



'Leave me alone' response caused by petting

Some cats really enjoy being stroked and held, some tolerate it and some put up with very small amounts before they let you know it's enough. It can be hard to tell if a cat enjoys being stroked as they might initially behave in a friendly way and seem to ask for attention. They approach and meow, rub against your legs and even jump into your lap and purr, however if you respond by stroking them or even just paying them attention, they suddenly lash out with their claws or bite hard enough to hurt.

Why does this happen?

No one really knows, and this type of behaviour is not well understood, but it might be a sign that the cat was not touched enough as a kitten. Some cat behaviourists think that repetitive physical contact such as stroking can become unpleasant & even painful for some cats & this is what causes them to react in this way. They could feel overstimulated which excites them & puts them on edge or the repetitive stroking causes static electricity to build in their fur. Or they might be feeling pain along their back. Imagine if someone rubbed your back in the same spot over and over again – it could become unpleasant or annoying very quickly and you would want it to end – maybe this is how these cats feel.

What can I do?

- It's always a good idea to have your vet check for any obvious things which could be causing your cat pain
- Adopt another active cat so that their excess energy & affection can be directed onto their playmate
- Provide an outdoor covered enclosure where your cat can go for a while to be distracted & physically stimulated
- Provide more structure by playing with them at the same times every day. Use wand type toys and balls, not your hands, fingers or feet. Rotate toys so they don't get bored. Play only for short periods of 5 minutes.
- You could work with your cat to find out if they have a 'stroking threshold'. Stroke them once only & play close attention to their reaction. Learn to recognise if they are giving your advance signals that they are not comfortable eg tensing up, ears flattening to their head, twitching tail or fur standing up along their back.

Take these very small steps:

- When your cat asks for attention don't try to pick them up
- Reach out with one finger (which they might sniff) & then give them one short, gentle stroke around their neck/head. No more than one stroke and don't go beyond their shoulders!
- Put one treat on the floor next to them, walk away & ignore them
- Later when they're asking for more affection repeat the finger and treat steps
- If you're sitting down & the cat jumps on your lap stand up so they can jump to the floor gently. Don't try to move them off with your hands
- Take it slowly. After several weeks you could try stroking twice in a slightly different area of the neck at each interaction but pay close attention & if you feel your cat tense, see their ears flatten or their tail twitch, stop immediately and remove yourself

Don't absent-mindedly touch or stroke your cat outside these sessions

Your cat will learn that one stroke means one treat is on its way. Stick to this. Don't stroke twice at first or give two treats. Walk away until the next time & ignore your cat. Leave them wanting more.

What not to do

NEVER physically punish your cat by hitting them on the nose or swatting them

NEVER forcefully throw your cat off your knee

NEVER shout at your cat

If you do any of these things, at best your cat will become afraid to come near you at all which is not a good result

If all else fails it may mean your cat is just wired this way. Cats are like people - some like physical contact and some don't. Accept what they are able to give and don't push their limits. Try to accept them for who they are and enjoy what they can give. Appreciate the way they display affection – they might rub your legs or follow you around the house, they might chat to you, hang out next to you whilst watching TV or sleep on your bed at night. Relish the time you spend together and the companionship they bring **without the need to touch**.

As a very last resort you may want to ask your vet if medication can help, however if used this should only be a temporary measure.