

Boroughbred Behavior Resources



Issue: Petting-Induced Aggression

One of the most confusing types of aggression a cat owner may experience is petting-induced aggression. One moment you're loving your cat and showing them affection by petting them, and then seemingly out of nowhere, the interaction ends with claws and teeth digging into your arms and hands. A show of affection turns sour just after a few strokes.

Things to Consider

Before assuming your cat may have petting-induced aggression, always have your cat examined by a veterinarian to rule out any possible medical conditions. Sudden aggression may actually be the result of pain. If your cat has an injury or sore spot, petting them on those areas will likely cause discomfort, and is the reason they react to prevent additional pain.

Another thing to consider, although this may sound silly, is to pay attention to your cat's mood. Your cat may not want to be pet if they're in play mode! If they're busy pouncing on objects, stalking a fly buzzing around the room, or have the "zoomies" (spurts of energy that causes them to bolt back and forth), petting them will only increase their stimulation and entice them to instinctively grab and wrestle with your hands. Make sure your cat is calm for petting, not when they're running marathons.

What Causes Cats to Become Aggressive During Petting?

Cats may have specific areas on their body that are more sensitive than other areas. When rubbed repeatedly over these areas, it can become uncomfortable for them. Imagine being tickled under your feet for 5 minutes straight, wouldn't you start to get annoyed after a while? Maybe even reflexively kick the person doing it? The length of time it takes for petting to go from enjoyable to uncomfortable varies for each cat, but once that threshold is reached the cat will take measures to end the stimuli that isn't pleasant for them anymore.

What's the difference between petting-induced aggression and overstimulation?

Petting-induced aggression may appear very similar to overstimulation because both may result in the cat nipping or swatting at the person after being pet, but there are some differences. An overstimulated cat may enjoy petting, maybe even loves it, but over time becomes increasingly emotionally conflicted about the attention they receive until they reach a point where they can't take it anymore. This cat has a limit to the amount of physical attention it can receive before they become reactive.

Petting-induced aggression is derived from discomfort and agitation. A cat with petting-induced aggression has a body part that is physically sensitive. It doesn't feel good to be pet in these areas, either because that body part is associated with a prior fear response or it still causes physical discomfort. Cats with petting-induced aggression generally react quicker than many cats with over-stimulation since they feel uncomfortable and want to communicate, "Stop that!"

A simple way of thinking about the differences is that overstimulation is an emotional progression towards a threshold, whereas petting-induced aggression is a reaction towards an unpleasant physical sensation.

Check out our "**Overstimulation**" flyer for more information on this topic.

Watch out for Warning Signs

Pay attention to your cat's body language because although it may seem startling to us, they were most likely giving us several warning signs before they decided that enough was enough. Some warning signs include:

- Eyes dilating
- Ears tilting sideways or bending flat against their head
- Pilo-erection of the body and tail
- Tail thumping, swaying from side to side, or quivering
- Quickly flipping their head back to watch your hand
- Twitching of the body or shifting of their body posture to lean away
- Vocalizations like growling, hissing, or stress meowing



What Can I Do?

To help a cat feel more comfortable with petting, pay attention to your cat's preferred petting spots to get attention. They may like petting on their head and shoulders but not by the base of their tail. You should also pay attention to their tolerance level so petting is ended before they become reactive. Petting should ideally stop before the warning signs appear, so pay attention to your cat's body language. Most of these incidents typically occur when the owner isn't paying attention (for example: watching TV) and didn't notice

the warning signs their cat was displaying. You can also time your interactions; if your cat typically bites or swats your hand after being pet for five minutes, try to end the interaction at four. Use treats to reward the cat for appropriate responses to physical attention. Our goal is to end the interaction on a positive note so they're more likely to be receptive of petting next time.



What to Avoid

Never punish your cat. Yelling or hitting will only teach your cat that you can be scary and damage the bond between you and your cat. They'll be less likely to be accepting of petting, especially if they're fearful of you. Remember that they aren't biting because they're mean, they're biting because they've exhausted their options in communicating their discomfort, especially if their warning signs have been ignored, and have probably learned that biting was the only successful option to stop "the thing" that was annoying them.

The next time you're petting your feline loved one, pay attention to their body language and pet them on their favorite spots. If you end petting before they resort to biting or scratching, you're on the right track to change your cat's mind about physical affection.

For more information:

International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants: <https://m.iaabc.org/>
Certified Applied Animal Behaviorists: <http://corecaab.org/>