

# Cat: Overstimulation



Overstimulation refers to a cat's normal response to being petted or handled in areas or ways the cat finds uncomfortable or have gone on for too long. A majority of cats exhibit overstimulation or petting-induced aggression to some degree. However, cats vary enormously as to the extent to which they like petting or handling and for how long they tolerate these without finding it aversive. They also vary greatly in the number and intensity of warning signals before it might result in aggressive reactions when those warning signals are neglected or ignored.

Here are some ways to help you develop a healthy way of petting your cat and to be safe.

- **Keep your petting sessions short** and to the areas where the cat truly enjoys your touch; keep in mind that it is very important to avoid getting the cat to the point where she is irritated. Even if you feel okay with the level of aggression, your cat might find this handling quite stressful. It also may reinforce biting behavior and may increase aggressive incidents and/or intensity in the future. Therefore, if you know your cat may get overstimulated after about 2 minutes of petting, then only pet the cat for 1 minute and give it a break. Similarly if you know your cat doesn't like to be petted a certain way or in a particular area, avoid doing so as much as possible. After a while you can increase petting time a little and see how well she tolerates it.
- **Observe for signs of overstimulation and impending aggression.** Cats almost always give clear warning signals before biting or scratching. It can be difficult to pick up on those signs at first because cats can be subtle in their body language. Common signals to look for include: tail swishing or flicking, skin twitching over the back, flattening of the ears, freezing, tenseness or staring, quick head turn to watch your hand as you pet, pupillary dilation, low growl, or walking away and lying down. Pay close attention to other environmental changes such as loud noises and animals and people entering the room.
- **Stop petting at the first sign** of any of these early warning signals. You can do this by just keeping your hands still by your sides. If the cat is very upset you may want to walk away from the cat, or if on your lap, stand up slowly and let the cat gently slide off.
- **Wait before attempting to pet again.** Some cats only take a few minutes to settle down; others can take several hours. Make sure that all signals of irritation have stopped. If the cat is still worked up, switch to playtime with quiet interactive toys such as a feather or string toy. This can help decrease the arousal to touch, while still allowing you to interact.
- **Only pet your cat in the areas she truly enjoys.** Most cats like to rub their faces or bodies on an offered hand, but do not appreciate long strokes over their bodies. It is important to know your cat, if she generally gets aggressive when petting the tail base, stay around the head for petting.
- **Punishment is not the way to address this behavior problem;** it will not make your cats more comfortable with handling or less aggressive. **Never yell or hit** your cats as this might only make your cat fear you or become even more aggressive. The only way to address these behaviors is avoidance and proper handling and play techniques.

**The prognosis** for this type of behavior in a home situation is good in most cases, given it is mostly a management problem. However, cats with rough play manners or who do not like to be petted or handled should not be allowed to play with young children or older people. The risk for injuries and infections are significant. For a good prognosis it is important to:

- Read the cat's body language
- Understand of basic needs of cats
- Accept limitations to petting and the patience to not push the cat to accept more than she can handle