

Is Your Cat Obsessed With Licking You?

Unravel the intriguing mystery behind your kitty's endless licking sessions and discover the surprising and heartwarming truths this peculiar behavior reveals about the unique bond you share with your feline friend.

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Cats tend to have lots of curious behaviors, one of which is the compulsion to lick themselves, other cats, inanimate objects, and sometimes even their humans
- Some cats “groom” their owners as a display of trust, because they like the way their human smells, or to “mark” a person as belonging to them
- Other reasons cats lick is for attention, to relieve stress or anxiety, because they have a medical issue, they were weaned too early, or to show affection

One of the many marvelous, if curious, cat behaviors is the feline compulsion to lick. One study suggests the average kitty spends up to 8% of their waking hours licking (grooming) themselves.¹ When you consider how many sleeping hours there are in a cat's day, it's rather remarkable how much of their time is dedicated to licking when they're up and around!

Our feline family members are fastidious creatures, which explains their obsession with grooming themselves. Interestingly, licking is also a social interaction among cats, especially males and females about to make whoopie. But how should we interpret cats licking their humans? Why do feline family members occasionally rake their rough little tongues over our exposed skin?

Why Your Cat May Be 'Grooming' You

The good news, according to BBC's Science Focus, is there's no reason to assume when your cat licks you that he or she is initiating a pre-mating ritual!² The fact is, however, that neither scientists who study such things, nor cat behavior experts are entirely sure why cats “groom” their humans. Of course, theories abound. The following are just a few offered by Science Focus:³

- **He's showing he trusts you** — Or alternatively, he's reassuring you he doesn't view you as competition. According to animal psychology expert Dr. David Sands of The Animal Behaviour Clinic, “this type of licking is similar to a cat-to-cat behavior known as allogrooming, which is basically mutual grooming.” Newborn kittens learn the behavior from their mother.

"Because of these maternal origins, adult cats will only lick other cats they trust and are not in competition with," says Sands. "And this trusting grooming behaviour may be transferred to a human. After all, cats are not sitting there saying 'I'm a cat and you're a human being'. To them, animals are either in competition with them or not. And licking shows you're not in competition. In other words, if your cat licks you, it's not [necessarily] a positive sign of attachment. It's just not a negative one (which is as good as it gets with a cat)."

A 2015 study by researchers in the U.K. found that cats appear to bond as well with strangers as with their owners.⁴ According to the researchers:

"These results are consistent with the view that adult cats are typically quite autonomous, even in their social relationships, and not necessarily dependent on others to provide a sense of security and safety."

- **He's attracted to your scent** — "Cat taste buds are so sensitive — they can pick up scents from our skin that could include pheromone secretions from other animals," says Sands. You might also have something interesting to kitty on your skin — for example, salt, moisturizer, or food you've just eaten. Just be careful, because many things applied to human skin can be **toxic to cats**.
- **She's owning you** — According to Sands, cats love their own scent more than all others. If you've ever stroked your kitty and she immediately licked herself right where your hand had been, she was replacing your scent with hers.

"So much cat behavior comes down to possession and ownership. Everything that they do is very territorial," Sands says. "Sometimes when cats groom other cats and people they're scraping off scents and supplanting them with their own. It's their way of marking and saying 'This is mine! I own you!'"

When your cat rubs herself against you, it only looks like a gesture of love. In reality, she's "marking" you as belonging to her and no one else.

More Reasons Your Cat May Be Licking You

- **He's seeking attention** — Chances are your cat has learned exactly what moves he must make to get attention from you. If he's licked you in the past and received a reaction, he'll repeat the behavior whenever he wants something from you. This could be the perfect time to have some one-on-one playtime with your kitty — ideally with an activity that gets him up and moving. Alternatively, he may be asking for food or a petting session.
- **She's feeling stressed or anxious** — It's not unusual for a cat who's feeling **stressed or anxious** to lick things excessively, including their human. It's best to consult your veterinarian if your kitty is exhibiting other signs of stress, such as hiding, "missing" the litterbox, digestive issues (diarrhea or constipation), excessive vocalization, decreased appetite, increased sleep, or aggression.
- **He has a medical issue** — Cats may lick a person or objects in their environment when they feel unwell. Nausea, pain, or discomfort can trigger it, so if your cat is licking excessively or the licking started recently, it's a good idea to make an appointment with your veterinarian.
- **She was weaned too early** — Kittens who are either orphaned or weaned too early sometimes do a lot of licking to satisfy the early oral stimulation they missed out on. If your cat is rather persistent about licking you,

and if she also tends to “make biscuits” (knead) on your person, there’s a good chance she wasn’t with her mother long enough.

- **He's being affectionate** — Mother cats groom their kittens by licking them, and kittens often carry the behavior into adulthood, grooming other adult cats, an activity known as allogrooming, or “social grooming.” Grooming is actually a social activity among felines that is used to communicate and strengthen social bonds. So, if your feline friend is licking you, he may simply be nurturing the relationship you share.

Unlike sloppy dog kisses, kitty kisses can be uncomfortable thanks to the back-facing barbs known as papillae that line the feline tongue.

If you’d like to discourage licking behavior in your cat, the best method is distraction. Grab an interactive toy and spend some time playing with her, or if you don’t have time for a play session, sprinkle some **catnip** on her favorite scratching surface. It’s best not to use treats to distract your cat, as it can actually encourage the behavior you’re hoping to curb.

Sources and References

[PetMD, February 19, 2024](#)

[The Spruce Pets, August 18, 2023](#)

[Catster, June 24, 2024](#)

¹ [Eckstein, R.A. and Hart, B.L. The organization and control of grooming in cats, *Applied Animal Behaviour Science* 68\(2\):131-140, June 2000](#)

^{2,3} [Science Focus, February 3, 2024](#)

⁴ [Potter, A. and Mills, D.S. PLoS One, 2015 Sep 2;10\(9\):e0135109](#)
