

## **How Well Do You Know a Cat's Body?**

### Compliments of Cats International

#### **Whiskers**

Whiskers are extensions of the skin and not special hairs. Each whisker is an intricate receptor designed to detect even the most minute changes in the environment: tiny movements, air currents, changes in air pressure, temperature, or wind direction. They help the cat to navigate at night, acting as radar. They are double the thickness of the cat's guard hairs and are embedded three times as deeply in the skin in order to translate the slightest contact to sensory cells at their roots. They stimulate an eye blink when touched which helps to protect the eyes. The cat can change the position of its whiskers when hunting. They reach forward to give information about the prey in the cat's mouth. The whiskers are located across the muzzle (12 on each side in 4 rows), high on the outer edges of the cheeks, above the eyes, and on the back of the front legs (carpal hairs). And you thought they were there just to look cute!

#### **The Amazing Feline Tongue**

Cats drink by converting their long tongues into spoons. The tip of the tongue is curled backward to create a hollow shape that acts like the bowl of a spoon. Then he dips this into the water and flips it back and up, toward the open mouth. Small quantities of liquid are flicked toward the rear of the mouth. The cat swallows after every fourth or fifth lap, when enough liquid has accumulated at the back of the mouth. The barbs, or papillae, on the tongue soak up the liquid like a sponge. They are raspy and are also designed to rip the meat off of bones. (If you have been licked by your feline friend, you already knew this.) The backward-pointing barbs serve to move food and water into the cat's mouth, but they can also make it difficult for the cat to remove a piece of string or yarn from its mouth. (Always check your house and Kitty's toys for potential hazards.) Some other uses for this incredible little bit of feline anatomy are:

1. To wash and clean the cat's fur (a washcloth).
2. To smooth the fur when ruffled (a comb).
3. To dry the fur when wet (a towel).
4. To pant when the cat is hot (an air conditioner).
5. To additionally cool the cat by covering his fur with saliva which then evaporates.

## **Your Cat's Tail, Ear, and Eye Signals**

### **Tails**

When the tail is erect for its full length, it is used as a greeting to another cat or to a friendly human and is an invitation for contact rubbing. This can also be a request for food. The tail flicks of a seated cat often indicates irritation. Tail wagging can range from small irritated flicks which may express indecision--wavering between two possible courses of action--or in its most pronounced form, it can be the prelude to a fight between two male cats and undoubtedly accompanied by growling. A tail that is held down with an elevated rump belongs to an aggressive cat that is standing sideways near another cat. A fluffed-up, arched tail is seen when a cat stands with its back arched (the "Halloween cat") and it is torn between being aggressive or defensive. A fluffed tail that is positioned straight out or down, is seen when the decision moves toward aggression. (All of these tail positions can be observed when two kittens engage in play fighting.) The tail that is wrapped against the cat's body may mean that the cat is contented or for a nervous cat, it is a defensive posture.

### **Ears**

If the tail alone doesn't give you enough information about what the cat is thinking, take a look at the ears. Cats involved in a standoff will make threatening sounds, but to really understand what is happening, check the ear position. The defender's ears will lie down flat against the head for protection. The cat whose ears are lying flat, but with a twist, so that the tips of the back of the ear can be seen from the front, is the aggressor. Forward-pointing ears are used by confident, curious, cats to listen for sounds in front of them. A cat that is hunting prey (or playing) will also keep its ears forward to collect as much auditory information as possible in order to execute a successful pounce.

### **Eyes**

In a standoff situation the defending cat's pupils will be dilated to provide the cat with wider peripheral vision, an advantage in anticipating an attack. The aggressor's pupils narrow to give him better depth perception, an advantage in judging where to attack. While dilated pupils can indicate fear, they are also indicative of the light conditions. In dim light the pupils expand to allow as much light to enter the eye as possible. Perhaps one of the most wonderful of feline body signals, but one that is most often missed by even the most observant of cat owners, is the slow eye blink. According to Roger Tabor, in his interesting and informative book, *Cat Behavior, a Complete Guide to Understanding How Your Cat Works*,

"Blinking is a very powerful communication as a reassurance signal and is commonly used between cats when they are sitting or lying in a hunched-up, sphinx-like position. I have used the blink to relax house cats, feral cats, and even tigers in the wild...it is

important to put them at their ease by allowing them to read the signals that tell them you are not a threat." (It is also a great way to say "I love you" to your favorite feline companion.)

A continuous stare has the opposite effect on cats. It is threatening and unsettling and is used effectively by cats in maintaining territorial distance. This explains why a cat that enters a room of strangers, all of whom are cat lovers except for one, will choose to approach the non-cat lover, the only one who is not staring at him.