

Overstimulation is an umbrella term that describes high-arousal behavior in cats. It can look different for different cats. Overstimulation can be triggered by a variety of things, including petting and handling. Most cats display overstimulation or low tolerance for more intrusive petting on occasion.

Like most animals, individual cats will vary in their comfort and desire for physical contact and petting. If petting goes on too long or if your cat is uncomfortable being handled, this is when we can see overstimulation occur. Often this becomes most noticeable once your cat has progressed to hissing, swatting, or biting your hands to let you know they no longer enjoy the interaction. But all cats will give some variety of earlier warning signs when they are becoming overwhelmed. Learning your cat's threshold for enjoyable petting and their signs of discomfort will not only prevent unwanted behavior like biting and swatting, but it will also improve the trust and bond between you and your cat.

When Interacting with Your Cat

- Stay within the cat's comfort zone. Always start with the parts of the body cat is most comfortable with (usually head and cheeks) and watch body language!
- Less is more. The idea is to leave the cat wanting more — so limit it to short petting sessions and stop before the cat signals that they have had enough.
- Give frequent breaks from petting to reassess whether cat is still enjoying handling. Watch for signs that the cat is soliciting petting, such as rubbing their 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.
- Offer other options for positive interaction with you, such as playing with interactive toys, training, and enrichment.
- Over time, if their boundaries are respected and positive association with petting built their tolerance may even increase!

Common Signs that Signal Overstimulation

- Dilated pupils
- Ears are back or to the side.
- Tense body — may suddenly stiffen.
- Frequent re-positioning of body.
- Cranky meow, hiss, or low growl.
- Skin twitches or rolls on back/sides.
- Fur puffing out on their body and tail

Feline Overstimulation



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- Hard stare, fixing eyes on you or your hands
 - Quick head jerk or turn, usually to look at your hand, or their own body.
 - Swishing tail either whole tail or just the end, usually a quick, rhythmic motion. Watch for change in movement rather than simply swishing.

When Should I Seek Additional Help?

If your cat is biting or scratching you, we recommend reaching out to a qualified cat behaviorist or veterinary behaviorist for an evaluation and behavior plan. Joybound Behavior Specialty Service can help you and your cat. Please contact us at **trainer@joybound.org** for more information!

If your cat has a sudden change in petting tolerance, we recommend contacting your veterinarian as this can be a sign that your cat is not feeling well.