

Behavior Tips: *Basic feline body language* Provided by: ACVB American College of Veterinary Behaviorists

Cats are a unique species - they are solitary predators, but also can be prey. As a result, cats are very good at hiding signs of illness or injury, and will hide when they feel threatened. Watching body language helps us to understand how the cat is feeling: ferocious king of the household jungle, neutral observer of the social environment, or stressed, frightened or ill companion?

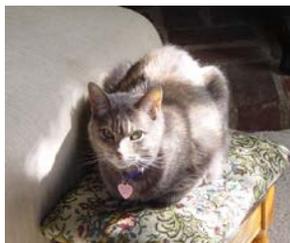
Information contained in body language is usually presented through a combination of redundant signals. Important messages are repeated and supported by cues from different body regions (i.e., back and tail, ears and whiskers). When trying to interpret body language it is important to look at the whole animal and all signals given, then evaluate the situation, environment, and context, and finally determine whether or how to approach the cat.

Cats are subtle and they are essentially speaking a different language than we do. They can change messages and arousal levels quickly. Remember that cats withdraw if threatened, so if the cat's early warning signals to leave them alone are ignored, they may stop signaling. Cats in this state may be pushed to the point of biting or scratching. Their reflexes and reaction times are much faster than those of most targets, so humans, cats and dogs can be injured. Everyone benefits if they learn to understand the cat's body language so that aggression and injury are avoided. Being able to recognize when the cat is stressed or ill is especially important because health and welfare issues are most easily and humanely addressed early.

A happy, relaxed cat will have his head up, back straight (not arched), and tail either out behind him or up over his back, sometimes curled in a question mark shape. His eyes will have normal oblong pupil size with a soft gaze and forward but relaxed, neutral ears. His fur will be smooth against his body. If he is lying down, he might have one or more of his legs stretched out from his body. He might meow or purr as someone approaches.



Relaxed, approachable



Neutral, observing, prefers to be left alone

A fearful cat will have a lowered body and may press himself against a wall or corner or try to hide. His head will be pulled close to his body. His legs will be tucked tightly under him or coiled in anticipation of escape. His tail will be tucked or wrapped tightly around him and his ears swiveled backwards. His pupils will be dilated, he may lick his lips, swallow or gulp frequently. Be careful, this fearful cat can easily be pushed to resort to defensive aggression if he feels the threat intensify.

Play will often combine signs of happy, alert body posture - ears and whiskers forward, but also include various sequences of stalking, chasing and pouncing behavior mixed with swatting or rolling. Frequent pauses and role reversal should occur. With play, these signs are often presented outside of the typical order of hunting or fighting and signals are often more exaggerated. In play, cats or kittens may roll on their backs with all four feet ready to use, then jump up and quickly approach again. You might even see a "Halloween cat" presentation during social play between kittens. Vocalizations vary. The chirr can start a play

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interaction, and squeaks or chirps appear if the cat becomes highly aroused during play. Play can be silent, but kittens may hiss at each other during play.



Curious, just before pounce on dog in play

Most types of aggression are intended to make someone or something go away. Vocalizations associated with aggression include a hiss, growl, spit and a shriek/scream. Cats who are defensively aggressive can look like fearful cats, but now the tail is lashing, the ears are back against the head, and hair may be standing out from the body (piloerection). If the defensively aggressive cat is in a crouch or standing, he will try to avoid anyone who approaches. If the approach continues, the cat may feel trapped, and turn on his back to defend himself with feet up and claws unsheathed.

A cat that is beginning to show aggression in a more confident manner may stand with straight legs and hindquarters higher than the rest of the torso, the tail down or perpendicular to the ground and ears swiveled out to the side. He will directly stare at his adversary with a frontal approach or stance. This cat could be very still or begin twitching his tail. *If your cat begins to show this type of body posture, calmly remove yourself from the room and allow the cat time to calm down before trying to interact.*

You can tell if your cat is interested in interacting with you by watching him. *Signs that he is more relaxed and interested* include a paw or leg stretched away from the body, tail loose behind the body, whiskers forward and/or ears forward. *Signs that he is more worried or would prefer to be left alone* include head and neck tucked close to the body, legs and/or tail wrapped or tucked close to the body, whiskers back flat against the face and ears to the side or back.

Observing, prefers to be left alone



If your cat is giving signs he would prefer to be left alone, please respect that and do not force interaction on him. The more this is respected, the more he will trust you. Trust is important, and if your cat trusts you he will allow you to help get him the best treatment possible when he is ill.