

# Why Does Kitty Lick Me?

BY RITA REIMERS



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**I**t's a common occurrence in my household: I'm watching TV late at night when one of my cats decides to curl up beside me. Then the nighttime ritual of kitty baths begins. Before I know it, there's another cat sitting on my lap, and the two begin grooming one another. Soon, I feel a sandpaper tongue on my arm as they decide that perhaps I might need a bath, too.

It's natural for cats to bathe one another before settling down for the night. But why do I suddenly get included? Do they love me? Or do I just need a bath, too? The answer is yes and yes.

## **Mutual grooming**

If you find that your cats decide to groom and/or lick you, that's a mighty high honor indeed! In nature, cats groom one another to express acceptance and friendship and promote social bonding. During mutual grooming, or

allogrooming, cats will often bathe one another in areas they can't themselves reach, such as the top of the head or down their back.

It's interesting to find that the more senior ranking cat in the hierarchy will initiate grooming of the lower-ranking cats, rather than the other way around. In my household, alpha cat BooBoo will pick one of the cats at random and start bathing. I'm sure the goal is to receive a good grooming himself in return.

At times, I've noticed my cats ask one another directly for some bathing

assistance. They will go over to another cat and lower their heads, asking to be groomed, much the way a parrot will lower its head asking for a rub. Sometimes, cats will bathe one another simultaneously as well, especially if they are siblings or a well-bonded pair. My brother/sister pair, BooBoo and Pinky, will often curl up together forming a tight little circle so they can bathe each other at the same time. It's adorable to watch!

One reason cats bathe so much at night before going to sleep is to wash away the scent of the day's catch or, in our case, the scent of the meals we provide our housecats.

In nature, cats rid themselves of the scent of the day's hunting spoils, so no predators will come around looking

for food. It's how they protect themselves from attacks while they sleep and keep their kittens safe from harm.

So, when your cat bathes you, you're being accepted as one of them, a member of their family to be protected from harm, and she is also strengthening that bond between you.

### A kiss is just a kiss

There are times when a kitty kiss is, well, just a kiss. I have to brag here a little bit: Each one of my cats knows what to do when I ask them for a "kiss." For example, Tinkerbelle will come right over to me and lick my forehead when I ask for a kiss. Punkin will lick my cheek, and Pinky will give me a head bump (not a kiss, but I'll take it!).

At times when I see a little tiff brewing between two of my cats, I will go over to them and say "kiss," and they will start to lick one another. Often this



### When Licking Means Trouble

Sometimes cats use grooming as a way to alleviate anxiety and calm themselves in stressful situations. Excessive grooming, called **psychogenic alopecia**, can drive cats to lick themselves bald and cause raw hot patches on their skin.

Endorphins are released when your cat licks, which is a self-soothing mechanism for your cat.

If your cat is **obsessively grooming** day and night to the point of having bald patches, consult your veterinarian. It could be parasites, situational anxiety or even plain old boredom that is causing this behavior.

will take the wind out of their sails and defuse the disagreement, resulting in a bond-strengthening grooming session instead of a fight.

The next time your cat decides to give you a kiss/bath, go ahead and let her. You'll be strengthening the deep bond between you even more. 🐾



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