

PETTING-INDUCED AGGRESSION IN CATS

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Some cats get overly aroused during interactions with humans and do not tolerate prolonged petting. It can be hard to understand why your cat does not always enjoy lots of petting or being touched on certain parts of their body.

This behavior is normal. But it is also a common complaint of cat owners that their cat solicits attention and then quickly decides that enough is enough. Petting-induced aggression may include swatting, nipping or running away from the person. Cats who exhibit petting-induced aggression are not mean or abnormal. They are just more sensitive than others.

Cats can have sensitivities to petting for many reasons. Repetitive contact can cause overarousal, pain, excitement, and even static electricity in the cat's coat. A cat may start out enjoying the contact before quickly finding it unpleasant.

Cats with petting-induced aggression are behaving normally and can be great house pets if you learn how to read their body language and manage your interactions with them.

Do:

1. Learn your cat's likes and dislikes. Make a mental note of how many strokes it will take for your cat to get agitated and make sure not to exceed that number of pets. Also, keep a clear inventory of the places on your cat that tend to get them worked up and stay away from them.
2. Monitor body language. Your cat may show subtle signs that they want you to leave them alone. Cues that your cat is not enjoying the interactions any longer may include:
 - a. Quickly turning their head towards your hand
 - b. Twitching or flipping their tail
 - c. Flattening their ears or rotating them forward and back
 - d. Restlessness
 - e. Dilating pupils
3. Let the cat pet you. It sounds a bit silly, but if you put your hand up and allow the cat to rub on it, they will likely stop rubbing and move away when they are satisfied. You can also teach your cat to move away from your lap by tossing a toy or favorite treat onto the floor so that you can easily disengage in an interaction without fuss.
4. Pet your cat primarily on their head and chin. Avoid other body parts, especially the belly, tail and back.
5. End on a positive note. Make sure you stop petting your cat before they become overstimulated. Each time you interact with your cat and there is no negative response, your cat will be more likely to return for more petting later.

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Don't:

1. Do not engage in prolonged petting. It is best to pet the cat's body once or twice and then stop to observe your cat. Only proceed with more petting if the cat is fully relaxed.
2. If your cat has reacted negatively to having a part of their body petted in the past, do not pet them there. For example, if your cat has swatted at you for petting their belly, do not attempt this type of interaction again.
3. Do not punish your cat. If you physically punish your cat (flick them on the nose, spray with water or other types of aversive interactions), they will become less tolerant of interactions with people. If your cat is anticipating pain or fear when being petted by you, it is more likely to react negatively. This fear-based reactivity will likely be more severe than petting-induced aggression.
4. Do not use your hands or any other body part to "rough house" or play with your cat. This encourages your cat to view you as a toy and will enforce the idea that nibbling and swatting at hands is okay.

Try not to get frustrated, and keep in mind that your cat really does love you! They are just more sensitive about certain interactions.

We are always here to help! You can find additional behavior and training resources at pasadenahumane.org/behavior.

Adapted from Northeast Animal Shelter

