Ask My Cats

What your cat is *saying*

The golden rule: read the whole cat. One signal is only a hint. Look at the ears, eyes, tail and body together, and think about what is happening around your cat.

EARS



Forward and upright
Relaxed, alert or interested.



Sideways ("airplane")
Annoyed or nervous. Check the rest of the body.



Flat against the head
Fear or a warning, most of all with wide pupils.



Swivelling
Listening closely. During handling it can mean discomfort.

EYES



Soft, half-closed
Calm and comfortable.



Slow blink
A friendly, non-threatening signal.



Wide pupils
Fear or excitement. Ears and body tell you which.



Narrow slits, staring
Frustration, or "enough". Check everything else.



Tight squint that stays
Possible pain. See a vet if it lasts.

WHISKERS AND MOUTH



Relaxed, out to the side
Relaxed.



Fanned forward
Alert or interested, or has had enough petting.



Pulled back flat
Frightened, nervous or defensive.



Mouth chattering
Excited at birds. The exact reason is not known.



Hissing
A warning to back off. Never punish it.

TAIL



Held high
Friendly greeting



Hooked tip
Friendly, curious



Quivering
Excited greeting



Low and loose
Relaxed, or uneasy



Tucked under
Fear, sometimes pain



Puffed up
Scared or angry



Lashing
Irritated: stop



Slow swish
Focused, or frustrated

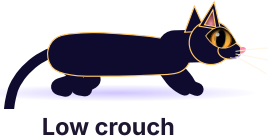
POSTURE



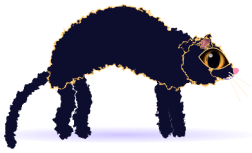
Standing
Neutral. Read the face and tail.



Settled
Relaxed. Hunched and uncomfortable can mean illness.



Low crouch
Fear, or hunting. Ears and body tell you.



Arched and fluffed
Keep away: scared or angry.

Eight moods, and *what to do*



Relaxed & content

"All is well in my kingdom."

- Ears relaxed and forward
- Soft, half-closed eyes
- Whiskers relaxed

Do: Leave things as they are.



Curious & alert

"Ooh, what was that?"

- Ears up, turned to the target
- Wide eyes
- Whiskers fanned forward

Do: Let them investigate at their own pace.



Affectionate & trusting

"You are my favourite person."

- Slow blinks
- Tail held high, maybe hooked
- Soft, relaxed face

Do: Look past them, blink slowly, hold still.



Playful: hunting mode

"Don't move. I'm going in."

- Wide pupils, forward ears
- Low crouch and wiggle
- Twitching tail

Do: Use a wand toy, then a treat. Never hands.



Annoyed or overstimulated

"That's enough. I mean it."

- Ears turning sideways
- Tail flicking or lashing
- Slitted or very wide pupils

Do: Stop touching. Give space.



Anxious or scared

"I don't feel safe here."

- Ears flat or sideways
- Wide pupils
- Whiskers pulled back

Do: Do not stare or corner. Offer a hiding place.



Defensive: back off

"Stay away. This is a warning."

- Hiss or growl
- Ears flat
- Arched back, puffed tail

Do: Leave the cat alone. Never punish.



Uncomfortable: could be pain

"I don't feel right, but I hide it."

- A squint that stays
- Hunched or tucked body
- Hiding, unusually quiet

Do: Call your vet if it lasts or you are worried.

Call your vet if

- Your cat has not eaten properly for 24 hours
- Eating, drinking, litter box habits, grooming or voice change
- A squint stays, or your cat hides or hunches for long
- Your cat bites or flinches when touched in one spot
- Anything seems off. You know your cat best.

Please never

- Punish a hiss, a swat or a bite
- Stare at, corner or chase a scared cat
- Reach into a hiding place
- Pick up a frightened cat
- Pet past the first sign of "enough"

Say hello the cat way

- Look slightly past your cat, and blink slowly
- Hold your hand out, still
- Let your cat come to you
- Keep petting short. Pause to see if your cat wants more.

Good to know. A purr does not always mean happy: cats also purr when stressed or in pain. A belly roll shows trust, not an invitation. This guide is not a diagnosis. Body language alone cannot tell you whether a cat is ill.

Sources: International Cat Care · Fear Free Happy Homes · Cornell Feline Health Center · Humane World for Animals · VCA Animal Hospitals · Feline Grimace Scale (Evangelista 2019) · slow-blink study (Humphrey 2020). Try the free interactive decoder: **askmycats.com/cat-body-language**