

Why Is My Cat Biting Me?

CatChannel behavior expert Marilyn Krieger, CCBC, explains that cats can get overstimulated and respond aggressively.

By Marilyn Krieger

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Q: My wife and I have a 13-month-old male cat named Willy. He was neutered when we got him in June. He is extremely affectionate, zooms around the house getting into anything he can find to make into a toy, he sleeps with us at night, etc.

The big problem we have with Willy is the following: When we pet him he purrs and purrs and just loves us to death, and then all of a sudden he will use his rear legs to try to move our hand(s) away from him, while simultaneously biting our hands, at times hard enough to draw blood.

Please, what is wrong? And how can we correct his biting?

A: Based on your description of the problem, it sounds like you are petting Willy on his stomach and that after a while, Willy is responding with what we call petting-induced aggression. Petting-induced aggression occurs when the petting becomes too much for a cat. He might have sensitive areas or the strokes are too repetitive or perhaps while falling asleep, he is startled awake by the petting and then responds instinctually by biting.

Stomachs are vulnerable areas on cats and should either not be stroked or stroked with caution since they are well-protected by both teeth and claws. There are some trusting and self-confident cats who enjoy being petted on the stomach and Willy may be one of these cats until he becomes overstimulated by petting. I recommend that you play it safe. Instead of petting Willy on his stomach, pet him on his sides, head, neck and back.

Cats usually give warnings before biting. It's up to us to learn to recognize the body-language cues that are given before the bite. Some of the cues to look for include: rippling of the fur and skin, tenseness, tail thumping, ears laid back, head turning toward the hand, whiskers flattened against the face, vocalizing and pushing the hand away with the back feet. An exception is when cats are startled awake. Startled cats typically don't give warnings before biting.

If you see any warning signals from Willy while you are petting him, stop petting him immediately and take your hands off of him. Wait until he calms down before starting to pet him again. Don't pet him for very long and vary the strokes and the areas you are petting. Always stop at the first sign of his being uncomfortable with the stroking.

When Willy does bite, instead of pulling your hand away, try gently pushing in toward his mouth. He will let go, thus minimizing the seriousness of the bite. At first, pushing in toward the mouth is difficult to do, since we are hard-wired to pull away when bitten. A cat is instinctually driven to bite down and increase the bite hold when an animal is trying to escape, thus increasing the odds of a meal. Though you are not prey, instincts take over and can result in a serious bite.

Naturally, the best course of action is to avoid being bitten. If Willy is responding to his stomach being petted, then consider not touching and stroking that sensitive area.