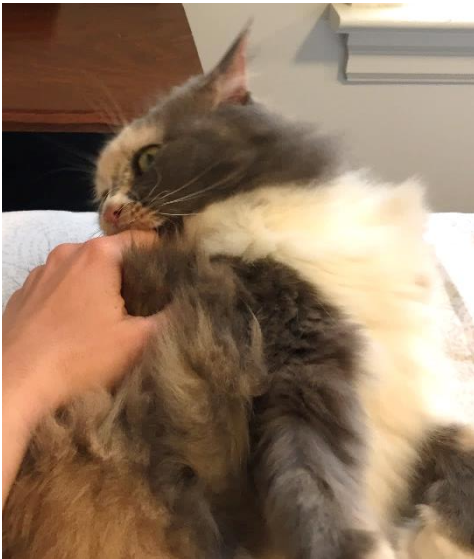


Petting-Induced Aggression



Some cats seem to seek out petting, or even actively enjoy it for a time, only to turn around and scratch or bite. Petting for some cats is much like tickling for humans – it may be fun for a while but can turn unpleasant, fast. The threshold for tolerance of petting can vary widely in cats. Moreover, some cats may want to be near their owner, but don't actually want to be petted. The problem arises when the owner's desire for petting is greater than the cat's tolerance.

Visit your veterinarian

If your cat is showing signs of petting-induced aggression, a trip to the veterinarian might be warranted. This is especially true if the behaviour is new, occurs in old-age, or presents with signs of pain (including changes in litter box behaviour, such as diarrhea, increased frequency of urination, or out-of-box elimination).

Reducing the behaviour

If no medical cause is found, there are several strategies you can use to reduce the likelihood of this behaviour.

Ensure you are petting in a “cat-friendly” way

One of the main reasons cats rub against each other and the environment is to deposit pheromones that mark things as familiar and safe, thereby creating a “group scent.” When we pet them, these pheromones get on us and we effectively join their group. When petting your cat, think about this and focus on where they have glands, especially around the face. Research shows that petting at the base of the tail can cause a negative response in cats¹⁻², so it should be avoided unless your cat clearly enjoys it. Most cats prefer to be pet in short bursts, rather than marathon petting sessions. This is likely particularly true in cats with low thresholds for petting.



Watch their body language

Cats with low thresholds for petting usually exhibit some warning signs before they lash out. The specific signs vary between cats, but common signs include:

- Thrashing tail
- Enlarging pupils
- Watching your hand
- Ears to the side/back
- Rippling skin on the back



Learn your cat's limits, and respect them

The easiest way to avoid petting-induced aggression is to learn how much you can pet your cat before they start showing these warning signs, and stop petting them before that. It's important to remember that they are not exhibiting this behaviour out of spite, but out of discomfort.

Learn alternative types of interaction

Petting is often how people bond with their cats, so asking them to hold back can be hard on this relationship. Interactive play or trick training is a fantastic way to bond with your cat without making them feeling discomfort. See [Trick Training Your Cat](#) for more information!



Increase your cat's tolerance for petting

It may be possible to increase your cat's tolerance for petting through a process called desensitization and counter-conditioning. This means gradually exposing an animal to something it doesn't like and pairing this with food. This process can change an animal's perception of something from bad to good.

1. Figure out how long your cat can always be pet before exhibiting warning signs
2. Pet your cat for that amount of time, and then give a high-value food reward
3. Gradually increase the amount of time you pet your cat, without pushing your cat past their threshold (i.e., they do not exhibit any warning signs). Continue using the food reward

Do not punish

It is especially important that you do not punish this behaviour. This may reduce the likelihood your cat will exhibit warning signs and may increase the intensity of the reaction in the future.

References:

¹Ellis, S. L. H., Thompson, H., Guijarro, C., & Zulch, H. E. (2015). The influence of body region, handler familiarity and order of region handled on the domestic cat's response to being stroked. *Applied Animal Behaviour Science*, 173, 60-67.

²Soennichsen, S., & Chamove, A. S. (2002). Responses of cats to petting by humans. *Anthrozoös*, 15(3), 258-265.

