



CatWatch

Expert information on medicine, behavior and health from a world leader in veterinary medicine



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A tabby grooms excessively to the point of his developing bald spots.

IN THE NEWS ...

A Simple Test Determines If a Cat Has been Spayed

Surgical scars once were a good indicator that a cat had been spayed, but with the procedure performed at younger ages today, the spay scar often heals without a trace. Now a test using a small blood sample to distinguish spayed from intact pets is available from the Animal Health Diagnostic Center at Cornell. Owners and shelters interested in the service should ask their veterinarian to contact the center at ahdc.vet.cornell.edu.

The diagnostic test, known as anti-Müllerian hormone or AMH, looks for the presence of a hormone that is produced only by the ovaries. A negative test indicates their removal. A positive test means the animal is intact or may have a remnant of an ovary from a previous spay. She may go into heat, but pregnancy is prevented if the uterus was removed during the spay procedure. The AMH test can help with the management of cases when a remnant is suspected. ♦

A Breakthrough Decades in the Making

The discovery of a benign virus' mutation into a deadly infection could lead to accurate diagnosis and treatment

Feline infectious peritonitis ranks as one of the deadliest diseases affecting cats — it's the leading cause of death in cats under 2 years of age. Veterinary scientists have long suspected that the FIP virus (FIPV) was a lethal mutation of the feline coronavirus (FECV), a benign and common intestinal virus, but they couldn't identify how this transformation occurred.

Until now. By taking a novel approach to studying FIP — at the molecular level — a



Shelter kittens are especially prone to the FIP virus.

team of Cornell University researchers has identified the changes that happen when the coronavirus mutates into FIPV.

Possibility of Vaccines.

This breakthrough is viewed as a vital first step toward accurately diagnosing FIP and eventually developing vaccines and treatments, says the study's lead scientist,

Gary R. Whittaker, Ph.D., a Professor of Virology in the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine's Department of Microbiology and Immunology.

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When the Diagnosis Is Arthritis

A few easy, often inexpensive changes at home can make your cat's life less painful and more comfortable

Arthritis creeps up on a cat with signs so subtle that they're easy to miss: getting up more slowly from a nap, dashing after a toy mouse less often, perhaps even losing interest in leaping from the floor to the kitchen counter top.

It hurts to realize that your cat hurts, but you play an important part in his comfort when the diagnosis is arthritis. The condition can't be cured, but veterinary care and a few easy changes around the house can keep both of you happier.

The first step is a trip to the veterinarian to learn the cause of the pain. A physical

exam, blood tests, X-rays and other tests can help determine whether the pain results from an infection, autoimmune disorder, injury or simply the toll of age.

Worn Cartilage. All types of arthritis involve degeneration of the cartilage covering the ends of bones in joints. Normally smooth, the cartilage allows joints to move easily. As the cartilage breaks down, the joints don't move as well and bones rub together, resulting in inflammation, stiffness, swelling and soreness. The condition has no cure but can be treated to keep a cat more comfortable.

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SHORT TAKES

58 MPH Sounds Fast, but Grip and Maneuverability Play Key Roles

Cheetahs, our domestic cats' big cousins, seem to fascinate scientists. Maybe it's because they're the fastest land animal, and measuring their speed presents a challenge. Researchers have clocked cheetahs running after a lure and observed films of them chasing prey in the wild.

Now, with the use of GPS and a motion-sensing collar of their own design, Alan Wilson, BSc, Ph.D., BVMS, and his team at the Royal Veterinary College in London have gathered what they describe as the first detailed information on the hunting dynamics of the cheetah in its natural habitat. Their tracking collar was equipped with a GPS module and electronic motion sensors — accelerometers, magnetometers and gyroscopes — powered by solar cells and batteries.

They recorded data over 18 months from 367 "hunting events" by three female and two male adult cheetahs in the Botswana Predator Conservation Trust in remote Northern Botswana. The findings: The cheetahs ran at top speeds of 58 miles an hour after prey, mostly impalas. By comparison, according to the Cornell Feline Health Center, domestic cats can sprint at 30 miles an hour for short distances, a remarkable feat in its own right.

Although speed is certainly important to a cheetah's hunting success, grip and maneuverability are also critical, according to the study published in the journal *Nature*. (For information on domestic cats' athleticism, please see "Why Do They Almost Always Land on Their Feet?" in our October 2013 issue. A clue: Like the cheetah, domestic cats have flexible spines.)

The average length of the cheetahs' run was 189 yards, with the longest ones measuring 611 yards, or about six football fields.



Royal Veterinary College

To test their tracking equipment, researchers used lures to simulate the natural hunting behavior of cheetahs at the Ann van Dyk Cheetah Centre in South Africa.

Future study, based on animals' ranging behavior in the wild, could have practical application in evaluating management of potential wildlife-protected areas, the researchers say.

Assessing the Eyes

Researchers at UC Davis are studying whether new tests for diagnosing and monitoring tear film disorders in humans could be applied to cats. "This information will be of immediate use to veterinarians worldwide because it will allow early diagnosis and treatment of tear film abnormalities in cats (and) minimize ocular pain and the potential for severe or chronic complications," says the Winn Feline Foundation, the study's sponsor.

All species have a thin film of tears coating their eyes for comfort, eye health and vision. The film provides corneal lubrication and protection from infection, and flushes debris from the eyes' surface. "Abnormalities in these tear layers are associated with rapid evaporation of the tears and drying of the conjunctiva and cornea, which is highly painful and potentially blinding," the foundation says. ♦

Finicky Eaters? They're Born That Way

In other cases, infection, disease, pain and medications can cause a lack of appetite

Veterinary nutritionist Joseph J. Wakshlag, DVM, Ph.D., has an eye-opening assessment about finicky eaters: "The reality is that most finicky cats are the best kinds to have because they regulate themselves. They eat to meet a requirement to keep themselves alive, not for pleasure. They are lean animals and usually live longer."

Some cats are born finicky about food. "Hormones control part of this. There are appetite centers in your brain, and they control your hunger patterns — what and how often you eat," says Dr. Wakshlag, Associate Professor at the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine. "It's part of the reason some people like to eat and become overweight and others don't. Since all other species where this has been examined show the same patterns of similar appetite centers, and also because they have the same rates of obesity as people, we assume the physiology is similar."

Q: What are other causes of inappetence?

A: If a cat is on medication, this can sometimes be the cause. If he's not on medication and becomes inappetent, then you know there is probably disease. Inappetence is a clinical sign of kidney disease, liver failure and infection. Pain can cause it. Dental disease and some forms of pain in the mouth can cause it, although that's more so for cats than dogs. Dogs can usually muscle through dental disease.

Q: Is there a difference between inappetence and anorexia?

A: Inappetence is more of a lay term, whereas anorexia and hyporexia — a diminished appetite rather than a loss of it — are scientific terms.

Q: Which medications tend to cause inappetence?

A: Opioids like morphine decrease the motility of the gastrointestinal system and can cause it. Many chemotherapeutic drugs will cause nausea, which causes a lack of appetite. It's generally not a problem if a cat is on a week's worth of antibiotics, but chemotherapy is a problem. If your pet is on medication for allergies, it can change the appetite: Prednisone usually increases it, while cyclosporine tends to decrease appetite.

Q: When does inappetence warrant a veterinary visit?

A: After two days or two to three meals. When cats don't eat, they are probably sick. Usually a mouth check is the most important examination, and the veterinarian will look for such things as an ulcer on the tongue, loose teeth or a tumor in the mouth.

Q: What are the cautions when trying to get your cat to eat?

A: You have to be careful of adverse reactions. If I give a chemo drug, the result is you're nauseous. Here's your food, which you won't eat because you are nauseous, and now you are averse to that particular food. Change the food to a different form, and you'll know if the cat is not eating because he's averse to it or if he is still nauseated. Try new pet food, and if new food doesn't work, then we go to human food. But we have to be aware that if the cat is nauseous, and we force food on him, then he will just end up becoming averse to many different foods, so stopping the nausea is the most important thing.

Q: How do you make food more palatable?

A: Use chicken, broth, cheese. You can also try jack mackerel. Cats like salt, pro-



Cats appear to have similar appetite centers in their brains as those in humans because their rates of obesity are similar.

tein and fat. Like people, every animal has different preferences.

Q: What are long-term solutions?

A: Some solutions are to provide energy-dense food, food with a higher calorie and fat content than you would normally use. These are more palatable. Heating food can make a bit of difference for cats.

When necessary, cats can be given their nutrition through feeding tubes. These tubes must be placed while the cat is under general anesthesia.

Q: Can inappetence cause other problems?

A: Anorexia is a problem since cats can use fat for fuel, but when a cat starts mobilizing fat stores — the fat on the body — for energy, the liver has a hard time keeping up, and the fat can accumulate in the liver causing hepatic lipidosis, often called "fatty liver," which causes liver failure. The fatter the cat is before weight loss begins, the bigger the problem.

However, if it's caught early, hepatic lipidosis can be treated. Developing hepatic lipidosis takes about a week of complete anorexia, and if a cat is eating less than half of his normal food volume, it might take a bit longer to happen. Unexpected or unexplained weight loss is a bad sign, and your cat should go to the vet when you notice it. ♦

Holiday Hazards Can Tempt the Curious

They range from 'linear foreign bodies' to lilies, toxic essential oils and exposed electrical cords

As then-veterinary student Pamela J. Perry, DVM, Ph.D., was packing her car to head home for the holidays, her cat Chester began vomiting wads of tinsel. When she called the veterinary college to have Chester examined, her roommate mentioned that she had seen Chester pulling strands of tinsel from the tree and eating them — she even took photographs.

Dr. Perry rushed Chester to the veterinary hospital for abdominal X-rays. "Fortunately, he had already vomited the majority of the tinsel and did not require surgery," she says, and Chester recovered uneventfully.

Dr. Perry, a lecturer in animal behavior at the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, never again decorated a tree with tinsel and still displays the pictures of Chester eating it as a reminder of the trouble cats can get into during the holidays.

Who doesn't have a memory of the cat climbing the Christmas tree or singeing his tail in a candle flame? Dangling ornaments, packages tied with ribbons, beautiful but toxic plants and hordes of guests trooping in and out can all tempt your tabby into trouble, but these expert tips can help you both survive the holidays intact:

- ◆ **Supervise guests and cats.** Don't let guests slip Snowball any foods he shouldn't have, and don't give him the opportunity to snag the string used to wrap the turkey or ham. String, tinsel and ribbons — known to veterinarians as potential linear foreign bodies — are favorite feline playthings, but if swallowed, can cause serious partial or complete intestinal obstructions and injuries like perforations requiring emergency surgery, Dr. Perry says.
- ◆ **Practice safe scents.** Essential oils can be highly toxic, says Gretchen

L. Schoeffler, DVM, DACVECC, Emergency and Critical Care Section Chief at the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine. Cats seem to be drawn to them, but even eating potpourri, which has less concentrated oils, can cause severe internal injuries in the form of burns to the mouth and esophagus.

While burning candles may smell inviting, Dr. Schoeffler says they can cause burns from hot wax if knocked over by a curious cat or even start a house fire. Instead, simmer natural ingredients on the stove to spread a holiday aroma throughout your home. Good combinations include pine or cedar twigs, bay leaves and nutmeg, or cinnamon, cloves and orange peel.

- ◆ **Hide the chocolate.** Eating it can lead to vomiting, diarrhea and more serious reactions, depending on the type and amount ingested. Dark baker's chocolate is more toxic than milk chocolate, which is adulterated with sugar and other ingredients.
- ◆ **Place holiday greenery out of reach.** At best, cats eat it and then throw it up, usually in the middle of your cookie exchange party. At worst, plants such as mistletoe, holly and amaryllis can cause mild to severe vomiting, diarrhea, abdominal discomfort, difficulty breathing, kidney failure and even death if a cat eats them. Lilies are particularly toxic to cats if they eat even a small amount of the plant or flower, Dr. Perry says.
- ◆ **Truss the tree.** To protect it from climbers, anchor the tree to the ceiling or wall with bungee cords. Wait several days to decorate it so your cat becomes used to it, then use



To protect a tree from climbers, use bungee cords to anchor it to the ceiling or wall. Let your cat become used to it for several days, then decorate with nontoxic, unbreakable ornaments.

nontoxic, unbreakable ornaments.

Prevent electrical burns to the mouth by wrapping electrical cords in tough cable covers. And read the label before adding chemical extenders to the water for live trees. They may be toxic to animals who check out the new "water bowl." Play it safe by blocking access to the water.

- ◆ **All is calm, all is bright.** While many cats enjoy the hustle and bustle of holidays, others could do without the disruption of their routine and the presence of strangers. Even if they don't have to battle crowds at malls or turn out a perfect roast for 20, the holidays can be just as stressful — if not more so — for pets as for people, Dr. Perry says.

To reduce stress, maintain as much of your cat's normal routine as possible. A quiet room where he can escape from the commotion is ideal. Taking time to provide daily one-on-one time will also help smooth your cat's ruffled fur and likely lower your blood pressure as well.

What about those cute jingle-bell collars? Could they harm your cat? Unless he chews off and swallows the bells, only his pride will be hurt, but you might want to watch your back in case he has a vengeful nature. ♦

VIRUS... (continued from cover)

"For far too long, FIPV has been tricky to diagnose because there are two forms of the same virus: one is benign (FECV) and one is lethal (FIPV)," says Dr. Whittaker. "All current testing cannot discriminate because the two are quite similar. Until now, it was possible to say the virus is there, but we weren't able to say if it was safe or dangerous."

As a result, countless cats suspected of having the FIP virus have been euthanized in catteries and animal shelters to stop the spread of the virus. The only available vaccine is not generally recommended by the American Association of Feline Practitioners. And there is no known cure or effective treatment.

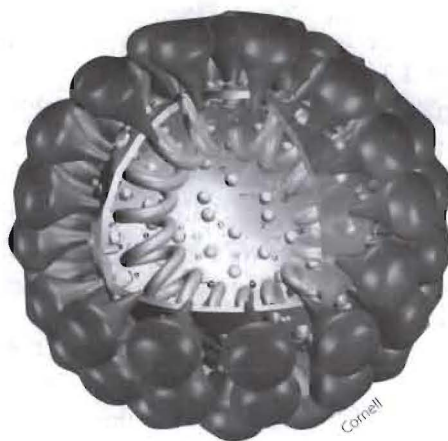
Dr. Whittaker's team compiled hundreds of samples of feline coronavirus from donations from veterinarians and cat owners. The samples included feces, blood and abdominal fluid. His decision to narrow his focus on a part of the virus' structure — crowns of spikey proteins on coronavirus particles — led to the discovery.

He had long suspected that the proteins change shapes when responding to proteases — the enzymes that break down proteins — in white blood cells, Dr. Whittaker says. When he compared a site in the spike protein in the coronavirus to the same area in FIPV that was known to activate members of other virus families, including influenza, via a host cell protease, he

found differences in the spikey proteins and the genes that code them. The benign coronavirus had mutated into lethal FIP.

Molecular Basis. "As a result of our research, we've found the first known molecular basis for FIP," Dr. Whittaker says. The findings were published in the journal *Emerging Infectious Diseases*. The Morris Animal Foundation, Winn Feline Foundation and Cornell's Feline Health Center funded the research.

"FIP has taken the lives of so many cats and until now, we simply didn't know much about how the common feline enteric coronavirus mutated into this deadly disease," says David Haworth,



A focus on part of the coronavirus' structure — its crowns of spikey proteins — led to the discovery of its mutation into the FIP virus.

DVM, Ph.D., president and CEO of the Morris Animal Foundation. "Thanks to Dr. Whittaker's discovery, scientists may now be able to develop an effective vaccine and possible treatments for this terrible disease."

Dr. Whittaker has been studying ways to combat FIP for more than two decades. "FIP is a tragic disease for families falling in love with new kittens and for veterinarians who can do nothing to stop it," he says. "None of my personal cats have had FIP, but I have had far too many friends and colleagues who have had cats with FIP."

Help for Shelters. His long-term goal is to develop an effective vaccine. "We have gained a lot of information based on our research, and now we can apply this and make better informed decisions. We are also hoping that we will be able to provide better information to shelters and breeders so that they will be better able to screen cats before they go to owners and prevent the spread of FIP."

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Dr. Gary R. Whittaker
"... a tragic disease."

THE MUTATED VIRUS TARGETS A WHITE BLOOD CELL VITAL TO IMMUNITY

Feline infectious peritonitis is a fatal virus that comes in two forms: effusive (wet) and non-effusive (dry). Although FIPV can affect any cat of any age or breed, kittens are more prone to infection, particularly those in shelters or catteries, as well as geriatric cats. Purebreds appear to have greater vulnerability, especially Asian breeds, such as the Birman and Himalayan.

In both forms, symptoms include fever, diarrhea, weight loss and lack of appetite. The wet form is characterized by fluid accumulation in the chest or abdomen. The dry form may affect vision and/or cause other neurological problems, possibly leading to

blindness and/or paralysis. The mutated virus targets macrophages, a specific type of white blood cell that plays key roles in a cat's immune system. Infected cats usually die within weeks of contracting this virus. The disease has no cure.

By contrast, the feline enteric coronavirus (FECV) is a benign condition that triggers mild diarrhea or gastrointestinal episodes, but is not fatal in the vast majority of cases. The virus is generally transmitted from one cat to another through infected feces and contaminated surfaces, such as food dishes. Most cats with FECV do not develop FIP.

ARTHRITIS...

(continued from cover)

Orthopedic surgery is seldom an option for arthritic cats, says Rory J. Todhunter, BVSc, Ph.D., Professor of Surgery at the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine. Because cats are so small, the surgery is difficult and impractical.

When cats do develop arthritis, they're good at hiding signs of pain, such as limping, that tell their owners that they're hurting. Consequently, their owners are much less likely to



Gentle play with a toy mouse provides beneficial exercise for arthritis sufferers, but leaping to bat a toy on a string is off limits.

take their cats to a veterinarian for treatment. "We might see only one cat

to 20 to 50 dogs with orthopedic disease," Dr. Todhunter says.

Most arthritis cases at Cornell are managed medically, he says. Even surgery, however, calls for an owner's help to make it work. "Arthritis is a global disease, and fiddling around in the joint isn't going to solve it. Once you've got the damage, it's there forever."

This is where you come in. Here are changes you can make at home to improve an arthritic cat's life. The good news: Most of them don't cost a dime.

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WEIGHT LOSS AND MAINTENANCE: 'IT'S CRITICAL'

In addition to changes at home to ease your cat's pain, his veterinarian may offer medical treatments, but the No. 1 prescription on the list for overweight cats is weight reduction and maintenance, says Dr. Rory J. Todhunter, BVSc, Ph.D., Professor of Surgery at Cornell. Attention to weight can lighten the workload of sore joints. Dr. Todhunter calls it critical.

After checking the cat for other possible conditions that cause joint pain, the veterinarian may prescribe a non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug, or NSAID, to lessen irritation in the joints.

Chronic NSAID use in cats is not without worry, however, so choose the right drug and the correct dosing frequency, says board-certified anesthesiologist Andrea L. Looney, DVM, Senior Lecturer in the Section of Pain Management at Cornell. "Tramadol, which can be a very useful drug in dogs with osteoarthritis, can be problematic for cats with the same disease. It commonly causes side effects in cats, such as wobbliness, staring, inappetence, inactivity, all forms of narcosis

[deep stupor or unconsciousness] and/or evidence of opioid psychological effects. Because it's very bitter, many cats find it objectionable."

Also on the roster of possible treatments: "A nutraceutical like Cosequin or Dasuquin or a polysulfated glycosaminoglycan like Adequan or Cartrophen under veterinary supervision," Dr. Todhunter says. These supplements are derived from natural sources, all with formulations especially for cats.

"Stronger pain medication is also available through your veterinarian," he says. Surgery is the last resort but it won't cure this progressive disease.

On a hopeful note, physical rehabilitation activities such as hydrotherapy — yes, for cats — can sometimes offer relief, Dr. Looney says. "In fact, along with underwater treadmill hydrotherapy, TENS (transcutaneous electric nerve stimulation) and therapeutic ultrasound, physical rehabilitation activities are also a cornerstone of weight loss programs."

RESEARCH

VIRUS...

(continued from page 5)

Dr. Whittaker regards FIP as one of the most challenging viruses to defeat but says this new discovery could spur advances in treating diseases in animals and people. "This is a scary virus from many standpoints, but this discovery

could have implications for similar coronaviruses, such as FIPV's deadly cousin in ferrets and another human-infecting cousin emerging from bats in the Middle East," he says. "For now, it finally unlocks the door to developing the world's first effective diagnostics, preventions and therapies for FIP in cats." ♦

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Please visit the Cornell Feline Health Center website at <http://www.vet.cornell.edu/fhc/brochures/fip.html> www.vet.cornell.edu/fhc/brochures/fip.html

◆ **Trim the weight.** Getting an overweight or obese cat to the proper weight may reduce or eliminate the need for medications, Dr. Todhunter says. "You need to do it slowly and be persistent. Remember the rule is 'Calories in and calories out.' You have to control caloric intake for the pet to lose weight." It may be as easy as following your veterinarian's advice about daily calorie intake for your cat's age and activity.

◆ **Provide exercise.** "In the best of all worlds, we would not give a painkiller; we would build up exercise to prevent pain," Dr. Todhunter says, suggesting gentle daily exercise that's kind to aching joints. This means batting a toy mouse around the floor is adequate, but jumping to catch a toy mouse dangling from a string is excessive. High-impact play, such as leaping, is off the list. Outside play on leash and harness, laser play, climbing on natural substances and even remote-controlled feeding and grazing devices help with weight loss.

◆ **Redo the restroom.** If you have a multi-story house, keep the litter box on the floor in the room where your cat spends the most time. That



Ramps can ease the way to a welcoming sofa for some cats.

way, he won't be forced to climb stairs. Speaking of climbing, a pan with a lower entry or lower sides can make elimination easier.

◆ **Keep it comfortable.** Lucky cat, if you have low windows facing the sun. Make the most of the warmth by giving him a place to nap there. Place his bed in a warm location on the floor for extended naps.

Although your cat may love curling up to sleep on soft blankets and pillows, what's underneath them is better firm because it makes rising easier.

◆ **Up and down.** Some cats with arthritis take well to using ramps instead of steps to access short flights of stairs. Others turn up their whiskers at it. If your cat is a potential ramp user, you can buy a ramp or build a low-angle one from plywood covered with carpet, making sure that both ends of the ramp will stay put when your cat is on it.

◆ **Raise the bowl.** Elevated food and water bowls are increasingly common in pet stores, but you can accomplish the same effect by placing your cat's bowls on a low box or upside-down bowl — if he needs it. Don't think you have to raise the food bowl unless the cat has neck pain, Dr. Todhunter says.

Small changes around the home play a large role in maintaining an arthritic pet's quality of life, Dr. Todhunter says. "What owners can do can make a big difference." ♦

THE ONLY TIPOFFS THAT YOUR CAT MAY HAVE ARTHRITIS

Because cats generally don't walk on leash in controlled situations, it's more difficult for veterinarians and owners alike to detect subtle lameness in cats due to osteoarthritis. Changes in spontaneous activity level and behavior may be the only tipoff. According to the American Animal Hospital Association, these changes may include:

- ◆ Changes in chewing, eating and/or drinking
- ◆ Weight gain or loss
- ◆ Avoidance of being touched
- ◆ Changes in sleeping habits
- ◆ Increased vocalization
- ◆ Increased urination and/or "accidents"
- ◆ Decreased or excessive grooming

Any of the foregoing signs warrants a veterinary visit.



Elizabeth

Elizabeth is thankful for the assistance of **Bruce G. Kornreich, DVM, Ph.D., DACVIM**, Associate Director of the Cornell Feline Health Center, in providing the answer on this page.

PLEASE SHARE YOUR QUESTIONS

We welcome questions on health, medicine and behavior, but regret that we cannot comment on prior diagnoses and specific products. Please write **CatWatch** Editor, 800 Connecticut Ave., Norwalk, CT, 06854 or email catwatcheditor@cornell.edu.

COMING UP ...

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A Tabby's Destructive Grooming Leads to Extensive Bald Spots

Q Our 5-year-old male tabby cat has begun grooming and biting himself incessantly to the point where the fur on his front legs and belly has thinned, and he is almost bald in these areas. Our efforts to stop him have not been successful, as we cannot watch him all the time. He acts normal otherwise, and his appetite is good. He is an indoor cat, so we don't think he has fleas and have not seen any evidence of this. Can you help so that we can provide some relief to our little man?

A I'm sorry to hear about your kitty's problem. Cats normally spend a great deal of their time grooming ... as much as 50 percent of their waking hours. This grooming is believed to serve many purposes, from cleaning their coats to heat regulation and waterproofing their fur. When cats spend excessive time grooming, however, and/or when they groom to the point where they damage their fur, something may be amiss, and a visit to the veterinarian is warranted.

Many things can cause a cat to excessively or destructively groom, including behavioral issues, such as boredom and stress, and medical conditions, such as hyperthyroidism and obesity. The behavior can also be an indication of itchiness due to an allergy. In fact, allergies were the most common cause of skin disease in cats in a recent study by dermatologists at the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine.

Determining the cause of itchiness can be challenging. I know that you don't see fleas, but your veterinarian will make sure that your kitty does not have any ectoparasites (parasites living outside the body), such as fleas, lice, mites or ticks. They can cause cats to lick and bite their fur either because they're trying to remove them, or the parasites induce an allergic response (usually to the parasite's saliva) when they bite the cat.

Allergies to flea bites are quite common in cats. They may also become allergic to endoparasites (those that live within the body) such as intestinal parasites.

Another common cause is food allergy. Cats can become allergic to compounds, most commonly proteins, in their diet. Diagnosis involves using a diet composed of ingredients that a cat has not been exposed to before (a novel diet). The rationale is that if a cat has never been exposed to a compound, he cannot have an allergic response to it. Novel diet trials require that the cat get only that diet for at least 12 weeks.

Common allergens in cat food include beef, lamb, soy, dairy products and wheat gluten. Trials of foods composed of both novel proteins and carbohydrates, such as duck and potato, may be attempted once other potential sources of allergy have been ruled out.

A third common cause of allergies in cats is atopy, or allergy to inhaled allergens. Like people, cats can become allergic to dust mites, pollens and molds. In some cases, atopy may be a seasonal syndrome (i.e., in spring when grass pollen is abundant).

In any case, a thorough history is an important in the diagnosis. A skin test, during which small doses of potential allergens are injected into the skin and monitored for redness and inflammation indicative of an allergic response, or blood tests to detect antibodies involved in allergic responses to specific compounds may be helpful.

Treatment generally involves avoiding allergens and dampening the immune response because allergies can be thought of as a hyperactive immune response to inappropriate allergens. Drugs like steroids, antihistamines and in some cases cyclosporine can be used to control the itchiness in many cases. Allergen-specific immunotherapy (i.e., "allergy shots"), in which small amounts of allergen are intermittently injected under the skin, may desensitize some cats to the offending allergens.

I hope that you figure out your kitty's problem soon. It makes me itchy just thinking about it! Please drop me a line to update me. —*Sincerely, Elizabeth* ❖

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