

Makes Your Pet Act Crazy, Chase Her Tail and Even Self-Mutilate

This is one bizarre condition you've probably never heard of before. Bound to make you think your pet has gone crazy, and it probably is making her crazy! Can also trigger secondary infections. Here's how to help relieve the misery for your poor distressed pet.

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Some cats have a very strange disorder called hyperesthesia, also known as rippling skin syndrome or twitchy cat syndrome
- In hyperesthesia, the skin on the back ripples from the shoulders all the way to the tail, and triggers a range of odd sensations and behaviors in the cat
- In order to confirm a diagnosis of hyperesthesia, all disorders with similar symptoms must be ruled out
- The first thing you should do for a kitty with hyperesthesia is feed a clean, nutritionally balanced, species-appropriate, carbohydrate-free diet
- It's also important to minimize all forms of stress in your cat's lifestyle and environment, along with beneficial natural remedies and therapies, including chiropractic care

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If you're owned by a kitty, you're sharing your life with a very unique little creature. His physiology is unique, as are his nutritional requirements and even his incredible physical flexibility.

Another very unusual thing about cats is their tendency to develop a rather strange, bizarre disorder called hyperesthesia, which means abnormally increased sensitivity of the skin. Other medical names for the condition are neuritis and atypical neurodermatitis; in layman's terms, it's often called rippling or rolling skin syndrome, or twitchy cat syndrome.

Signs and Symptoms of 'Twitchy Cat Syndrome'

In kitties with hyperesthesia, the skin on the back ripples from the shoulders all the way to the tail, and sometimes up the tail to the tip. The movement is clearly visible in some cats, but more difficult to see in others.

What many pet parents notice instead is the kitty suddenly jumping and turning toward her tail as though something back there is bothering her. This can even happen during sleep. The cat might also try to lick or bite at the area. Kitties with hyperesthesia also have muscle spasms and twitches, and tail twitching.

If your cat has the syndrome, he may object to having points along his spine or back touched. He may chase his tail, bite at himself, turn toward his tail, and hiss, cry out, run and jump. He may even appear to be hallucinating — following the movement of things that are not there — and his pupils may be dilated during these episodes.

In severe cases of feline hyperesthesia, cats will self-mutilate by biting, licking, chewing and pulling out hair. These poor kitties suffer not only hair loss, but often severe skin lesions and secondary infections from trying to get relief from the uncomfortable sensations they experience.

Potential Causes for Hyperesthesia

No one knows for sure what causes hyperesthesia in cats, but there are a lot of possibilities. One of the first things you should do if your kitty is having symptoms is to rule out other causes for itching and twitching. It's important to investigate flea allergy dermatitis (FAD) as a cause or contributor to your cat's behavior.

In pets with a severe flea allergy, the bite from a single flea can cause long-term itching and skin irritation. A bad case of FAD can cause your cat to lick and scratch so aggressively — most often at the base of the tail or hindquarters — that she loses a significant amount of hair on that part of her body. Sometimes dry, itchy skin can induce or aggravate hyperesthesia. Dry skin is typically a sign of omega-3 fatty acid deficiency, which is common with cats fed kibble or an unbalanced homemade diet.

There's also a possibility that feline hyperesthesia is related to a **seizure disorder**. Some kitties experience grand mal seizures during or right after episodes of hyperesthesia. Some experts think the syndrome could be caused by a problem with electrical activity in areas of the brain that control grooming, emotions and predatory behavior.

It may also be a form of obsessive-compulsive disorder, or OCD, with the obsession being fearfulness, grooming and/or aggression. Also, seizure activity is known to lead to obsessive-compulsive behavior. I have found chiropractic to be one of the best ways to treat this strange condition, so an underlying neuromuscular disorder should also be considered. It's conceivable hyperesthesia is a combination of electrical-neurological, musculoskeletal and behavioral issues.

Another theory is that certain cat breeds are predisposed to develop mania as a result of stress. Oriental breeds, for instance, seem to have more hyperesthesia than the general population of felines, and stress often seems to be the trigger for these kitties. Also, cats with the condition have been found to have lesions in the muscles of their spine. It's possible the lesions cause or contribute to the sensations and symptoms that are a feature of hyperesthesia.

Diagnosing Hyperesthesia

Feline hyperesthesia is a diagnosis of exclusion, meaning it's the only option left after eliminating other conditions and diseases that cause similar symptoms and behavior, including:

- Skin conditions (allergies, parasites, infections)
- Underlying painful conditions of the back, spine, joints or muscles; also pain associated with bite injuries, abscesses, anal sac disease, organ damage or cancer
- Hyperthyroidism
- A problem in the brain (trauma, tumors, infection)

- Poisoning
- Nutritional deficiency

If possible, get a video of your cat during an episode of what you suspect is hyperesthesia, and take it with you to your veterinary appointment. Your vet should perform a physical exam on your kitty, take a behavioral history, and order a complete blood count, chemistry profile and T4 (thyroid) hormone level test. Other diagnostic tests might also be required, for example, skin tests and x-rays.

It's possible your veterinarian will refer your cat to a vet who specializes in dermatology or neurology. It's only when all other potential causes for your kitty's symptoms have been ruled out or treated, that feline hyperesthesia can be confidently diagnosed.

Treatment Recommendations: Diet

The treatment for feline hyperesthesia syndrome, like treatment for virtually every feline condition, involves reducing your cat's stress level. The first place I always start is with diet, because the wrong diet creates physiologic and metabolic stress. Your kitty should be eating a species-appropriate, nutritionally balanced fresh food diet that contains no carbohydrates. This eliminates all kibble, because it must contain carbohydrates — at a minimum from potatoes or peas — to help form the food.

Your kitty's diet should include moderate amounts of animal fat and high levels of fresh, whole animal protein. Feeding a variety of different proteins is important for nutritional diversity, and to reduce the risk your cat will become sensitive to a particular food. I've seen food allergies manifest in kitties with hyperesthesia, specifically allergies to poultry or seafood, so I definitely recommend rotating proteins.

I would also recommend that you eliminate all chemical preservatives from the diet. Ideally, a diet that contains no GMOs, dyes, synthetics or words you can't pronounce is best. Cats with hyperesthesia are sensitive and you want to eliminate anything that might exacerbate that sensitivity.

I also recommend that you purify your cat's water, switch to nontoxic cleaning products inside your home and don't allow smoking of any kind in kitty's environment.

Minimizing Stress in Cats With Hyperesthesia

To eliminate **stress-related triggers**, you'll need to take steps to make your cat as comfortable as possible. This means practicing consistency in his daily routine, while at the same time enriching the five key areas of his environment, including:

- Safe, secure food, water and litterbox locations
- His own places to climb, scratch, rest and hide
- Consistency in all your interactions with him
- Appropriate sensory stimulation
- The company of another friendly cat(s)

It's also important to set aside time each day to play with your cat. This helps him get aerobic exercise and gives him the chance to flex his hunter muscles. Use interactive toys to engage him. Many cats also love chasing laser toys, ping pong balls and even rolled up bits of paper.

Since cats have very short attention spans, try to break up playtime into three or four short sessions a day. One of the very best things you can do for your kitty is get him outside in good weather, if possible. The more often he can put all four paws on the ground, enjoy the sunshine and chase bugs, the better it will be for his emotional and mental well-being.

Natural Remedies and Therapies

While many veterinarians immediately recommend drug therapy for hyperesthesia patients, in my opinion giving your cat antidepressants, anticonvulsants or other drugs to curb obsessive behavior should be considered only when all other treatment options have been ruled out or exhausted.

A species-appropriate, nutritionally balanced diet along with **environmental enrichment** and natural calming remedies can be tremendously beneficial in alleviating the stressors in your cat's life that tend to trigger episodes of hyperesthesia.

I've had good success using a multimodal approach that includes acupuncture to reduce nerve wind-up and pain, and chiropractic care to help reduce dermatome neuritis. A qualified chiropractor can identify areas of inflammation in your cat's body and manipulate the spine to help decrease sensitivity and irritation in those areas.

TTouch is a special form of massage that can help reduce skin sensitivity in some cats. I've also had good success using homeopathic aconitum and hypericum, as well as other remedies to help dampen emotional and neurologic reactivity. Homeopathy can be a beneficial add-on to the protocol as well.

I also use DMG (dimethylglycine) and cannabidiol (CBD) oil, which contains no-to-low-THC. Both these nutraceuticals can help quiet the central nervous system. And they can be blended with other calming herbs, such as chamomile, valerian, hops and passionflower. There is much that can be done to help decrease your cat's overall inflammation, as well as the frequency and intensity of the windups that are a feature of this very strange neurologic disorder.
