Petting-related Aggression in Cats

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff

Many cat owners have had the pleasure of petting their cat, when seemingly all of a sudden, the cat bites their hand and runs way, often stopping to groom. This may be termed petting-induced, petting-related, assertion, or status-related aggression.

What causes this behavior?

Cats are normally not as social as dogs, nor do they have as much physical contact with others of their species. They may groom each other and sleep close to each other, but have few other contact behaviors. Petting is something outside of their normal instinctive behavior. There are multiple theories regarding the cause of petting-induced aggression.

Improper socialization: Cats need to be socialized to people very early in their life. Cats that have even 5 minutes of human contact each day of their life up to 7 weeks of age will be much more trusting of people than those cats that did not have human contact until they were older than 7 weeks. This theory does not totally explain aggressive behavior since properly socialized cats can still display petting-induced aggression.

Sensitivity threshold: According to this theory, the cat enjoys the human contact at first, but then the repetitiveness of the petting becomes irritating. The cat turns and bites as a way to say, "I've had enough." An analogy to human behavior can be made. If someone pats you on the back, it feels good. If they continue to pat you, it becomes annoying and you will either move away from them or ask them to stop.

Pain: If a cat has a painful medical condition, your touch or even the cat's perception that he may be touched in a painful area could cause the aggressive behavior.

Sudden awakening: Cats may find petting very pleasurable and actually fall asleep (even though their eyes may be open.) If they suddenly awake, they may not recognize the petting as such, but feel that you are trying to confine them. They instinctively bite and run (displaying petting-related aggressive behavior) before they are fully aware of what is going on.

Control: In this theory, aggressive behavior is explained by the cat's need to control the situation – when the petting starts, and when it stops. It is a way for the cat to assert his dominance.

How can petting-induced aggression be controlled?

There are several things you can do to decrease the chance your cat will suddenly bite you while being petted.

Have your cat examined by a veterinarian. It is important to find out if your cat has a medical condition that may cause pain when he is being petted. For example, arthritis in the neck, back or hip joints, or a sore tooth or ear infection may be painful. Petting may cause the pain to worsen or the cat to become anxious that you may touch a painful area.

Realize some cats just do not like to be cuddled. Each cat is unique. Some cats enjoy human contact, love to be held, and never seem to get enough petting. Others, for whatever reason, may enjoy human closeness (sitting on your lap) but not necessarily human-initiated contact. Understand that you will not be able to change the basic personality of your cat and need to accept him as he is.

Know the warning signs. Some owners will report that their cat suddenly turns and bites them. However, if the owner is very observant, certain clues will often become apparent:

- The ears may go back
- The skin or tail may start to twitch
- The pupils may dilate
- There may be a low growl
- The claws may become unsheathed
- The body may stiffen

If you see any of these signs, stop all movement and allow the cat to leave.

Predict the time. Once you are aware of the warning signs, you can start to time how long your cat likes to be petted. If the warning signs start about two minutes after you begin petting the cat, then never pet the cat more than a minute and a half. (But still watch for warning signs!)

Change the way you pet the cat. Some cats may prefer to receive short small strokes, similar to those they would receive if another cat were grooming them. Some cats prefer to be scratched under the chin or between the ears instead of receiving whole-body strokes.

Do NOT physically correct the cat. Do not give your cat any physical correction if he does turn and bite, since it may cause him to be more aggressive.

Use counter-conditioning. You may be able to relieve your cat's petting-related aggression by offering a reward for not

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biting. For example, after each stroke, offer your cat small bits of cooked chicken or other food he really likes. Repeat this several times a day, giving only a few strokes each time so you do not approach his threshold of intolerance. (Stop if your cat shows any signs of irritation.) In time, your cat may start to relate the petting to something very enjoyable (a food treat).

Summary

Many cats will show aggression after a certain amount of petting. Recognize the warning signs in your cat and stop petting before they occur. Make sure your cat does not have a medical condition that could cause pain or irritability. You may be able to make petting more enjoyable for your cat, or you may need to accept the fact that your cat only wishes to be near you, and not touched.

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