

# PETTING AGGRESSION

## WHEN IT COMES TO PETTING, NOT ALL CATS ARE CREATED EQUAL

### THE PROBLEM

While petting your cat, does she sometimes attack you for no apparent reason with claws and teeth? It could be caused by static electricity or if she is a kitten, it could just be your cat being playful. Some cats just don't tolerate a lot of petting. Petting can over stimulate the receptors where the fur meets the cat and irritate your cat's skin causing petting induced aggression.

#### Petting aggression can be caused by:

1. Medical and emotional reasons
2. Static electricity
3. Lack of socialization with each other and siblings
4. Sensitivity threshold

### MEDICAL AND EMOTIONAL REASONS

Cats that are sensitive to touch may have a medical problem such as inflammatory polyps, arthritis, dental issues, hip dysplasia, or parasites such as ear mites that might make their ears sensitive to touch. If aggression during petting is a new behaviour, have your cat checked by a veterinarian. Stress, anxiety and frustration are all emotions that can increase a cat's sensitivity to touch and reduce her threshold to touch.

### STATIC ELECTRICITY

On going petting can cause static electricity that may be painful for cats, triggering an aggressive response.

### LACK OF SOCIALIZATION WITH EACH OTHER AND SIBLINGS

Mother cats teach their babies to be gentle with their claws and teeth. Social play with other kittens also helps a young cat learn how much pressure she can use with her claws and teeth before it causes the other kitten to go away or hurt back. Orphan kittens miss out on this opportunity and some may be rougher when using their claws and teeth as a result. If this is the reason your cat gets aggressive during petting, she will likely also bite during play and other interactions.

### SENSITIVITY THRESHOLD – *the most common problem*

Just like humans, cats have many receptors on their skin. In addition, they have some specialized hair on various parts of the body that are extremely sensitive to heat, cold, change in air flow and pressure, and of course touch. Where and how long a cat can be touched before it becomes too stimulating varies from cat to cat. For some, it may be only minutes. At that point, the cat will have a reaction similar to that when experiencing pain (almost like a reflex). She will suddenly turn and bite or scratch whatever is causing the irritation such as your hand or a brush.

### WHAT TO DO? MANAGING THE PROBLEM

First of all, it is important to understand that your cat is not mad at you, trying to be mean to you, or getting back at you for something. She is simply experiencing a reflex in response to an unpleasant, irritating, or even painful sensation.

### Tips to help you with petting aggression

#### 1. *Ensure your cat is healthy and that her emotional needs are met*

If this is a new and unusual behaviour for your cat, be sure to have her checked by a veterinarian and explain that this is new behaviour. Also be sure that your cat's emotional needs are met with proper environmental enrichment (toys, perches, hiding areas, mental stimulation) and social enrichment (opportunity for play with guardian and plenty of attention other than petting). Teach your children to respect the cat's space and prevent them from chasing or hurting her in any way. Even low-level anxiety can reduce a cat's threshold to touch.

## 2. *Get to know your cat preference for different types of petting*

Most cats prefer petting on the cheeks, temples and between the ears and eyes. Other favourite spots include the other areas of the head, the chin, lips, back, and chest. The least favourite areas are the lower back near the tail, tummy, and back legs. However, some cats like different parts of the body to be touched in a specific order, while some only like being petted in a specific location in the house, at certain times of the day, or during specific activities such as but not while resting. You can find out which parts of the body are less sensitive to prolonged petting. Keep your hand over your cat and let her direct the petting. Pay attention, you will learn which body parts she prefers to have touched and in what order. Notice the difference when she is petted at different times of the day, in different areas of the house or during different activities (such as feeding versus nap time).

## 3. *Recognize the signs that she is becoming over stimulated*

Time the petting session up to that moment when she is getting irritated and always stay under this limit. Look for the behaviours that show she is about to reach her limit. Usually, cats will show one or more of the following behaviours:

- Flatten their ears
- Twitch their tail
- Give a low growl
- Ripple their skin
- Stiffen their body

If you see any of these behaviours, stop petting her immediately! Your cat will start rubbing on you when she is ready for more petting.

Threshold to touch is not easy to change, but here are a couple of methods to help manage the problem.

### **Try different ways of petting your cat**

- Try short, small strokes. This resembles the motion made by mother cats when grooming their kittens.
- Try scratching her in her favourite areas (chin, between ears) instead of petting the whole body.
- Try the stop/start technique giving her a break every few seconds.

### **Try increasing her threshold**

After each stroke, offer your cat small bits of cooked chicken or other food she really likes. Repeat this several times a day, giving only a few strokes each time. While this may help a little, it will not change a cat with very high sensitivity to one that can be petted for a long time.

### **CAUTION**

Never punish a cat for showing petting induced aggression or force her to be petted by restraining her movements. This will cause her anxiety associated with petting and will further reduce the cat's threshold during future physical interactions. Keep in mind that there may not be a solution to this problem - you may only be able to manage it. Be patient and your cat may come around.

### **NOTES**

Are you thinking of getting a second cat and would like to avoid this problem? Threshold for touch and willingness to be held are fairly stable over time and across situations. If petting is your thing, when choosing a cat spend lots of time petting and touching and holding. If the cat is comfortable with that at the time, it is likely she will be that way at home too!