



Overstimulation and Low Tolerance for Handling

Domestic cats display a wide range of tolerance for handling by humans. While some cats enjoy all sorts of petting, many cats may nip or swat if handled in a way which is uncomfortable for them. There is likely a genetic basis for individual differences, but there is a learned component as well. Cats communicate via body language, and if people do not 'read' the cat correctly and continue to handle the cat when s/he is uncomfortable, then the cat can learn to swat or nip in order to get the person to stop (and it usually works!) Many adult cats may have been handled inappropriately in the past, and may need to re-learn that people will stop when they show signs of discomfort.



What is Overstimulation?

Overstimulation is an umbrella term that describes high-arousal in cats. It can look different for different cats. The following are some variations:

- The cat is very busy- constantly moving, approaching, rubbing/marking with cheeks and body
- The cat shows decreased handling tolerance
- The cat is particularly sensitive to certain parts of body being handled (lower back, chest/belly, and paws)

Most cats display overstimulation or low tolerance for more intrusive petting on occasion. It is a behavior issue that is usually easy to manage if you educate yourself about body language, which is the main way cats communicate their stress and their needs with us. Generally, cats who have a tendency to overstimulate will do best with adopters who are able to learn the signals that their cat has had enough, and willing to let them "call the shots" about petting and handling.

How Do You Work With Cats Who Have Low Tolerance for Petting?

- Stay within the cat's comfort zone: Limit handling, initially, to the parts of the body cat is most comfortable with (usually head and cheeks), and watch body language!

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- Less is more. The idea is to leave the cat wanting more- so try to give breaks from petting before the cat signals that s/he has had enough.
- At the first signal from the cat that they are getting irritated (if not before), stop handling. See the list below for all body language cues that can signal stress or over-arousal.
- Give frequent breaks from petting to re-assess whether cat is still enjoying handling. Watch for signs that the cat is soliciting petting, such as rubbing head against you.
- You can pair petting with food or treats- cats often enjoy being stroked while eating, and this builds a positive association with petting.
- Bond with the cat by other means: play with interactive toys, train to do tricks, engage in enrichment activities with the cat.
- Interactive playtime also reduces tension and anxiety!
- Over time (weeks or months) you can gradually lengthen the time that the cat enjoys petting, and tolerates parts of body being handled. This is a slow process, and you need to be careful not to push the cat too fast.
- Simply having no "incidents" is a success!

What Are the Common Signs that Signal Overstimulation?

- Ears are back or to the side
- Tense body- may all of a sudden stiffen
- Dilated pupils
- Hard stare, fixing eyes on you
- Swishing tail (can be the whole tail or just the tip, usually a quick, rhythmic motion- watch for change in movement rather than simply swishing.)
- Quick head jerk or turn (usually to look at your hand, or their own body)
- Frequent re-positioning of body
- Cranky meow, hiss, or low growl (less common)
- Skin twitches or rolls on back/sides

What Should You Do If a Cat Nips or Swats While You Are Petting Them?

- If it is a quick nip or swat, simply withdraw your hand.
- If the cat is holding on to you with teeth, stay still and attempt to distract cat with object/toy instead of pulling away (which will cause more injury to you.)
- If there is no broken skin that you need to attend to, sit quietly with the cat without attempting to touch.
- After a minute or so, you can switch to interactive toys, and continue to visit with the cat without handling.

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- Try to reconstruct what was happening at the time of the nip/swat, so that you can learn what triggers this behavior
- It is important to note if you were watching for body language changes at that moment, if there was anything going on in the environment (noises/cleaning, people passing by, other cat looking in window, etc.), and how much petting had preceded the incident
- Correction (yelling, tapping nose, etc) can make this considerably worse, and can cause the cat to fear you and/or bite harder.

This handout is a brief guide to the more common, mild forms of this behavior. If your cat shows severe tolerance issues, bites hard and without warning signs, please speak with your veterinarian on how you can manage this behavior.

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