

Diagnosing Itchy Skin Problems – What's Wrong With Your Pet?

If your pet is scratching, pawing, and rubbing itchy areas on her body, and if you see inflamed and irritated skin, getting to the source of the problem can help save her from needless discomfort. Signs to look for, and the process to uncover clues to help solve the problem.

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- There are many potential underlying causes of feline dermatitis (inflammation of the skin). They generally fall into one of two categories: infectious or non-infectious
- The most common and obvious symptom of feline dermatitis is scratching, pawing and rubbing of itchy areas, as well as inflamed and irritated skin
- Diagnosing feline dermatitis often includes multiple skin and blood tests to identify the root cause(s)
- Treatment involves successful resolution of the underlying cause of the dermatitis, as well as healing the wounded skin
- Kitties with skin disorders should be transitioned to an anti-inflammatory diet supplemented with omega-3 essential fatty acids

Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published February 18, 2016.

Your cat's skin is one of the largest organs in his body, and it has a lot of jobs to do. For example, it provides a protective barrier, helps maintain body temperature, and produces a range of substances — everything from oily secretions to hair and claws.

As with all the important organs of the body, there are a number of disorders that can affect the health of your cat's skin, and in fact, skin conditions (typically referred to as dermatitis, or inflammation of the skin) are relatively common in kitties and can be a source of significant discomfort.

Causes of Feline Dermatitis

There are many potential causes of feline skin disease, however, they can be generally categorized as either infectious or non-infectious.

Infectious causes:

- Parasites, including fleas and mites. Mite infestations and flea allergy dermatitis (FAD) are very common causes of feline dermatitis
- Bacterial infections, which often occur as a secondary disease of damaged skin

- A fungal infection such as ringworm
- A viral infection such as cowpox

Non-infectious causes:

- Immune system disorders, including allergies to fleas, environmental substances, or food; as well as feline eosinophilic granuloma complex, a syndrome in which excessive numbers of eosinophils (a type of white blood cell) are stimulated, leading to itching, skin damage, and lip ulcers
- Sun damage, particularly in white cats and kitties with white ears, noses and eyelids
- Cancerous growths and tumors, including squamous cell carcinoma and injection site sarcomas
- Chemicals, which can cause contact dermatitis in sensitive cats
- Drug reactions
- Inability to self-groom properly due to obesity, arthritis, or dental disease
- Stress, which can lead to excessive grooming behavior
- Disorders such as hyperthyroidism, diabetes, liver disease, and FIV or FeLV
- An underlying painful condition such as lower urinary tract disease can cause cats to over-groom the area, resulting in irritation and inflammation of the skin
- Trauma, including bites, fight wounds, and other injuries; poorly fitting collars; and foreign bodies

Symptoms of Feline Dermatitis

There are many potential signs your cat has dermatitis, and most are dependent on what's causing the inflammation and its location. Kitties can show one or multiple signs of discomfort that may involve a single spot on the body or a more generalized (widespread) problem.

There is typically persistent and often frantic scratching, pawing and rubbing of itchy areas — commonly the paws, face, underarms, and base of the tail. The skin becomes inflamed and irritated. Hot spots can develop, as well as ulcers.

Your cat's skin may become oily, or dry and scaly. Often an ear infection develops, and there can be a foul smell coming from the ears. Additional dermatitis symptoms can include:

- Head shaking or ear scratching
- Scabbing, crusting or flaking
- Hair matting
- Baldness
- Skin color changes
- Disorders involving the claws, nail beds or paw pads

It's important to note that most cats with dermatitis feel itchy and uncomfortable, but they tend to be secretive with their excessive grooming, scratching and biting behaviors. Just because you don't actually see kitty scratching or grooming obsessively doesn't mean it isn't happening.

Diagnosing Feline Dermatitis

Very often, the diagnostic journey involved in identifying the type and root cause of a skin condition is a marathon rather than a sprint.

First, your veterinarian will take a complete history of your kitty's lifestyle and symptoms, and perform a thorough physical examination during which he or she will look for obvious problems like fleas.

Your vet will also perform a fecal exam to look for the presence of internal parasites. He'll swab the inside of your kitty's ears to check for signs of ear mites or other uninvited guests.

Skin scrapings may be necessary to identify parasites burrowed deep in hair follicles. A Wood's lamp test may be done to test for ringworm.

If nothing turns up during these diagnostics, the search will continue with blood tests to look for systemic causes of dermatitis, including autoimmune disease. If your cat's bloodwork is normal, the next step is often to look for hypersensitivity reactions with an environmental or **dietary cause**.

I find food intolerances are a common cause of dermatitis, so I often start with a dietary elimination trial of a grain/carb/starch free, novel protein canned food diet. A good clue that your cat is dealing with a parasitic or allergic reaction is if the eosinophil count is elevated on the diagnostic bloodwork (complete blood count).

Treating Feline Dermatitis

To successfully treat feline dermatitis and prevent recurrence, it's imperative to identify and resolve the underlying cause(s) of your pet's itchy, irritated, and inflamed skin. I realize there are a mind-boggling number of potential triggers for the condition, but I can't stress enough the importance of finding and treating (or avoiding) the source.

When it comes to healing your cat's wounded skin, she first must be prevented from licking it. She'll need to be fitted with an Elizabethan collar (E-collar) in most cases to interrupt the itch-lick-scratch cycle. An alternative might be a light, non-stick bandage. I've also had success putting infant T-shirts on some cats.

Keeping the wound clean is absolutely essential. I recommend disinfecting the area with dilute Betadine (povidone iodine) twice a day. Topical remedies I've used with good success for encouraging wound healing include:

- Manuka honey applied to the area twice a day
- **Willard Water** or colloidal silver sprayed on the wound several times a day
- Essential oil of lavender diluted with **coconut oil**
- Hypericum or calendula cream or tinctures

Of course, once you've put one of these products on your cat, you must prevent her from licking it off. So have your E-collar, non-stick bandage, or tiny T-shirt ready to go before you apply a healing balm. There are a number of homeopathic remedies that can be incredibly beneficial for itchy cats, so I encourage you to work with a **homeopath** to find the right one for your kitty.

In my opinion, over-vaccination is one of the biggest abnormal immune system triggers, so detoxing from vaccines (as well as avoiding further unnecessary vaccines) is really important.

A Review of Your Cat's Diet

Regardless of the underlying cause of a kitty's dermatitis, I always review the diet as part of my workup to see what changes might promote healing and prevent a recurrence. Animals with itchy skin should be fed an anti-inflammatory diet. Diets that create or worsen inflammation are high in carbohydrates.

Your cat's diet should be very low in grain content and absolutely potato-free. If you adhere to Chinese food energetics and principles, you'll also want to avoid feeding "energetically warm" or hot foods during periods of inflammation in your pet. This means avoiding chicken and beef as protein sources.

Omega-3 fatty acids also decrease inflammation throughout the body. Adding them into the diet of a cat with a skin disorder can be very beneficial. The best sources of omega-3 are krill oil, salmon oil, tuna oil, anchovy oil, sardine oil, and other fish body oils.

I also recommend coconut oil because it contains lauric acid, which helps decrease the body's production of yeast. Using fish body oil with coconut oil can help moderate or even suppress the inflammatory response.

Sources and References

[PetWave](#)

[Cats.org](#)
