# Cat body language

## Read the animal before you say hello.

Cats rarely warn for long: they freeze, hide or flee first [1]. In any animal, read the whole body: one sign alone can mislead [2, 3].



### Calm ~~

Relaxed and at ease. **Fine to say hello, if they come to you.**

**EYES** soft; slow blinks

**TAIL** up, with a curved tip, to greet

**BODY** loose, standing easy

[1, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8]

### Alert

Interested, assessing. **Pause. Let them look first.**

**EARS** upright, toward the sound

**EYES** open and watching

**TAIL** still; the tip may twitch

[5]

### Playful

An invitation to play. **Keep it gentle and short, with breaks.**

**STALK** creeps low, then pounces

**BELLY** up in play: not a request to rub

**TOYS** a wand toy, not your hand

[1, 9, 10]

### Stressed

Uneasy. **Stop what you are doing. Give room.**

**EARS** turned out to the sides

**EYES** pupils dilated

**BODY** crouched and tense

[1, 4, 5]

### Fearful

Wants to get away. **Back off. Never corner, reach or lean over.**

**EARS** flat, sideways or back

**EYES** pupils fully dilated

**BODY** crouched low, tail tucked in

[1, 5, 9]

### Warning

A clear request for space. **Stop. Move away calmly, and don't stare back.**

**EARS** flattened to the head

**MOUTH** open; hiss, spit or growl

**BODY** arched, side-on, fur raised

[4, 9]

## Meeting a shelter cat

Ask the staff first, and read the kennel card [2, 11]. Then: [1, 6, 12, 13, 14]



1. Get down to the cat's level. Don't lean over or stare.
2. Hold out a soft hand, not too close. Let the cat choose to sniff.
3. Stroke the head and cheeks. Avoid the belly and the base of the tail.
4. Let a hiding cat hide: a hiding box lowers stress.

**SOURCES** All sources read 14 October 2026.

**1** Rodan I et al. (2022). AAFP/ISFM Cat Friendly veterinary interaction guidelines: approach and handling techniques. J Feline Med Surg 24:1093–1132. doi:10.1177/1098612X221128760

**2** ASPCA. Dog bite prevention. aspca.org

**3** Beerda B et al. (2000). Behavioural and hormonal indicators of enduring environmental stress in dogs. Anim Welf 9:49–62. doi:10.1017/S0962728600022247

**4** RSPCA. Understanding your cat's behaviour. rspca.org.uk

**5** Kessler MR, Turner DC (1997). Stress and adaptation of cats housed singly, in pairs and in groups in boarding catteries. Anim Welf 6:243–254. Table as reproduced by Maddie's Fund.

**6** Humphrey T et al. (2020). The role of cat eye narrowing movements in cat–human communication. Sci Rep 10:16503. doi:10.1038/s41598-020-73426-0

**7** Humphrey T et al. (2020). Slow blink eye closure in shelter cats is related to quicker adoption. Animals 10:2256. doi:10.3390/ani10122256

**8** Cafazzo S, Natoli E (2009). The social function of tail up in the domestic cat. Behav Processes 80:60–66. doi:10.1016/j.beproc.2008.09.008

**9** ASPCA. Aggression in cats. aspca.org

**10** International Cat Care. Why do cats..? icatcare.org (updated 26 Sept 2025)

**11** Humane Society of Silicon Valley (2025). Shy dog training guide: consent petting. hssv.org. Shelter practice, not a trial.

Corrections: hello@petnecto.com

**12** van der Leij WJR et al. (2019). The effect of a hiding box on stress levels and body weight in Dutch shelter cats. PLoS ONE 14:e0223492. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0223492

**13** Ellis SLH et al. (2015). The influence of body region, handler familiarity and order of region handled on the domestic cat's response to being stroked. Appl Anim Behav Sci 173:60–67. doi:10.1016/j.applanim.2014.11.002

**14** Kry K, Casey R (2007). The effect of hiding enrichment on stress levels and behaviour of domestic cats in a shelter setting. Anim Welf 16:375–383. doi:10.1017/S0962728600027196