



Some Personal Space, Please!

BY RITA REIMERS

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Cats. So cuddly and sweet, soft and furry, pleasant to touch and caress. Cats are at their cutest, it seems, when they are sleeping, whether they're all curled up in a ball or lying happily on their backs enjoying a sunspot. Who could resist reaching down to give that exposed belly a rub or two? It's right there, wide open, just asking for your hand to gently massage the furry softness of a squishy kitty tum-tum.

Just as you barely start caressing that furry softness — wham! Before you can even react, all four of your cat's legs have wrapped around your hand like a Venus flytrap; one that has claws and maybe even teeth that are grabbing hold of your bare skin!

Your cat has just taught you a very painful lesson about her boundaries.

Laying some boundaries

So, what just happened? Most likely, you triggered your cat's "fight or flight" response and she reached out to protect herself out of instinct. Cats are both hunter and hunted in the wild, which is why they have such quick reflexes and a heightened awareness of their surroundings.

When a cat sleeps tummy-up, it's a high honor and a sign of ultimate trust in her human, but that doesn't mean it's OK to touch that most vulnerable underside.

Usual "off-limits" spots can include:

Tummy: As I said, an exposed underside doesn't mean she is extending an invitation to touch. There are cats who enjoy belly rubs — most of my cats do. However, if you want

to test the waters and see if your cat would enjoy a belly rub, approach cautiously, and don't do it while she's sleeping.

Feet: Your cat's feet are ultra-sensitive, as they are used both to hunt for dinner and to protect herself. Nerves in her feet are very delicate, which is why most cats don't like to have their feet touched.

Tail: Your cat uses her tail for balance. Sometimes you can pet the tail as part of a full back stroke, but some cats are very sensitive to tail touch. The movements of your cat's tail also communicate how she's feeling — to you, potential predators and cat pals, too.

Eyes: Have you ever tried to wipe a goopy eye? I think we can all understand why this would be a sensitive area for your cat. Her eyes are also very light sensitive, so shining lights into her eyes would be very painful for her.

Whiskers: Some cats don't mind having their whiskers stroked; others dislike anyone or anything touching their delicate antennae. Whiskers are



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👉 Increasing your cat's touch limits



There are ways to get your cat to accept more touching, even in those off-limit areas. You need to be able to touch your cat, not just for bonding and affection, but also to ensure her physical health and well-being.

Try these methods when your cat is relaxed but not sleeping:

Gently squeeze her feet to show the nails, then let go. Get her used to this so you can trim those sharp claws as needed.

Stroke your cat lightly while she's on your lap,

and let your hand stray slowly to her belly and other "off-limits" areas for just a few light pets.

Give her some soothing sweet talk while petting her to help her relax and trust you more deeply.

Wipe your cat's eyes with a soft, warm cloth when she is relaxed, so

it will be easier to clean her eyes when it's really needed.

Brush your cat with a soothing massaging type of brush, both to prevent hair mats and to deepen your bond. My cats all line up as soon as I touch one of their brushes!

what your cat uses to gauge if she will fit in certain places. Whiskers also sense vibrations in the air, and those vibrations are what helps a cat hunt and maneuver at night. Never cut your cat's whiskers, as she will feel lost without them and become stressed.

Top of the head: While most cats love to have their faces and ears rubbed, if you approach them from overhead, this puts them on the defense. For cats, this feels like a hawk swooping down to attack them, and most of them will either freeze with fear or swat your hand away.

Note that ANY spot can become off-limits — often in just a moment's notice. Watch your cat's body language for clues when to stop petting her. We often keep mindlessly petting our cats as we watch TV with them on our laps, not noticing that kitty has had enough until we feel her teeth and claws.

Before she ever bites you, though, there will be signs that she's ready for you to stop touching. Take notice if:

- ❖ your cat's skin begins to twitch
- ❖ her tail starts whipping around
- ❖ her ears go back or to the side
- ❖ she starts making a low growling sound

A bite may be coming next if you keep touching her.

When it hurts

There is one distinct difference to be on the lookout for, and that is if your cat appears to be in pain when touched. If she cries and/or pulls away when touched or reaches over to grab your hand (versus biting down) to stop you from touching a certain spot, this

could be a sign of a medical issue. Seek medical attention immediately if you suspect your cat is in pain.

Respect your cat

More than just respecting your cat's body-touch boundaries, also respect her place in the household. Give your cat places she can call her own — cozy beds, soft blankets and cat trees — where she can go when she wants to be alone and not bothered by anyone. Cats do need time alone, just as much as they need time with their special

humans. After all, there's nothing sweeter than a cozy, self-confident cat taking a nap upside down in her favorite spot. 🐾



Devoting her entire life to cats, **Rita Reimers** is founding owner of JFCATS.com, a feline health and wellness company. JF CATS has been providing cat behavior services and cats-only pet sitting for the last 15 years. Rita and her business partner, Linda Hall, are also starting a line of USA-made cat toys and bedding, called Gracie & Esther. You can reach Rita directly on Facebook and Twitter @TheCatAnalyst, and on Instagram @RitaReimersTheCatAnalyst.

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