

Stroking could stress out your cat

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A new study by an international team of animal behaviour specialists suggests that cats who reluctantly allow their owners to stroke them could be more stressed out than moggies who carefully avoid being petted.

The surprise conclusion arose in a study conducted by researchers from the University of Lincoln, UK, University of Sao Paulo, Brazil, and University of Veterinary Medicine, Austria, which aimed to better understand how cats cope with living alongside humans and other felines in a single household.

Although many people consider cats to be solitary creatures, the collaborative research, published in the *Journal Physiology and Behavior* and presented to an international audience in Portugal in September 2013, revealed that cats can live happily together in groups, and that the number of cats is not necessarily a problem.

Sponsored by Ceva Animal Health, the scientists examined cats living alone, in pairs and in groups of three or four in the home, assessing levels of stress hormones on four occasions.

Although the number of cats in the home did not predict background stress levels, the researchers found that younger cats (less than two years old) living on their own were more stressed than younger ones living in the larger groups.

Evidence was also found to suggest that the owner's urge to pet their cat

may be a stressful experience.

Professor Daniel Mills, Professor of Veterinary Behavioural Medicine at the University of Lincoln, said: "We chose stable households to look into this question and were quite surprised by the results. Despite typically living on their own in the wild, we have known for some time that cats come together when resources like food are concentrated in a single area, for example when people feed strays. However, it might be that they do this out of need and it is still stressful for them, because they are not a naturally social species.

"Many people keep groups of cats in their home and although they might seem happy together, some people have argued that because this is an unnatural set up, it is not good for their welfare. Our research shows this is not necessarily the case. It seems even if they are not best friends, cats may be able to organise themselves to avoid each other without getting stressed. Also, and I think very intriguingly, our data suggests that cats who tolerate, rather than enjoy or dislike being petted, seem to be the most stressed."

Professor Mills explains that those cats that dislike being petted, can probably avoid this interaction if they live with another cat which enjoys or tolerates it, and so do not get stressed.

He added: "It seems that those cats on whom the owner imposes him or herself are the ones we need to be most concerned about. The results also reinforce the importance of ensuring that you give all individuals control over their environment, so if you have several [cats](#) you should give them the choice of sharing or having their own special areas to eat, drink and go to the toilet."

More information: 'Are cats (*Felis catus*) from multi-cat households more stressed? Evidence from assessment of faecal glucocorticoid

metabolites analysis' Volume 122, 2 October 2013, Pages 72–75,
Physiology and Behavior.

Provided by University of Lincoln

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