ll also be able to gauge for how long you can pet your cat before they start exhibiting these signs. Each cat is an individual, so you’ll need to watch for what the cat can tolerate.

Reasons for overstimulation

Petting-induced overstimulation can be due to several reasons:

- Not enough socialization with other cats. Single kittens who did not grow up with littermates often become over stimulated when petted. Mouthy behavior during play is normal among kittens, and kittens learn from each other or from their mom when to stop.
- Not enough interaction with humans enough as kittens.
- Pain and the cat may need medical attention. If your cat appears to be over stimulating more than usual, you may want to consult your regular veterinarian.

Some cats simply have a lower threshold to being touched than others. They may enjoy being petted, but only for a short period of time, or only in certain places.

How to help prevent petting-induced overstimulation

Focus on petting the cat’s head, face, chin, cheeks instead - those places are less sensitive for most cats and therefore less likely to become over stimulated. Learn where your cat likes to be petted, and stick to those areas when petting them.

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Other recommendations to prevent petting-induced overstimulation:

- Rule out any physical/ medical issues for your cat's behavior. Your cat may be in pain from arthritis, an injury you're not aware of, or dental pain.
- Teach your cat that toys, not your hands, are the appropriate place for mouthy behavior. What may be cute in a tiny kitten can be painful from a large adult cat. Once cats associate your hands with being a toy, it will be difficult to modify the behavior.
- Accept that some cats simply don't like to be petted or cuddled for long periods of time. Trying to make your cat into someone they're not will only damage the bond between the two of you.
- Always ignore undesired behaviors and reward desired ones. Correcting a cat only accomplishes one thing: making your cat afraid of you. Yelling, tapping their nose and pushing or chasing them only develops fear.

Using counter-conditioning

A wonderful way to modify your cat's behavior is by rewarding them. In order to do this properly, you need to stop petting them long before they show you warning signs. Reward them with a treat after each stroke, and repeat several times, then stop petting altogether. Always end the short petting session with a treat and before they've had enough. Either move away or start to stand up if they're on your lap. In time, your cat may realize that biting equals a "time out," and eventually enjoy longer intervals of being petted.