



Peninsula Humane Society & SPCA

Heavy Petting: How to Know When Your Cat Has Had Enough!

We love to pet cats and most cats love to be petted. It's right up there with food in terms of a cat's interest in us humans. The calming, comforting sensation of stroking a purring cat inspires many an adoption.

Making sure this pleasure is truly shared can take practice, however. The same touch that at first feels so good to a cat can quickly become too much. Along with keen sight, smell, and hearing, cats are tremendously sensitive to touch.

Imagine having an itch just where you can't reach, say, between your shoulder blades. At first, the friend who scratches you there is your savior, but what if the contact goes on too long?

This can happen to a cat, too, but the cat can't politely ask you to stop. If you understand her subtle signals, she won't need to use the annoying ones: a paw strike, scratch, hiss, or bite.

Those more subtle signs include:

- flattening ears
- quick movements of the head to watch your hand
- a twitching or flicking tail
- dilated pupils
- a tense body
- meowing or even growling

Also, if the cat moves away -- out of petting range -- give him some time and space to regain composure.

Other things besides your touch can greatly affect a cat's response to petting. Loud noises, other people or animals, or the smells of other cats can upset a cat who may then redirect that irritation to you.

If you detect signs that a cat is worried or upset, proceed cautiously with petting. Try extending a finger to see if the cat will sniff or allow you to stroke her cheek. Be ready to withdraw right away. It's much better to try again later than to provoke an irritated response that may color the cat's future expectations.

What if you misjudge and the cat is already upset? To interrupt a cat in the act of nipping or scratching, say "Ouch" and go very still. Try not to jerk away with a sudden movement. When the cat releases you, carefully pull your hand away. If the cat is on your lap, sit quietly with your hands at your sides and wait. You may have to stand up slowly to tip the cat off your lap. Wait a few minutes before trying a different form of interaction, for example trailing a toy within the cat's reach (preferably a toy that keeps you out of reach).

Above all, if the cat rejects petting or exhibits any of the signs of overstimulation, don't persist. It's upsetting to a cat to be irritated and to have to express that irritation. **And never punish or reprimand a cat in a punitive way.** You'll only teach her to be wary of you.

Each cat has her own tolerance for physical affection. Some cats have very little tolerance for touch and prefer being spoken to softly and enticed with toys. Learning how to make your cat happy may take practice, but the rewards are great for both of you.

For more info, call our free Behavior Helpline (650/340-7022 x783 or, for Spanish, x786) or consider a low-cost consultation. To make a consultation appointment, call 650/340-7022 x667. The PHS/SPCA Behavior Department, like many shelter programs, is funded by donations.