

Overstimulation and Petting Aggression

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When a cat feels uncomfortable being handled or if they've been petted for too long, a majority of cats will exhibit overstimulation or petting aggression to some degree. However, cats vary as to the number of warning signals and intensity of their reaction.

Managing overstimulation and petting aggression

The first thing to keep in mind is that it is very important to avoid getting the cat to the point where he is over stimulated or irritated. Even if you feel okay with the aggressive behavior, it is still quite stressful to the cat. It also reinforces the biting behavior habit and may increase aggressive incidents and/or intensity, possibly due to the kitty feeling less trustful of the person pushing them. So, for example, if you know the cat may get over stimulated after about 5 minutes of petting, then only pet the cat for 4 minutes. Or, if you know the cat doesn't like to be petted a certain way or in a particular area, avoid doing so as much as possible.



Look for warning signals

Observe for signs of impending aggression. Cats almost always give warning signals before biting or scratching. Cats are very subtle in their body posturing by nature, so these signals are sometimes difficult to pick up on at first. Common signals include: tail swishing or flicking, ears flat, staring, quick head turn to watch your hand as you pet, eye pupil dilation, stillness or tenseness, low growl, and walking away and lying down. Note that re-directed aggression can also be a reason for biting, so pay attention to environmental triggers such as loud noises, animals and people present, other cat smells, and changes in the environment.

Reacting to warning signals

Withdraw your attention immediately at the first sign of any warning signals. You can do this by just keeping your hands at 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 settled down, others can take hours, even a day or two if very upset. At least give a 10 second break. 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 feather toys, or string. This can help relieve anxiety for the cat, while still allowing you to interact.

This approach may take time to change your cat's behavior (some cats take months or even a year or more to adjust how they handle over stimulation) but withdrawing your attention is the best and most humane thing you can do to deter your cat from biting or reduce the intensity of it.

Other helpful tips

The prognosis for this type of behavior in a home situation is good. In many instances, if the cat has the freedom to get away from a situation that is over stimulating him, he will choose to do that instead of aggress. The following will help in behavior modification:

- No young children.
- The ability to read the cat's body language/ willingness (on the part of the human) to learn. An understanding of basic cat behavior.



- Ability to accept limitations to petting and the patience to not push the cat to accept more than he can take.

If you have a pet behavior question or would like some training assistance,
San Diego Humane Society is here to help!
Visit our website at www.sdhumane.org to view our behavior and training options,
or call our **Behavior Helpline at 619-299-7012 ext. 2244** to speak with a trainer.