

Petting Sensitivity

Cats vary in how much they like being petted and held. Some cats really enjoy it, some tolerate it, and still others only put up with small amounts before they say “enough.” They usually say this by biting and scratching.

The cat who become aggressive when petted is often a friendly, social cat who seeks out the affections of her pet parents. She meows, rubs against people’s leg, jumps in their laps and purrs. She may 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 bite to the person’s hand, but some bite hard enough to do damage. Some cats hiss and scratch at the person too.

While this reaction may 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 her tense up. Her ears flatten against her head and her tail twitches. She may 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 if it’s repeated over and over. In fact, repetitive contact can induce arousal, excitement, pain and even static electricity in the cat’s fur. Imagine that someone is rubbing your back but instead of moving their hand all over your back, they rub in just one spot repeatedly. That becomes unpleasant and annoying fairly quickly. Your cat may be feeling the same way. What started out feeling good is now irritating and she wants you to stop.

No one really knows how to prevent this type of aggression from developing but most agree that cats who were well socialized as kittens are more likely to take pleasure in being touched by people. Cats who were groomed and handled gently as youngsters seek out contact with people more than cats who lacked this experience. Friendliness also seems to be inherited through paternity. Kittens whose fathers were friendly toward people are more likely to be friendly and sociable than kittens whose fathers were not friendly toward people.

How to Teach your Cat to Enjoy Petting

Most cats can be taught to tolerate more stroking by teaching them to associate petting with tasty treats. The next time you pet your cat, watch her closely for signs of irritation. She may be able to tolerate as little as 5 seconds or as much as 30 seconds. Take note of how many strokes you apply before she gets upset. Is she a 2-stroke cat, a 3-stroke cat, or even a 5-stroke cat? You need to know this so you can limit your petting to the number of strokes she can accept.

The next time your cat shows you she’s in the mood for some affection by coming up and rubbing against you, have some of her favorite treats handy. Don’t hold her but reach out to pet her just the number of strokes she has demonstrated she enjoys. Let’s suppose she’s a 2-stroke cat. Pet her twice and then give her a small treat. Ignore her afterwards.

You may need to walk away if she keeps pestering you for more treats. Wait for at least 10 minutes and then the next time she asks for affection, repeat these steps, treating and then quitting before she has the opportunity to get upset. Follow petting sessions with treats for at least one week. Then the next time you pet her, sneak in a third stroke to see if she'll tolerate it. She probably will because now she's anticipating treats when she's touched. Gradually over the course of several weeks, see if you can transform your 2-stroke cat into a 5-stroke cat! Make sure that your cat is 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 tell tale signs of irritation — the tense body, the restlessness, the flattened ears and the twitching tail.

Outside of your training sessions, refrain from absent-mindedly petting your cat. You want to make sure that for now, you don't push her past her point of tolerance.

It's a good idea to put your cat on a meal plan so you can train just before mealtime when she's hungriest. Learn what type of stroking she likes — for example, long strokes along her body or rubbing around her chin and neck — and do only those, bearing in mind to vary slightly where your hands make contact with her so your touch doesn't become annoying.

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 that she doesn't care for physical affection.

What NOT to Do

Never physically punish your cat by hitting her on the nose, spanking or swatting her for lashing out at you aggressively. Even yelling at her is likely to make the problem worse rather than better. Never forcefully throw her off you either. At best, she'll become afraid to sit near you, and at worst she could be injured by the fall.