

Overstimulation in Cats

Cat owners sometimes have difficulty understanding why their cats, who seem friendly and content one minute, will scratch or bite them the next. Cats always have a reason for doing this — it's just not always immediately obvious what that reason is. Almost every cat, even the most easygoing ones, will display overstimulation behavior at some point during their life. This handout will go over the different kinds of overstimulation, and what you can do to avoid it.

TOUCH OVERSTIMULATION

Many cats get touch overstimulated, which means that while being pet may feel good for a while, eventually it may start to feel irritating or even painful. A good way to understand this is to compare it to the sensation you get when being tickled — some people may enjoy it for a minute or two, but then the feeling becomes "too much" and you want it to stop. If you don't pick up on your cat's signals to stop, they will use a bite or scratch as a more obvious sign that they need a break. All cats have a different threshold of what is "too much," and different parts of their body have different sensitivities. Many cats tend to be sensitive on their stomach or paws and can reach their overstimulation threshold faster — or sometimes immediately — when being touched in those areas.

PLAY OVERSTIMULATION

Cats can get hyped up from playing with a toy, or watching a bird out the window, and then your fingers or foot move in a fashion that makes kitty's instincts kick in and go for a pounce. It also tends to happen in cats who aren't getting enough playtime throughout their day — if they don't get an appropriate outlet for their energy, they will find things to play with, which often end up being hands or feet.

How to Prevent Overstimulation

Overstimulation is a natural cat behavior and can never be fully eliminated, but it is possible to reduce the behavior, or avoid it being expressed towards humans entirely. Cats should never be encouraged to play with body parts (such as wagging fingers or getting them to play with a moving foot under a blanket), and if they do try to engage in this kind of play behavior, they should immediately be redirected to a toy. If your cat is trying to play with your hands or feet when there doesn't seem to be any stimulation present, they may be letting you know that they have a lot of stored-up energy and need an outlet for it. Make sure you have regular play-time with your cat each day, and provide them with toys and enrichment that are easy for them to engage with on their own, such as a battery-operated motion toy. Every cat has different preferences for the style of toy they like, so you may need to experiment and figure out what they love.

For cats who are more inclined to get touch overstimulated, you will need to learn about body language. Common warning signs to look for include a twitching or thrashing tail, dilated pupils, fluffed up fur (particularly around the base of the tail), ears twitching frequently or quickly, your cat quickly jerking their head toward your hand as you pet them, or your cat's skin "rippling" under your hand. Every cat may have individual signs that they are becoming overstimulated, and they may present with varying degrees of subtlety. One cat may thrash their tail in large motions, while another may only move the tip of their tail a little. You should always do your best to tailor cuddling and petting styles to each individual cat. The more time you spend observing your cat, the easier it becomes to notice their individual signs, and prevent nips and scratches from ever happening.



LOVE BITES

Cats may also give "love bites," nipping or licking to express their affection or desire for attention, just like they may have done with their siblings when they were a kitten.

These bites are typically gentler than overstimulation bites, though firmness of the nip can vary from cat to cat. Many people enjoy receiving an affectionate love nip from their cat, but if you want to encourage your cat to stop, you should cease giving attention whenever they nip you, and give lots of pets when they refrain from nipping.

For visual aids, we recommend watching videos about cat overstimulation and cat body language.

SUGGESTED VIDEOS

Jackson Galaxy, overstimulation:
YouTube ID: [Si-yk1KxYX0](#)

Jackson Galaxy, basic body language:
YouTube ID: [o2kSYwTkJUM](#)

Cat's Protection, basic body language:
YouTube ID: [bvsvB7sf4QU](#)

Example of one kind of overstimulation from a cat rescue: YouTube ID: [I_fUhh6DGfQ](#)



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