

HEALTH & SAFETY

Is This Cat in Pain? Signs to Watch and When It's an Emergency

Cats hide pain well. The Feline Grimace Scale, the emergencies that cannot wait, and where to go after hours in our area.

By Catt County Cat Nippers • Reviewed October 15, 2026 • 1 min read • 2 cited sources

Need help with spay/neuter costs in Cattaraugus County? Apply at cattcountycatnippers.org/apply or call or text (716) 200-1283. Support this work at cattcountycatnippers.org.

Read the face: the Feline Grimace Scale

Researchers at the Université de Montréal developed and validated the Feline Grimace Scale, which scores five features of a cat's face, each from 0 (normal) to 2. Watch the cat for about 30 seconds while it is not eating, grooming or sleeping.

- Ears: upright and forward (0) → pulled apart (1) → rotated outward and flattened (2)
- Eyes: open (0) → partly closed (1) → squinted (2)
- Muzzle: relaxed and round (0) → tense (1) → tense and oval (2)
- Whiskers: loose and curved (0) → straighter (1) → straight and pushed forward (2)
- Head: above the shoulders (0) → level with them (1) → below them, hunched (2)

What the score means

A total of 4 or more out of 10 suggests the cat is in pain and needs veterinary care. It is a screening tool, not a diagnosis.

Go to an emergency vet now if a cat

- is straining in the litter box and producing little or no urine (especially males)
- is breathing with its mouth open or struggling to breathe
- has been hit by a car, attacked, or is bleeding heavily

- has collapsed, is having seizures, or cannot stand
- may have eaten lilies, antifreeze or human medicine

Sources

1. Evangelista et al., Facial expressions of pain in cats: the Feline Grimace Scale (Scientific Reports, 2019)

<https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-019-55693-8>

2. AVMA News — New scale interprets pain from feline facial expressions

<https://www.avma.org/javma-news/2019-10-01/new-scale-interprets-pain-feline-facial-expressions>