

Why Your Dog May Not Like to Cuddle (Is It You?)

Are you making these common mistakes that may be making your dog feel uncomfortable or threatened? Many owners do and then wonder why their pet doesn't want to cuddle or be within touching distance.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- If you're feeling a bit rejected and wondering if your dog really loves you, don't — some dogs just prefer not to be cuddled
- If you've had your dog for a long time and the dislike of petting is a new phenomenon, pain due to undiagnosed illness or injury could be the culprit
- For dogs that like to be petted sometimes but not others, you may be petting him in a way that feels threatening or uncomfortable
- Scratches at the base of the tail, shoulder and chest tend to be enjoyed and tolerated by many dogs, while pats on top of the head may not
- If your dog shows signs of being uncomfortable when you pet him, back off and let him interact again another time on his own terms

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Petting and cuddling with your dog are among the most enjoyable parts of pet ownership, for good reason. The act of petting your dog can lead to increases in feel-good hormones like oxytocin and dopamine — in both you and your dog.¹ So not surprisingly, many dogs and their humans enjoy it.

That being said, it's also very normal to have a dog who prefers not to be cuddled. Your dog may like to sit in your proximity, but not within touching distance, for instance. Or he may run to you in order to play an active game of fetch but move to the other end of the couch when you sit down. If you're feeling a bit rejected and wondering if your dog really loves you, don't — some dogs just prefer not to be cuddled.

Reasons Why Your Dog May Dislike Cuddling

If you've had your dog for a long time and the dislike of petting is a new phenomenon, pain due to undiagnosed illness or injury could be the likely culprit. In this case, a trip to your veterinarian is in order to rule out a painful condition. If, however, your dog has always been rather cuddle-averse, it could simply be that it's just his personality.

Just as humans vary in their level of fondness for personal touch and affection, dogs, too, may desire varying levels of physical touch. If your dog is a rescue pooch, also consider that past abuse may have made him fearful of human hands. For dogs that like to be petted sometimes but not others, consider the way you're initiating contact.

In one study of 28 dogs who were petted in nine different ways, most of the dogs showed signs of being uncomfortable when petted on the top of the head or paw.² The dogs also showed signs of stress, such as elevated heart rates, when they were held while lying on the ground, held by the collar or had their muzzle covered.

"The dogs' behavioral and physiological responses suggest that some common physical human-dog interactions [are] perceived as unpleasant by dogs," the researchers explained,³ which means that if your dog avoids being petted it could be because he doesn't like the way you're petting him.

On the other hand, scratches at the base of the tail, shoulder and chest were well-enjoyed and tolerated by most dogs. How can you tell how your dog likes to be pet? Learn to pay attention to his body language and other signals.

These Are Signs Your Dog Doesn't Like the Way You're Petting Him

Dogs use calming signals to help diffuse stressful situations. And to your dog, being pet or cuddled in a way he doesn't enjoy could very well be a stressful situation. Examples include:⁴

- Yawning
- Licking (this may be a very quick lick of the nose or simply the tip of the tongue barely stuck quickly out of the mouth)
- Turning away or turning his head away (your dog may tilt his head only slightly to the side or turn completely around)
- Play bow (putting the rear end in the air and the front legs in a bowing position)
- Sniffing the ground (this may be done for calming or simply to take in the surroundings; it depends on the situation)
- Walking slowly
- Sitting down (especially with his back to you or the other dog)
- Lifting a paw
- Walking in a curve (dogs prefer to approach others in an arc, not straight on)
- Smiling or smacking lips
- Scratching as if he's itchy
- Wagging his tail (in cases where you know the wagging is not a sign of happiness)
- Urinating on himself
- Trying to lick your face or mouth
- Making a soft face (with ears close to his head)
- Laying down with his belly against the ground (this shouldn't be confused with laying down with his belly up, which is a sign of submission)
- Shake offs (this may be a slight shake or an entire body shake, as though he is shaking off water)

If your dog does any of these things while you're petting him, assume he doesn't like it and stop. It's important to respect your dog's stress signals, as ignoring them could further agitate your dog and even lead to aggression. The more you understand what your dog is trying to tell you, the stronger the bond between you will grow.

How to Pet a Dog Who Doesn't Like To Be Pet

How should you pet a dog who doesn't like to be pet? The answer is, don't! If your dog is one who tends to avoid cuddling and physical contact, understand that some dogs may simply not tolerate an abundance of physical affection from their human. However, others may come to enjoy it, provided you progress slowly and don't force the interaction.

It's best to allow your dog to initiate contact. Avoid invading his personal space, and when your dog approaches you, give him a gentle pat on the chest or base of tail (do not pat him on the head or anywhere that requires you to reach over the top of your dog, which could appear to be intimidating or threatening to your dog).

You should also avoid hugging your dog, which may feel constraining. After the initial pat or scratch on the chest, watch your dog carefully for stress signals. If your dog shows signs of being uncomfortable, back off and let him interact again another time on his own terms. In time, your dog may learn that you can be trusted and interactions with you are safe and enjoyable.

Sources and References

¹ [Vet J. 2003 May;165\(3\):296-301](#)
^{2, 3} [Journal of Veterinary Behavior May-June 2014, Volume 9, Issue 3, Pages 93-97](#)
⁴ [International Dog Trainer 2013 \(Archived\)](#)
