



Issue: Overstimulation in Cats

Imagine you're sitting and watching TV, while your cat is also sitting next to you and you're petting her. You look at her adoring gaze, all is well and then suddenly, without you noticing anything has gone wrong, she swats you, nips/bites or just applies pressure with her teeth! Then, maybe she calmly starts grooming herself as if to say, "I'm bored now, what can we do for fun?" Or she walks away, or tries to engage in rough play. What just happened?

Let's take a step back and analyze the situation. Overstimulation has just occurred, but a behavioral plan can be created to prevent this from happening in the future.

Many cats enjoy being pet. But, sometimes they become conflicted during petting sessions. The petting goes on longer than the cat's comfort level will allow. The length of time it takes a cat to overstimulate varies by the cat, and sometimes by the mood the cat is in, but usually there are warning signs that will tip off when the cat starts becoming conflicted.

Signs That a Cat is Becoming Overstimulated

- The tail starts to twitch or swish back and forth. The harder or faster the tail moves, the more overstimulated the cat is becoming.
- The cat's pupils start to dilate (become larger and rounder).
- The ears go flat or face backwards or to the side.
- The cat's skin starts twitching.
- The cat makes a quick head turn to watch your hand while you're petting them.
- The body tenses or freezes.
- The whiskers flatten against the face.

Helping Your Cat Avoid Overstimulating

The goal here is to figure out how to help the cat avoid overstimulating. Start by timing how long you can get your cat before they overstimulate, or by counting the number of strokes (whichever is more relevant). Watch for the signs listed above. Once you know how long it takes to push them over the edge, use that as the upper limit. Keep your interactions under that amount of time or that number of strokes so they don't go over their threshold.

Examples: If they can tolerate petting for five minutes, then try only petting them for three. Slowly, with practice, you may be able extend the amount of time they can tolerate petting. If your cat consistently overstimulates after 15 strokes, back down to 10. Then, slowly try to increase the strokes over time.

Whatever you do becomes their habit. If you don't let them overstimulate then that becomes the new normal. And it keeps them consistently calmer which can help increase the duration of petting over time. Reward these petting sessions and activate the pleasure centers of their brains with treats.

Ritualized Play Therapy

The concept here is more than just playing with your cat, but to ritualize play so that it becomes a regular routine that the cat comes to expect. Think of it like recess for a young child who builds up energy and needs a release. Inactivity can be stressful on a cat so by giving the cat regular play sessions their bodies come to expect and enjoy, you can de-pressurize the cat and reduce their vulnerability to touch, greatly reducing their sense of fight or flight.

Use two types of toys, **toss-able toys** (balls, crinkle toys and furry mice) and **interactive toys** (feather wands, like the Cat Dancer). No matter what, make sure to use toys that your cat really likes. Condition the cat to anticipate these play sessions by putting the toys away after the session is over so they become excited when they see or hear the toys being brought out for a play session.

Try for two sessions a day. The time depends on the cat but 10-20 minutes is a typical length of time. Since play is partly predatory behavior in cats, it's all about killing the toy (the mouse) and the end result of this in nature is a meal. So, give your cat a nice (small) tasty reward at the end of the session so that the cycle of predation is complete in the cat and they can now feel like it's time to rest.

Conclusion

Watching your cat's body language, helping them avoid overstimulation and having regular, ritualized play sessions with food at the end can go a long way to helping your cat enjoy petting. Work with your cat and make it a fun experience for you both and the rewards will bring you both joy and satisfaction.

Please see related flyer "**Pet-induced Aggression**" for more information on the differences between overstimulation and petting-induced aggression.

Resources:

<https://www.dabird.com/>

<https://www.catdancer.com/>

<https://littlebigcat.com/behavior/overstimulation-petting-related-aggression/>

<https://littlebigcat.com/behavior/play-therapy/>

For more information:

International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants: m.iaabc.org

Certified Applied Animal Behaviorists: corecaab.org