

FREE GUIDE

Is My Cat Stressed?

12 Signs That Are Easy to Miss

A practical checklist for cat owners, with notes on what each sign tends to mean.

Stress in cats is rarely obvious. Unlike dogs, cats do not usually show distress loudly. They withdraw, they shift habits, they change in small ways that are easy to miss or explain away.

This checklist covers the 12 most diagnostically useful signs, from the ones most people notice to the ones that tend to go unrecognized for weeks. Each sign includes a short note on what it tends to mean in practice.

Not every sign means the same thing in every cat. Context matters. But if several of these apply to your cat right now, something is worth looking into.

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01. Hiding in unusual places

Your cat retreats to spots it does not normally use: deep under furniture, inside cupboards, behind appliances. This is different from choosing a favourite quiet corner. The location is unfamiliar and the withdrawal is sustained.

WHAT IT TENDS TO MEAN

A cat who hides occasionally in a preferred spot is resting. A cat who retreats to a new location and does not emerge voluntarily is communicating that something feels unsafe.

02. Reduced appetite or refusing meals

A stressed cat will often eat less, eat more slowly, or stop eating altogether. This can happen even when the food has not changed. In cats, food refusal lasting more than 24 hours is always worth investigating, because prolonged anorexia carries health risks beyond the stress itself.

WHAT IT TENDS TO MEAN

Appetite change alongside any other sign on this list raises the priority of the situation. Appetite change alone, with no other signs and a clear recent trigger, is usually transient.

03. Grooming more than usual

Over-grooming, particularly on the belly, inner legs, or tail base, is a classic stress response in cats. It is self-soothing behavior. Mild cases produce a slightly thin coat. Severe cases produce bald patches or skin irritation.

WHAT IT TENDS TO MEAN

Bald patches without over-grooming visible can indicate a medical skin condition rather than stress. A vet check is appropriate when patches appear without an obvious behavioral explanation.

04. Grooming less than usual

The opposite pattern. A cat that stops grooming, or grooms only minimally, and develops a dull, matted, or unkempt coat is often either in pain, unwell, or in a state of significant low-level depression. This sign is easy to miss because it develops gradually.

WHAT IT TENDS TO MEAN

Reduced grooming in older cats is sometimes the first visible sign of arthritis, dental pain, or kidney disease. It should not be attributed to stress without a medical assessment.

05. Increased vocalisation

A cat that suddenly starts meowing more than usual, particularly at night or when left alone, is expressing distress. The sound is often different from normal social vocalisation: more persistent, lower in tone, or with an urgent quality. Senior cats sometimes vocalise more due to cognitive or medical changes rather than behavioral stress.

WHAT IT TENDS TO MEAN

Sudden vocalisation increase in a previously quiet cat warrants a vet visit to rule out pain, hyperthyroidism, or cognitive decline before assuming a behavioral cause.

06. Litter box changes

Going outside the litter box, going more frequently, straining, or producing very small amounts are all potential stress signals. They can also indicate a urinary infection, bladder inflammation, or obstruction. Stress and medical causes often occur together and reinforce each other.

WHAT IT TENDS TO MEAN

A male cat straining to urinate with little or no output is a medical emergency. Do not wait to see if it resolves.

07. Increased reactivity or jumpiness

A stressed cat startles easily, reacts to sounds it previously ignored, and may flee from interactions it normally welcomed. The threshold for what registers as a threat is lower than usual. This is the nervous system in a heightened state, not a personality change.

WHAT IT TENDS TO MEAN

Sudden reactivity with no apparent cause, particularly in older cats, can sometimes indicate pain that makes touch or proximity feel threatening. Worth investigating if the jumpiness is new.

08. Reduced play or disengagement

A cat that has stopped engaging with toys, interactive play sessions, or activities it previously enjoyed is showing a significant shift in emotional state. Play requires a degree of safety and confidence. When those are absent, the motivation disappears.

WHAT IT TENDS TO MEAN

Gradual reduction in play is also a normal part of ageing. A sudden drop in a younger cat is more diagnostically significant than a slow decline over years in a senior.

09. Tail tucked or held low

Tail carriage is one of the most reliable real-time indicators of a cat's emotional state. A tail held low, tucked under the body, or puffed and rigid communicates discomfort, fear, or defensive arousal. A relaxed cat carries its tail loosely upright or in a gentle curve.

WHAT IT TENDS TO MEAN

Reading tail language is most useful in combination with other signs. A low tail on a cat approaching food with relaxed posture is not the same as a low tail on a cat pressed against a wall.

10. Dilated pupils in a calm environment

Pupils naturally dilate in low light. But dilated pupils in a well-lit room, particularly when the cat's posture is tense or withdrawn, indicate elevated arousal or fear. This is an involuntary physiological response, not something the cat can control.

WHAT IT TENDS TO MEAN

Persistent dilated pupils in all lighting conditions can indicate a neurological or ocular condition. If the pupils do not constrict normally in bright light, consult a vet.

11. Spraying or marking in new locations

Urine marking by a previously non-marking cat, or marking in new locations, is often a response to feeling that the territory is threatened or insecure. It is most common after the arrival of a new cat, a change in household composition, or the presence of outdoor cats visible through windows.

WHAT IT TENDS TO MEAN

Marking and inappropriate elimination are different behaviors with different causes. The distinction matters for the response. Marking is almost always vertical and small in volume. Inappropriate elimination is usually horizontal and larger in volume.

12. Changes in social behavior

A cat that suddenly seeks more proximity than usual, becomes clingy, or follows you from room to room is often looking for reassurance. The opposite pattern, a previously affectionate cat that withdraws from contact, is equally informative. Both are departures from the cat's established baseline and both are worth noticing.

WHAT IT TENDS TO MEAN

Social withdrawal in a cat that was previously interactive is one of the most commonly dismissed stress signs. It is easy to explain away as "just being a cat." Taken alongside other signs, it is often the clearest indicator that something has shifted.

A NOTE ON USING THIS LIST

One sign in isolation is rarely diagnostic. A cat that hides occasionally is not necessarily stressed. A cat that hides, has stopped eating well, and is grooming less than usual is showing a pattern worth taking seriously.

The most useful thing you can do with this list is compare it against your cat's normal baseline. Any sign that represents a genuine change from how your cat usually is carries more weight than one that has always been part of its character.

If several of these signs are present at once, or if any single sign has lasted more than 48 hours alongside a change in appetite, the first step is always a vet visit to rule out a physical cause. Stress and illness often occur together.

A cat that is stressed is not being difficult. It is communicating, in the only language available to it, that something is wrong.

QUICK REFERENCE

- + Multiple signs together are more significant than any single sign.
- + Compare against your cat's personal baseline, not a general standard.
- + Signs lasting more than 48 hours with appetite change: vet first.
- + Stress and medical causes can occur simultaneously and reinforce each other.
- + Hiding, reduced play, and coat changes are the three most commonly missed signs.

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