# Overstimulation in Cats

Cat owners sometimes have difficulty understanding why their cats, who seem to be friendly and content one minute, may suddenly bite and scratch them the next. While overstimulation isn't aggression, the response may appear aggressive. Cat owners however can find some relief, knowing that this behavior is normal and is both easy to manage and/or prevent.

**Overstimulation**

It is not uncommon for cats to suddenly bite while being petted. One reason for this reaction can be over petting. However, it can also be due to stress or a built up of frustration. Stress or frustration is created from either the lack of interaction or from over exposure to a stimulus that is unattainable, like a bird at the window.

All cats have the ability to become overstimulated but vary in their reaction based on frustration level and/or how much they tolerate being petted or held. Some cats will only react by twitching their tails and never escalate, while others will escalate into a bite. All reactions though, especially a bite, is the cat's signal that she has had enough petting. Owners must become aware of their cats' body postures, and cease petting or stop any other kind of interaction before the bite occurs.

**Signals owners should be aware of include:**

- Restlessness
- The cat's tail beginning to twitch
- The cat's ears turning back or flicking back and forth
- The cat's skin rippling when you pet her
- The cat turning or moving her head toward your hand

**What to do**

When you observe any of these signals, it is time to stop petting the cat immediately and allow her to just sit quietly on your lap or go her own way, whichever she prefers. If your cat continues to solicit attention, then walk away from your cat.

If you want to try to prolong the amount of time your cat will tolerate petting, use a food reward. When your cat first begins to show any of the behaviors described above (or even before she does) offer her a special tidbit of food such as a tiny piece of tuna or boiled chicken. At the same time, decrease the intensity of your petting. Continue to lightly pet your cat for a short time period while offering her tidbits. Each time you work with your cat, try to pet her for slightly longer time periods using the food. Petting will then come to be associated with more pleasant things and may help her to enjoy petting for longer periods. Be sure to stop the petting before she shows any aggression, not as a result of the aggression, otherwise you could inadvertently reinforce the aggression.

Several interactive play sessions per day, can also help reduce or eliminate these behaviors by alleviating stress and any built up frustration.

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*Simulating the hunt*
Create your play sessions to mimic the cat's natural hunting behavior. Remember, cats are natural hunters, and they were originally domesticated to rid our homes and barns of rodents and other vermin. Choose a fishing-pole toy – one that imitates the noise of flapping bird wings for instance is irresistible to most cats. Make the toy soar around the room, engaging your cat's attention. Or simulate mouse activity by sliding the end of the toy around on the floor in quick, jerky movements. Allow the cat to pounce and catch the toy and bat it around. Then start again. End the play session by allowing the cat to capture the toy.

*After the play session*
Sessions should be long enough for the cat to get tired – around 15 - 20 minutes depending on the age and activity level of the cat. About five minutes after the end of the session, give your cat a high protein snack, like canned cat food, tuna fish, or sandwich meat. This mimics what would happen at the end of a real hunt – the cat would eat her catch. Don't be surprised if your cat takes a long nap after a play session.

**What not to do**

Any kind of physical punishment almost always makes the problem worse, as it makes the cat more likely to bite either because she is fearful and/or because petting becomes even more unpleasant if it is associated with punishment.

Avoid using laser lights when playing with an overstimulated cat. Laser lights are easy to use and will usually get the cat running around, which is good exercise, but it is important for a cat to enjoy the satisfaction of catching the toy (or prey), which they can't do with a laser light. As a result, laser lights can create more frustration, which is why it is not recommended for overstimulated cats.

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