



## Issue: Feline Body Language

Cats communicate using physical contact, vocalization, visual and chemical cues. Cats tend to meow more when interacting with humans so many people may presume a cat vocalizes to communicate; however, they typically use body language to communicate what they feel. Below is a cheat sheet on what the most common body postures, movement and vocalizations mean.

### Ears

- Facing forward – Content, relaxed, attentive, calm, may be showing interest
- Tilting sideways – Unsure or hesitant, conflicted, showing signs of weariness
- Bent flat against head – Fearful and nervous, trying to stay away and create distance

### Eyes

- Soft or Almond-Shaped – Calm, content
- Blinking – Showing they are not a threat, communicating trust
- Pupils Dilated – Alert and wary, fearful. Consider the cat's age, if the cat is in a dark area where they need to let more light in to see better by dilating their eyes or if the cat was recently medicated causing dilated eyes as a side-effect when looking at their pupils.
- Staring without blinking – Alert, wary, may feel threatened

### Whiskers

- Relaxed to the side – Calm and comfortable, can be indifferent or friendly
- Pulled back against face – Indication of fear. If the cat is eating or in a fight, they'll pull their whiskers back to protect them.
- Fanned out forward – Showing interest, curious, inquisitive

### Overall Body Posture

- Leaning forward – Showing interest, curious, might want to interact
- Lying down with limbs extended outward – Calm, relaxed, comfortable

- Lying down with belly displayed – Showing trust (but not an invitation to belly rubs)
- Crouched over, low body posture – Uncertain and wary or trying to stalk, preparing to pounce
- Leaning away – Trying to avoid interaction, wants to keep away
- Arched back without fur pilo-erect (hair flat) – Accepting affection or stretching
- Arched back with fur pilo-erect (hair standing up) – Feeling threatened or in a state of high arousal

## Tail

- Relaxed, held away from body (lying down) – Relaxed, content, and calm
- Held vertically, may have a slight curve at the very tip (standing up)– Friendly, confident
- Held vertically, quivering (standing up) – Signs of excitement, high arousal, may anticipate conflict
- Swaying from side to side – If at a slower pace, indication of mild interest. If at a higher rate, sign of arousal, irritability and potential for over-stimulation.
- End of tail thumping or twitching – Sign of agitation
- Tucked between legs or wrapped tightly around body – Nervous, fearful, unsure

## Vocalizations

- Meowing – Trying to communicate with humans or cats they cannot see. Pay attention to the volume and/or duration of the meow, because it could indicate stress or pain.
- Chirps/Trills – Typically used to greet someone!
- Growl – Upset and unhappy, good sign to give this cat some space
- Hissing – Uncomfortable, warning to back off, another sign to give this cat space

## Feet

- Kneading (also called “happy feet” and “making muffins”) – a sign of comfort, happiness, contentment. It may hurt if they do it on you if their nails are sharp, but it’s high praise from a cat if they like you enough to knead on or near you!

Now that you have an idea of what each body posture means, try not to just focus on just one body part. They still give us information, but in order to get a better understanding on what the cat is feeling, you need to look at the entire picture, which means looking at the cat’s whole body. Below offers some great visual examples of what a cat might look like when combining multiple body cues.

**For more information:**

International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants: [m.iaabc.org](http://m.iaabc.org)

Certified Applied Animal Behaviorists: [corecaab.org](http://corecaab.org)