

Cat Body Language: Decoding the Ears

It might be hard to believe, but cat ears contain over two dozen muscles, enabling them to swivel 180-degrees forward, backward, up and down. Although they pan around like radar dishes scanning for sounds, they're not just for hearing.

A cat's ears and tail (as we'll discuss later) are a vital part of cat body language, and proper interpretation can help you better understand their moods and in some cases, keep you safe from injury.

The Relaxed Cat. Normally, a relaxed cat's ears will point slightly to the side and slightly forward as shown in Figure 1 (next page). This indicates contentment and sense of well-being. She's neither fearful nor aggressive.

The Alert and Interested Cat. When your cat is alert and something has captured her interest, her ears will assume a straight-up orientation, and a forward posture as in Figure 2. She'll usually greet you with ears erect, offering a friendly greeting.

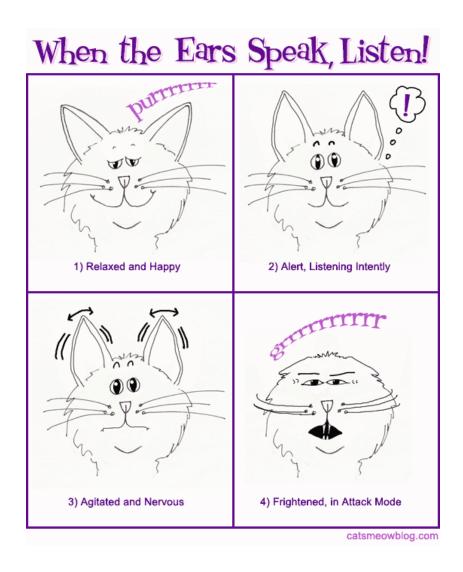
The Nervous Cat. If your cat's ears are twitching, she's agitated and nervous, as shown in Figure 3. This might be a cue to offer her reassurance and a safe embrace. Persistent twitching could be a sign of a medical problem.

Signs of Aggression. A cat's ears moving from a forward posture to a backward posture indicates increased aggression. A cat's ears moving from an upright position to a full horizontal position indicates increased fear, annoyance, or submissiveness — a warning for you to leave her alone. If you notice that a cat's ears are maintaining a horizontal orientation on a regular basis, she could have an ear infection or ear mites, and a trip to the vet is warranted.

Attack Mode. When the ears flatten against the head in a defensive position as in Figure 4, your cat is frightened and may attack. She instinctively keeps her ears flat against her head in attack mode to protect her ears from claws and teeth during a fight. Ears that are pointing backward somewhere between the "alert" and "defensive" positions indicate an aggressive cat who may attack.

Understanding when a cat might attack can save you from injury. When the ears are back (the telltale sign of aggression), you should never try to touch or pick up a cat because you're at high risk of being bitten or scratched -- injuries that could require hospitalization.

The Ambivalent Cat. The cat's ears are also able to move independently of one another. When they're in different positions, the cat is ambivalent and unsure of how to respond. She's likely to withdraw to assess the situation. As she does so, her ears may shift as they interpret stimuli and consider how to react.



Cat Body Language: Reading the Tail

Your cat's tail is like a big old apostrophe at the end of her body that puts a fine point on affection, aggression, fear and happiness. One of the most primal tail movements is the violent back-and-forth swish, sometimes called a Sword Tail. Whether it's a wild cat stalking a zebra, or a house cat stalking a toy, she'll swish her tail to prompt the prey to move, which allows the cat to zero in for the attack. In the house, either leave her be until she relaxes, or toss her a toy to attack. It's usually not a good idea to pick her up when she's in "swish mode", because the object of her attack will likely be you.

You also don't want to mess with your cat when her tail is in a position of defensive aggression. In this orientation, the tail is lowered, but the tip is curved upward. This indicates that something has attracted her attention, and she is very nervous, defensive, and unsure of her surroundings. If you try to pick her up, she may attack.

A happy cat holds her tail high, and if she greets you at the door with her tail quivering, she's happy to see you. That's the time you want to shower her with affection.

If you're introducing a new cat into your home, reading your cats' "tail language" can be helpful in breaking up fights before they start. You don't want to pick up the aggressor at this point, but a few squirts with a squirt gun can persuade him to beat a retreat.

diagram on next page

The Telltale Tail

friendly and content	non-threatening,unsure	derisive

friendly, but unsure	amicable, not fearful or aggressive	defensive aggression
angry 🐴	potentially aggressive	submissive
tradigity		
very happy to see you	excited, angry or irritable	alert, interested

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