

Misinterpretation of study: Anxious cat owners can carry on stroking their four-legged friends without worry

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Stroking can still be enjoyed by cats and their owners. Credit: Doris Sallaberger / Vetmeduni Vienna

In a study published recently in the journal *Physiology & Behavior* an international team of researchers examined whether cats living in multi-cat households are more stressed than cats housed singly. Many media outlets responded to the study with an incorrect interpretation of the results and published such as "Cats Hate to be Stroked". The co-author Rupert Palme of the Institute of Medical Biochemistry at the University of Veterinary Medicine, Vienna, explains: "As a matter of fact, the majority of the cats enjoyed being stroked. Only those animals that did not actually like to be stroked, but nevertheless allowed it, were stressed."

The actual aim of the study was to find out whether [cats](#) are more stressed when they live in large groups together or, whether the strict hierarchy of larger groups reduces [stress](#). Neither could be confirmed in the present study. The number of cats per household had no influence on the stress of the [animals](#). Rather, stress in [domestic cats](#) depends more on the socialization of the animals, on the relationship with humans, on the space available to them or on the access to food.

Every cat feels and reacts differently

The researchers studied 120 cats in 60 Brazilian households. These were divided into three different categories: group I: 23 single-cat households, group II: 20 multi-cat households with two cats; group III: 17 multi-cat households with three to four cats. The cat owners were asked to classify their pets as "bossy", "timid" or "easy going" in order to assess the personality. Furthermore, the [cat owners](#) reported how much each cat liked to be stroked. The researchers measured the stress levels of the animals by analysing the stress hormone metabolites (glucocorticoid metabolites GCM) in the collected faecal samples.

The majority of the cats like to be stroked

85 out of 120 cats were considered by their owners to "enjoy" being petted. There were only four cats in the category "disliking" being stroked. Those cats probably avoided the "stroker". The remaining 13 animals "tolerated" the stroking and were more stressed than the others. "Precisely these 13 animals led to the misinterpretation of the study" explains Palme, "Cats are in no way generally stressed when they are stroked. It depends much more on the situation and the character of the individual animal."

More information: Ramos, D. et al. Are cats (*Felis catus*) from multi-cat households more stressed? Evidence from assessment of fecal glucocorticoid metabolite analysis, *Physiology & Behavior*.
www.sciencedirect.com/science/.../S0031938413002771

Provided by University of Veterinary Medicine -- Vienna

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