



Feline Overstimulation

Overstimulation refers to the **irritation or aggression that occurs when your cat passes their physical tolerance for handling**. The majority of cats experience overstimulation to some degree. However, individuals vary greatly in how long they will tolerate petting before finding it aversive (uncomfortable).

Cats often learn that cues they use to signal that they are uncomfortable will not be noticed, and that swatting or biting is the only way to successfully make unwanted petting stop. When a cat proactively attempts to stop petting (either by moving away or reacting defensively) it is called hitting “threshold.”

The best way to reduce incidences of overstimulation is to **stop petting your cat BEFORE they hit threshold**. Most cats will give you signals that they are becoming overstimulated. These signals include:

Tail flicking/twitching/lashing

Ears held back

Dilated pupils

Back muscles twitching or rippling

Piloerection (puffy hair) at base of tail

Head whipping

Hard vigorous head butts, increasing intensity

Scenting hand with open mouth

Hard stare

Cranky corrective meow when touched

Overstimulation generally falls into two categories

Social “Self” Overstimulation: These cats *will not self-regulate their overstimulation*—they are so invested in getting attention/petting they will actively push *themselves* over threshold. They will often solicit attention intensely/furiously before hitting threshold. *With these cats, YOU will be responsible for choosing when they need a break.*

Corrective Overstimulation: These cats will *generally attempt to regulate their overstimulation*. They may move away, and/or will use their body language to communicate that they need a break. Make sure you can give them one! *With these cats you will be responsible for noticing when they ask for a break.*

Overstimulation Best Practices

Consent checks

Let them pet YOU! When approaching your cat, *offer your hand to them* instead of immediately petting. If they sniff/engage, proceed with petting. If not, respect their choice. Similarly, *take periodic breaks* during petting sessions to make sure your cat is still engaged/not showing signs of overstimulation. If they choose not to re-engage (or are showing signs of overstimulation), *take a break from petting*. Try offering them a toy or treat instead! See our *Consent Checks handout* for more details.

Play as an outlet

Too much stimulation is a frustrating experience for these cats. Burning that frustrated energy through play can be a HUGE part of keeping cats under threshold. Make sure you use toys that put YOU in the driver's seat—wand toys/fishing pole toys, etc. To maintain novelty and avoid chewed strings, store them out of reach when not in use.

You might engage your cat in a longer play session before settling down with them, or you might keep a toy on hand and *switch back and forth between petting and play*. This technique can be transformative! Many cats can go from having hair triggers to being able to be pet for long periods simply by being offered the chance to periodically switch between petting and play. Check out our *Happy Hunters handout* for tips!

Reward desired behavior

Many cats have learned that their signals will be ignored. This can lead to them escalating to a swat or bite sooner than they "need" to. One way to encourage them to increase their tolerance is to reward them with something they like (treats, favorite toy) when they display appropriate social behavior while under threshold. Catch them giving you a nice head bump (even if tail is twitching), then *stop petting* and *reward*. The idea is *cat communicating through body language (instead of swatting or biting) = something good happens*.