

Petting-Induced Aggression

Cats vary in how much they like to be petted and held. Some cats enjoy it immensely, some tolerate it, and some put up with only small amounts before they let you know it's enough. Since they can't say it verbally, they usually indicate that they'd like you to stop by biting and scratching.

A cat who exhibits petting-induced aggression is often a friendly, social cat who seeks out the affections of her pet parents. She meows, rubs against people's legs, jumps in their laps and purrs. She might even enjoy a bit of petting. But she likes it for only so long before she becomes irritable and lashes out at the person petting her. Most cats give an inhibited, soft bite to the person's hand, but some bite hard enough to hurt or injure. Some cats hiss and scratch at the person, too.

While this reaction might seem to come out of the blue, most cats give advance warning when they start to feel crabby. If you watch closely, you'll see your cat tense up. Her ears will flatten against her head and her tail will twitch. She might fidget. If you continue to pet her, she'll likely hiss or growl and then, in short order, she'll scratch or bite you.

This type of aggression is not well understood, but behaviorists think that physical contact, such as stroking, can quickly become unpleasant to a cat if it's repeated. In fact, repetitive contact can induce arousal, excitement, pain and even static electricity in a cat's fur. Imagine that someone is rubbing your back, but instead of moving her hand all over your back, she rubs in just one spot over and over again. That might become unpleasant and annoying fairly quickly. Your cat might feel exactly the same way about repetitive touching. What started out feeling good becomes irritating—and then she wants you to stop.

No one really knows how to prevent this type of aggression from developing, but most agree that cats who are well socialized as kittens are more likely to take pleasure in being touched by people as adults. Cats who are groomed and gently handled as youngsters seek out contact with people more than cats who lack this experience. Friendliness also seems to be inherited through paternity. Kittens whose fathers are friendly toward people are more likely to be friendly and sociable than kittens whose fathers aren't friendly, regardless of the mother cat's behavior.

HOW TO TEACH YOUR CAT TO ENJOY PETTING

Most cats can be taught to tolerate more stroking if they learn to associate petting with tasty treats. The next time you pet your cat, watch her closely for signs of irritation. She might be able to tolerate as little as five seconds of petting or as much as 30 seconds. Take note of how many times you stroke your cat before she gets upset. Is she a two-stroke cat, a three-stroke cat or even a five-stroke cat? You need to know this so that you can limit your petting to the number of strokes your cat accepts.

The next time your cat shows you that she's in the mood for some affection by coming up and rubbing against you, have some of her favorite treats handy. Don't pick her up and hold her. Just reach out and pet her.

1. Remember how many times you can stroke your cat before she gets agitated, and only stroke her that many times.
2. Give your cat a small treat.
3. Ignore her afterwards for at least 10 minutes. (You might need to walk away if she pesters you for more treats.)

Let's suppose you have a two-stroke cat. You'll pet her twice, give her a small treat and then ignore her. The next time she asks for affection, repeat these steps, always quitting before she has the opportunity to get upset. For at least one week, follow all petting sessions with treats. The next week, when your cat asks for affection, sneak in a third stroke to see if she'll tolerate it. She probably will because she's learned to anticipate treats when she's touched. Gradually, over the course of several weeks, see if you can transform your two-stroke cat into a five-stroke cat. Make sure that she's always in the mood for affection when you do this exercise. If you make a mistake and push your cat over her threshold, simply stand up and let her jump to the floor as soon as you see those telltale signs of irritation—the tense body, the restlessness, the flattened ears and twitching tail. Outside of your training sessions, refrain from absent-mindedly petting your cat. You want to make sure that you don't push her past her point of tolerance.

It's a good idea to put your cat on a new meal plan so that you can conduct your training sessions just before mealtime, when she's hungriest. Learn what specific types of stroking she likes—long strokes along her body or rubbing around her chin and neck, for example—and use only those strokes when petting her. Also remember to slightly vary the position where your hands make contact with your cat's body so your touch doesn't become too repetitive and annoying.

WHAT NOT TO DO

Never physically punish your cat for lashing out at you aggressively by hitting her on the nose, spanking her or swatting her. Even yelling at her is likely to make the problem worse rather than better.

Never forcefully throw your cat off of you. At best, she'll become afraid to sit near you. At worst, she could be injured by the fall.

ENJOY YOUR CAT FOR WHO SHE IS

Respect your cat's desire not to be petted much. Cats are like people—some enjoy a lot of physical contact with others and some enjoy only a little. Appreciate the other ways your cat demonstrates her fondness for you. She probably follows you around the house, sleeps with you at night and hangs out with you while you watch TV. Relish the time you spend together, and don't worry about the fact that she doesn't care for physical affection.

Source:

- ASPCA: <http://www.asPCA.org/Pet-care/virtual-pet-behaviorist/cat-articles>