

## Recommended Treatment for These Dreadfully Itchy Ailments, With a Stinky Caveat

It can make your pet scratch himself bloody and risk secondary infections. This treatment is simple, and quite effective in relieving the intense itching. Plus it avoids the serious adverse side effects of the other common options. But be forewarned about its unique smell.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

### STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- The mites most likely to make your cat miserable are ear mites, demodex mites, mites that cause “walking dandruff” and mites that cause feline scabies
- It’s important not to guess at the cause of your cat’s itchy ears or skin. Your veterinarian will be able to pinpoint exactly what type of mite is involved
- Since cats are very sensitive to many medications, and all drugs have side effects, I recommend nondrug remedies to rid kitties of mites
- My favorite treatment for body (not ear) mites is the very smelly, but very effective lime sulfur dip

***Editor’s Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published June 27, 2017.***

Mite infestations are much more common in dogs than cats, but kitties do occasionally get bugged by the tiny buggers. Most often they are cats sharing space with a canine or feline housemate with mites, as well as kitties who live where mites are a common problem, such as the southern and Gulf Coast regions of the U.S.

There are a few different types of mites that can drive your cat to distraction, including ear mites, two species of demodex mites, Cheyletiella mites (nicknamed “walking dandruff”) and Notoedres cati mites (more commonly referred to as feline scabies).

### Ear Mites

The ear mite most frequently seen in companion animals is Otodectes cynotis. An infestation is called otodectic mange, and can cause your cat a great deal of itching, irritation and general discomfort. Kittens and outdoor cats are more commonly affected than cats who live indoors.

The infestation is spread when an animal with ear mites comes in direct contact with your kitty. These parasites are most often found in the ear, but they can also infest other areas of your pet's body. Symptoms of otodectic mange can include:

- Head shaking

- Scratching or rubbing the ears
- Inflammation of the ear
- Dark waxy secretions and a strong odor from the ear
- Hair loss

An ear mite infection can also cause blood vessels inside your cat's ear to burst from aggressive scratching and head shaking. This condition is called an aural hematoma and results in swelling of the ear and pain. If you suspect your cat has an ear infection, make an appointment with your veterinarian for a definitive diagnosis. Since many ear infections have similar symptoms, it's important to find the precise cause so you can treat it effectively.

Unless kitty has an advanced ear mite infestation with an infection, or her quality of life has been compromised, I recommend avoiding drug-based treatments in favor of natural remedies for ear mites. It may take a bit longer to cure an infestation with a natural treatment, but you'll eliminate the risk of side effects from medication.

## Demodex Mites

There are two types of Demodex mites that can affect cats: demodex cati and demodex gatoi. Demodex cati lives inside the hair follicle; demodex gatoi lives in the skin. Demodex cati is thought to be a normal inhabitant of feline skin, while demodex gatoi is probably an opportunistic infectious parasite.

Demodex gatoi may be transmissible among cats, and is slightly more prevalent than demodex cati infections. Symptoms of feline demodicosis include:

- Extreme itchiness (especially when demodex gatoi is the culprit)
- Hair loss around the eyes, head, neck and flank
- Lesions on the skin, as well as scales and crusty patches

To accurately diagnosis demodectic mange, skin scrapings are necessary to detect and identify the mites. Hair samples may also help identify the specific type of mite involved. Demodex gatoi mites can also be seen in fecal flotation tests. Sometimes, this method actually provides a faster and more definitive diagnosis. If mites are detected in a stool sample, it is a confirming diagnosis.

Fortunately, treating demodicosis in kitties is not difficult. My favorite treatment and the safest approach is a lime sulfur dip done every five to seven days for at least six weeks or longer, until skin scrapings are negative. Allow the solution to soak thoroughly into the coat and skin (avoiding the eyes), and don't rinse it off. Keep your cat warm and in a well-ventilated area after she's dipped.

Be forewarned that lime sulfur dips are really stinky, but they're also really effective. The solution will discolor jewelry, towels and light-colored fur, so you'll need to take necessary precautions. Your cat will hate the dips, and kitties with light coats may be temporarily discolored, but alternative treatments, including Ivermectin and similar agents, have serious adverse side effects. I don't recommend them.

## Cheyletiella Mites

The cheyletiella mite is a highly contagious parasite that lives on the outer layer of skin, creating a condition similar to a flea infestation. The mites primarily infect cats and dogs, but infections are zoonotic, meaning they are also transmittable to humans. A cheyletiella infestation is often called walking dandruff because the mites move around under the keratin layer of the skin and leave flaky skin scales on kitty's fur. Symptoms of infection include:

- Hair loss
- Excessive grooming
- Scratching and mild skin irritation
- Scaly skin and the appearance of dandruff on the coat
- Skin lesions

Your veterinarian will take skin scrapings and hair samples for examination. The mites are large enough to be seen with a magnifying lens. Since the mites are ingested when your cat grooms, they can also be found in a stool sample. The lime sulfur dips I discussed above work well for cheyletiella mites as well, and are my recommended treatment for this type of infestation.

## Notoedres Mites AKA Feline Scabies

This tiny mite affects cats very much like the sarcoptic mange mite affects dogs. The mites can infect cats of any age and breed, and both sexes. They are transmitted through direct cat-to-cat contact, infestations are seen most often in outdoor cats.

The symptoms of feline scabies typically begin with itchy ears and hair loss that spreads quickly to the eyelids, face and neck. It sometimes also spreads to the lower abdomen and paws, probably as a result of grooming and the habit cats have of sleeping curled up in a ball.

In advanced cases, the skin thickens, wrinkles and develops gray or yellowish crusting. Because the condition is so incredibly itchy, kitties often scratch to the point of causing secondary infections. Sometimes there is also lymph node enlargement.

Your veterinarian should suspect feline scabies based on your cat's intense itching and hair loss pattern. Skin scrapings can confirm the diagnosis, as there are typically large numbers of mites present on the skin scrapings. Once again, lime sulfur dips are the treatment of choice for feline scabies.

## How to Help Prevent Mite Infestations

Since all of these mites are contagious, if there are other cats (or dogs) living in close contact with an infected kitty, they should also be tested for the presence of mites and receive treatment if necessary.

It's also important to keep kitty's immune system in balance by reducing stress, feeding a nutritionally balanced, species-appropriate diet and avoiding unnecessary vaccines. Taking these steps will help reduce your pet's susceptibility to mite infections that occur primarily in animals with suppressed immune systems.

I also recommend cats with mites be tested for infectious diseases such as **feline leukemia** (FeLV) and the feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV). Also consider having your kitty's immunoglobulin levels (IgG, IgA and IgM) measured. There are many immune-building herbs and supplements available that may be beneficial depending on the reason your cat is immunosuppressed.

## Sources and References

[VetStreet March 5, 2012](#)

[PetMD](#)

[PetEducation.com](#)

---