

Hot Spots: How to Treat Them and What Do They Mean?

Hot spots demand two things: treatment and figuring out what's causing them. Here's what I recommend using on hot spots to disinfect without burning and four things you can do to soothe and protect the skin. And then for the cause - could it be emotional?

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Hot spots are more commonly seen in dogs than cats, but some kitties do get them, especially those with long hair or dense coats
- A hot spot is an area of inflamed, infected skin that is typically a circular lesion located on a cat's head, neck, tail, or thigh
- Treating a hot spot is a two-step process. Step 1 is to heal the wound, and step 2 is to find the underlying cause
- Treating a hot spot involves keeping the area clean (disinfected) and dry at all times. It's also beneficial to apply a topical solution that promotes wound healing, and it's extremely important to prevent your cat from touching the hot spot as it heals
- Common causes of hot spots include food and environmental allergies, flea allergy dermatitis, an underlying painful condition, and mental or emotional issues

Hot spots are more often associated with dogs, but kitties can also develop this miserable skin condition — especially densely coated or longhaired cats.

Hot spots, also called pyotraumatic dermatitis or superficial pyoderma, are characterized by inflamed, infected skin. They appear as round lesions that most often occur on a kitty's head, neck, tail, or thigh, and are created when your cat's natural bacteria overpopulates parts of her skin.

Hot spots typically start out as slight skin tenderness, but when your cat starts licking, biting, rubbing, or scratching the area, it becomes irritated. Left unaddressed, kitty will begin to obsessively lick the spot, which increases the itchiness and makes the area moist, red, and inflamed. Next comes an infection, and ultimately, ulceration. There is also usually hair loss over the spot, and/or discolored fur.

Hot spots are more common during hot, humid weather, but they can occur year-round depending on the cause. When an infection arises from a kitty's own bacteria, there is almost always a root cause. Hot spots often occur in pets with weakened immune systems.

A hot spot on your cat can grow very large very quickly, so it's important to recognize the problem and begin treatment before the hot spot covers a large area of her body.

If your cat develops a hot spot, you'll need to do two things: 1) treat the wound, and 2) identify the underlying cause.

First Step: A Shave and a Sharpie

To treat kitty's wound, the first thing you need to do is remove the hair on, in, and around the affected area. Now, I realize you may not want to do that, and your cat may not want you to, either. But if you don't remove the hair, it will become trapped in the wound by the pus and you'll have a much harder time healing the hot spot. In fact, hair in and around the affected area can create a perfect environment for the wound to get bigger and the infection to get worse.

I recommend you shave the area of the hot spot, and then mark the edges of the lesion with a Sharpie type pen so you can tell if the infection is spreading. If it spreads, you'll know you're not treating it effectively at home and you should consult your veterinarian as soon as possible.

Some hot spots can result in fever and serious underlying skin problems, so if you see the wound growing rather than improving after a couple of days, it's time to seek veterinary care.

Disinfecting the Wound

Once you've shaved the area and identified the margins with your Sharpie, clip the hair back until you see healthy skin. Then you can begin gently disinfecting the wound with a solution that will remove bacteria.

I recommend using povidone-iodine, which is often sold by the brand name Betadine. It's an organic iodine with no side effects, and it does a good job controlling most skin bacteria. You can buy povidone-iodine at most pharmacies and some health food stores. Dilute the solution with purified water until it's the color of iced tea, and apply it to the wound using a soft washcloth or gauze.

In the beginning, the first two days at a minimum, while there's oozing from the wound, you'll want to repeat the disinfecting procedure as often as necessary to keep the area clean, dry, and pus-free. The goal is to keep the area clean and dry at all times, so the first couple days you might need to disinfect the wound as often as every two hours.

Protecting the Wound While It Heals

After you clean the wound you can apply a topical solution like colloidal silver, calendula cream, raw aloe, or a thin layer of manuka honey, which is a raw honey made from the tea tree plant. You can also use a cool chamomile tea bag against the wound to provide a soothing effect.

Don't use anything with stinging or astringent properties on an open, raw wound. Solutions like vinegar or oregano distillates, while antimicrobial, are really painful when applied to an open wound.

Repeat the disinfecting procedure and application of a light, natural topical soothing gel afterwards until the wound shrinks in size, the infection clears and your kitty is no longer bothered by the hot spot.

Insuring your cat leaves the hot spot alone is critical to healing. If your cat has the ability to re-traumatize the wound, the infection won't clear up and the hot spot will get bigger.

You'll probably need to put an E-collar on her to prevent her from licking and biting the affected skin. As an alternative to the E-collar, you might be able to protect the wound by applying a light wrap or putting a child's t-shirt on your pet, as long as you are sure she is leaving the wound alone.

Finding the Cause of Your Cat's Hot Spots

Allergies, both food and environmental, can cause hot spots. If your cat is eating a processed, grain-based diet, I recommend making a slow transition to a more species-appropriate diet. Cats aren't designed to process grains or carbs, and these ingredients can cause allergies or sensitivities that are expressed through the skin. If you are wondering if your cat could be reacting to a certain food but aren't sure, consider Dr. Dodd's **Nutriscan saliva testing**.

Environmental allergies can also cause hot spots. Ragweed, grasses, pollens, and molds are typical allergens, but it can also be polluted water or even toxic air that causes a secondary hot spot on your pet. You'll need to evaluate not only your cat's diet, but also her environment to search for sources of allergens that could be causing hot spots.

Flea allergy dermatitis is also a major reason why animals get hot spots. You might not even be able to see the fleas, but if your cat is sensitive, the bite of just one flea can cause a raging hot spot. Check your pet with a flea comb for fleas and flea dirt regularly.

If your cat has a painful spot on her body and she starts licking and chewing at the area, she can create a hot spot. For example, if you have an older kitty who has never suffered from hot spots but suddenly starts bothering the skin over a hip joint, it could be a response to underlying pain.

If your pet has neuralgia or perhaps sciatica — which is an irritated, tingling nerve pain similar to how your foot feels as it wakes up after falling asleep — you might notice her chewing at or licking an ankle or a toe. This behavior can bring on a secondary infection that is essentially a hot spot. In this case, there's no underlying allergic condition, but rather an underlying muscle, nerve, or bone problem.

If you suspect a painful condition could be a cause of your kitty's hot spot, I recommend a wellness visit with your veterinarian.

What if the Root Cause Is Psychogenic?

Sometimes there can be an underlying mental or emotional cause for hot spots, such as obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), or even boredom. These behavioral issues can cause licking and chewing that creates hot spots.

If your cat is exhibiting OCD behaviors, it's important to keep in mind that changes in routine are extremely stressful for felines. So the first thing I recommend is to dramatically limit the number of unusual external events your kitty is exposed to. Suggestions for environmental enrichment for cats include:

- Feeding and routine care (litter box scooping, brushing, etc.) should happen at the same time each day.
- Keep food bowls and litter boxes in the same spot — don't move them around unnecessarily.
- Keep litter boxes clean, as well as bedding.

- Provide an assortment of appropriate cat toys, hiding boxes, scratching posts/trees, etc., and make sure your pet has plenty, if not constant access to these goodies.
- Consider playing soothing music for an hour or two each day.

You might also consider treat or food-dispensing toys for cats, window perches, and kitty videos. Also, try to spend some time each day playing with your cat using interactive toys.

You may also want to consider feline stress remedies by **Spirit Essences** or OptiBalance cat and kitten formulas. Also discuss homeopathic remedies for obsessive behavior with your holistic vet.

It can be very challenging to discover the cause of a pet's hot spots, but if you treat only the wound and don't find the source of the problem, there's a good chance the condition will recur.

Sources and References

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