

CAT 12

# Skin and ear care



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## Skin and ear care

All cats benefit from regular grooming and it helps reduce hair-shedding in the home. For long-haired cats, it is essential and should be done daily, especially on the backs of the legs and the tummy, where matting often develops. Ideally, start from kittenhood and use a brush firm enough to penetrate the thick undercoat. Where an older cat is heavily matted, seek veterinary help to remove the matted hair as sedation is sometimes needed – thereafter, be sure to groom daily.

## **My cat has “gritty bits” and scabs in his coat. The vet says it is fleas but I’ve never seen a flea on him!**

You do not see fleas on your pet unless they have lots. Fleas only spend about ten per cent of their time actually on an animal. Their eggs tend to build up in cracks and crevices, such as down the sides of armchairs. Eggs survive for at least six months and, in the warmer months, can even be laid outside. They are the most common cause of skin problems, but are often hard to find. The only way to be certain that your pet does not have them is by using regular, good quality flea control. A single application of any product is not sufficient.

A cat’s lifestyle makes prevention difficult. You must treat the cat, the house and other areas such as the garage, either with an aerosol spray, or with medication that stops fleas from developing. Even so, it can take a long time (up to a year in some cases) to get rid of them. Regular treatment is essential for all cats, dogs and rabbits in the household. Cats that go out may have “hidey holes” in garden sheds which will also need treatment. In the summer, fleas can survive in piles of garden refuse, so make sure these

are tidied away and cannot be accessed by your cat. Ask your vet for advice on instituting a flea control programme with reliable products, and follow the instructions carefully.

Flea combs, powders, and shampoos are not effective for flea control, nor generally, are collars, as none of them have a sufficiently long-term effect. Herbal products are also ineffective and some (eg tea tree oil) can be toxic.

## **My cat is 18 months’ old and often gets a sore patch on his hindleg that the vet says could be a food allergy – but he is always fed the same food**

In normal circumstances, our immune system acts to protect us from attack by “foreign” substances, such as bacteria and viruses, thus preventing disease.





However, in allergic individuals, the immune system overreacts to essentially harmless substances, such as pollens, house dust or food proteins. Often, people wheeze or sneeze but cats tend to get an itchy skin, often noted by licking or over-grooming, which may produce a sore patch. Some of these cats have allergies to food. The only way to diagnose it is by “trial” feeding a low allergy diet, and seeing if the condition improves.

Some animals and people are born with the tendency to develop allergies, but do not usually show symptoms from birth. Allergies often do not emerge until six months of age or even later in life. This is because a long period of contact with the allergen is needed.

### **So should I buy another brand of food?**

Unfortunately it is not so simple. Most common brands of pet food – even many of those described as low allergy or hypoallergenic – contain multiple ingredients. What is needed is a simple diet, preferably of ingredients the cat has not had before, as you are aiming to avoid the food that produces the allergy – but there is no single diet that can be guaranteed effective in all cases. Your vet can recommend special commercial foods, or foods you can cook yourself. It is most important that your pet is fed only this diet and water (no titbits or milk)

for eight to 12 weeks, otherwise you will ruin the entire trial. You may need to keep your cat indoors if he/she is a hunter or may be eating food from a neighbours.

### **The low allergy diet did not work – what about an allergy test?**

Allergies can be caused by things other than flea bites or food. House dust mites, pollens and moulds are also common causes. Some cats have multiple allergies – a condition known as atopy.

Allergy tests can be helpful, but do not always give the complete picture. They are not always needed to confirm diagnosis, as vets can do this by excluding other causes of itchiness and looking at the pattern of the itch. Medication has to be stopped some time before testing and, in a severely itchy cat, this may not be practical.





Allergy testing is needed if you wish to try injections for desensitisation. These help some cats, but have to be given lifelong thereafter.

## Can anything be done to stop the itch?

For most allergic animals, a single course of tablets will not produce a cure. A lifelong treatment plan is required. Good quality flea control is essential, because itches can "add up". A cat with an allergy to moulds will itch much more if there are also fleas present.

Several drugs may be used. Scratching and licking causes skin damage which leads to infection with bacteria or yeasts. This in turn increases the itch. Treating infection often helps. Antihistamines work for some cats, but steroids or other

immunosuppressants are necessary for others. There are concerns about side effects, and your vet will prescribe treatment to minimise these. Always follow your vet's instructions.

## I have just noticed a horrible sore patch on my cat. What should I do?

Contact your vet as soon as possible. Meanwhile, prevent scratching or licking the sore patch, as this makes it bigger and more sore. Use an Elizabethan collar or put socks on your cat's feet. Bathe the area with cool salt water (a teaspoonful of salt to a pint of water) or apply ice. Do not use products meant for people on cats – some of them can be toxic. Flea bites are a common cause of soreness; try to buy your animal's flea treatment from your vet as this is most effective.





## There is a funny thing on my cat's side. Is it a tick?

Ticks are white to grey in colour, egg-shaped and around five millimetres long. They are picked up in grassland areas and fall off eventually, but it is probably best to remove them. As their mouthparts are firmly embedded, it is important that these are removed at the same time so it is best to see the vet. As a preventative measure, you can also get treatments from your vet which kill ticks if they attach.

## My cat is shaking his head a lot

This may be a sign of ear problems. Irritation causes production of wax and inflammation – sometimes referred to as “canker”. Infection with tiny ear mites, which are microscopic creatures, are one common cause. Your vet can diagnose them and give special treatment. All cats and dogs in the

household need treatment, usually for three to four weeks. However, ear irritation or discharge can have causes other than mites.

## My cat's ear problems keep coming back

Sometimes ear disease is straightforward and easily treated (for example, when caused by mites) but many ear problems are recurrent. Skin lines the ears, so problems such as allergies affect ears too, producing inflammation and infection. In the long-term, the lining can become thickened and corrugated so that it traps wax and needs frequent cleaning.

Some cats get fleshy growths called “polyps” in the ear. These interfere with ventilation and the drainage of wax. Sometimes these are near the outside, but they can also grow in the inner ear. Surgical treatment is necessary to remove them.

Ear cleaning is vital. For sore ears this may have to be done under anaesthetic. If you are advised to do this at home, use only a product from your vet. The ear canal is cone shaped, and runs from the visible opening down the side of the head, before turning inwards to the eardrum. Hold the earflap to straighten the canal, put a few drops of ear cleaner down the opening, and gently massage down, holding the flap to prevent immediate head shaking.

Wipe away any overflow with cotton wool, but do not use cotton buds inside the ear. Clean the earflap too. Your cat will shake vigorously afterwards so give a treat to take away the memories! Always contact the vet if your cat's ear is very red or painful afterwards.

## **My cat has a big swelling on one ear**

Sometimes head shaking breaks a blood vessel in the earflap, which bleeds and forms a blood blister (haematoma). If left, this can form a "cauliflower ear" which interferes with ventilation of the ear canal. See your vet, who may advise an operation to drain it.

## **I have heard that cats get sunburn. Is this true?**

Just as with people, excessive sunlight can be dangerous to pets. It is particularly a threat to cats with white or pale ears or noses, parts which may get sunburn that can even progress to skin cancer. It is best to keep these pets indoors on sunny days between 10am and 4pm. If this is not possible, sunblock (factor 15 or higher) can be used, but it will need repeated applications through the day. Avoid products containing zinc or salicylates – get your vet to check if a sunblock is suitable. If your cat has reddening, scaling, crusting or scabbing, especially on the ears or nose, seek veterinary advice.

## **My son has ringworm – the doctor thinks it may have come from our new kitten?**

Cats are not the only source of ringworm (which is a fungus, like athlete's foot) so all animals in the household should be checked by the vet in this situation. Special tests which may take 12 days to give a result, may be necessary. Ringworm presents many different symptoms in pets and they do not necessarily show signs of skin or hair problems – your pet may be a silent carrier. The fungus produces infective seeds called "spores" which are spread into the environment and are generally quite common, therefore, there can be many sources of ringworm. Your vet will prescribe treatment and advise you on disinfectants to use in the home.

For further information, see the pet care leaflet, Cats and human health (C14).



# Happy, healthy pets

**Blue Cross** advice leaflets are packed full of top tips to help owners with their pet questions. They cover a wide range of topics, from training a puppy to caring for an older cat. So if you need some support to help you with a pet problem, whether it's about a dog or a degu, we're here for you.

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