



## HOW TO INTERACT SAFELY WITH CATS

Cats are complex animals that may display a variety of behaviors in any given situation. Any cat—from your best friend at home to the stray cat on the street—will react differently, and possibly unexpectedly, to people, places, and other animals.

Animal behavior can shift from moment to moment, so it is important to constantly be aware of changes in the cat's behavior and in the environment. The cat's personality plays a major role in how they will respond to situations and people. Because there is such variation between each cat and their environment, it is important to understand how to interact with cats as safely as possible in any circumstance.

### Approach the cat in a safe manner

Here are some basic tips for approaching a cat in a non-threatening manner:

- Before you interact with a cat, it is important to be aware of your body language.
  - Present your side to the cat from a standing or squatting position.
  - Don't lean over the cat.
  - Let the cat come to you rather than approaching the cat.
  - Avoid direct eye contact (don't stare directly into the cat's eyes).
  - Slowly extend your hand toward the cat to sniff.
  - Keep petting to a minimum to minimize the chance of overstimulation.
  - Avoid petting the cat's belly.
  - Don't ever put your face close to the cat's face.
  - Speak in a friendly voice.

### Look for signs of stress in the cat

When interacting with any cat, it is vital that you are aware of what the cat is communicating to you. It is usually easy to identify a cat that clearly doesn't want you to approach; it will hiss, growl, hide, run away, or roll over onto its back. However, cats may show more subtle signs of stress, even while you are petting them. These warning signs indicate that the cat is uncomfortable and may include:

- Ears pulled back
- Lip licking
- Paw raised, possibly to swat
- Leaning away
- Dilated pupils
- Crouching down
- Quick head turn (toward hand)
- Jerky movements
- Urinating while interacting with you
- Avoiding eye contact/looking away
- Hackles raised (hair on back of neck standing up)
- Tail flicking (this could be just the tip of the tail or the entire tail)
- Skin on the back rippling

Based on the signals cats use to communicate, it is important to know when to back off and when it is OK to continue interacting with the cat.

- Stop petting or otherwise interacting with the cat if you notice the following:
  - A change in the cat's behavior from relaxed postures to a tense body
  - The cat becoming overstimulated (tail twitching, eyes dilating, skin rippling)
  - Sudden changes in the environment (loud noises, lighting changes, another animal approaching, etc.)

### **Safety tips for cat owners**

As a cat owner, it is your responsibility to know your cat's personality, stress signals and limits; to avoid situations that put your cat in a potentially stressful and dangerous situation; and to watch for signs of stress when encountering people, animals, and situations.

- Encourage strangers to let your cat approach on their own terms, rather than allowing them to approach and pet your cat.
- Rather than holding onto your cat so strangers can interact with them, allow your cat to remain on the floor or item they have jumped up on (like the furniture), so they can easily move away from a person or animal if they feel uncomfortable.

**For more information on cat behavior and handling, please visit <http://ddfl.org/behavior-help> for behavior handouts or to sign up for a free behavior helpline appointment.**