

Play-Induced Overstimulation in Cats



Cats need to play. Play is vitally important to a cat's mental and physical health. In the wild, when lions, tigers and other wild cats aren't sleeping, they're either hunting or teaching their young to hunt. And play is nothing more than channeling your domestic tiger's hunting instinct into play. This hunt/ prey behavior starts as soon as kittens are old enough to stand. Kittens will "stalk" their littermates and pounce on them. This is one of the reasons why young kittens should always be adopted with another kitten, or into a household with another kitten or young adult cat. Not only do kittens need a playmate, playing with another cat will also teach the kitten that biting/ clawing hurts, which will naturally moderate rough play behavior.

Signs of play-induced overstimulation

One of the most common signs of play-induced overstimulation or "play aggression" is "ankle grabbing." You walk past your cat and, all of a sudden, they grab your ankle and scratch or bite. Play-induced overstimulation can also be directed at your hands, especially if you use them to play with your cat – something that may be cute when they're a kitten, but painful once they've turned into an adult cat.

There's a difference between rough play and play-induced overstimulation

It can sometimes be difficult to determine the difference between rough play and play-induced overstimulation – there's a very fine line between the two. Watch your cat's body language for clues. Normal play behavior can include the sideways pounce or hop, often with the back arched. During this "fun" play, ears and tails will be straight up in the air. There may be some hissing, but play is usually quiet. If you notice a cat's ears turn toward the back of the head ("airplane ears") or you hear growling, the play has tipped over into overstimulation/ aggression.

How to prevent and correct play-induced overstimulation

Provide a variety of toys for your cat

Toys that stimulate your cat's natural hunting instinct (interactive wand toys) are most effective for creating a fun play experience for your cat that also helps them burn off excess energy. Even though there are lots of cute little catnip filled toys on the market, simply placing one in front of your cat and hoping that they'll play with it is not enough.

Structured "Play Therapy"

The solution to play aggression/ overstimulation is regular, structured, interactive play - "play therapy." Play with your cat at regular times every day, at least twice a day, for 10-15 minutes each. Playing about a half hour before bed is a great idea, because it will help you get a better night's sleep. These play sessions will not only keep your cat happy, they're also a wonderful way to strengthen the bond between cat and human.

Get creative with playtime

Interactive puzzle toys can be a great way to keep your cats entertained and mentally stimulated when you can't play with them. The toys are designed to be filled with treats, and they challenge kitty to retrieve the treats through varied openings in the toys. This foraging behavior is very satisfying for them.

Play-Induced Overstimulation in Cats



Interactive, fishing pole type toys such as the Go Cat Cat Catcher, Neko Flies or DaBird are the best way to get your cat playing with you, and to satisfy their hunt/prey instinct. How you move the interactive toy is important. Don't wave it around frantically just to give your cat an aerobic workout. That's not how cats naturally hunt. Stick to what's natural for your cat. In the wild, a cat would stalk their prey while staying as quiet and invisible as possible. They would inch closer and closer and then, when they gets within striking distance, they would pounce. Cats don't have the lung capacity to chase to exhaustion, so don't conduct marathons throughout the house. Move the toy like prey, alternating between fast and slow motions so it gives your cat time to plan their next move.

Here's a tip: Movements that go away from or across your cat's visual field are best as they will trigger their prey drive. Don't dangle the toy in their face or move it toward them. There is a fantastic article describing in detail how to play with your cat at: <http://www.littlebigcat.com/behavior/play-therapy>.

Rotate toys in and out. Don't keep the same toys out in the same spot all the time – this will almost guarantee that your cats will get bored with them. Put some toys away for a week or two, and then bring them out again. Your cats will think they got a brand new toy. But don't hide their favorite toy that they play with all the time.

Cat toys don't need to be expensive. To a cat, almost everything can become a toy: grocery bags with the handles cut off, boxes, toilet paper rolls, milk carton tops, tissue paper – in a cat's mind, these were all just made to be played with. Some cats enjoy chasing bubbles, or batting Q-tips around the bathtub. Think like a cat, and you may be surprised at the things you already have in your home that make the purr-fect cat toy.

How to redirect play-induced overstimulation behavior

Never play with your cats using your hands! Cats will come to associate your hand as just another toy, and they won't understand why it's okay to grab and kick the mouse, but not your hands.

Distract your cat with an appropriate toy. If you have an ankle grabber, always carry a toy with you. When you see your cat approaching, toss the toy ahead of you to distract them.

Give your cat a timeout. Stop any play and interaction with your cat the instant they start to play rough or scratch or bite you. Leave the room, or direct your attention elsewhere. Don't pick up your cat to remove them from the area, as their energy will be already heightened from playing, and trying to physically interact with them may lead to a scratch or bite. Be consistent about this and don't inadvertently reward bad behavior.

Never punish your cat. It goes without saying that you should never yell at your cat, hit, or chase them. Do not use squirt bottles to correct unwanted behavior. Punishment only accomplishes one thing: it will make your cat afraid of you, and possibly make them become even more aggressive. It will also ruin your bond with your cat. You want to find out what is causing the undesired behavior and work to eliminate that from the cat's life.