

Skin disorders

cats.org.uk





Your cat's skin provides a protective barrier, helping to maintain body temperature and produces a range of substances, including glandular secretions, hair and claws. Skin disorders are common in cats, causing discomfort to them and concern to owners. This guide outlines some of the more common skin problems in cats.

Causes of skin disease

Cats can suffer from a range of skin disorders, which may affect areas with specialised skin, such as the ear canal, the pads of the paws and the claws, as well as the skin covering the rest of the body. There can be many causes of skin disease in cats, and sometimes cats may be affected by more than one problem.

Infections

- **Parasites such as fleas, mites or ticks.**

Flea infestations and allergies to flea bites are very common causes of skin disease in cats.

For more information see cats.org.uk/health

- **Fungal infections.** Ringworm is the most common fungal cause of skin disease in cats, see 'Ringworm' section further on in this leaflet. Yeasts, a different form of fungus, can also cause skin disease

- **Bacteria may be the only cause of skin disease.**

Bacteria can cause skin disease although this is usually when the skin's defences are already weakened by an existing skin condition

- **Viruses.** Some viral infections can cause skin disease, such as feline cowpox virus, which is transmitted to cats through contact with infected rodents, or occasionally herpesvirus, which normally causes signs of cat flu

Hypereosinophilic syndrome, also known as feline eosinophilic granuloma complex, is one type of disease caused by allergies in cats. This occurs when excessive numbers of a type of white blood cell, called eosinophils, are activated. It leads to itchiness, skin damage and areas of thickened red skin, as well as ulcers and swelling of the lips.

Allergies

Allergic skin disease is very common in cats but can have different appearances. Sometimes cats suffering from an allergy, especially to food, will have signs such as vomiting or diarrhoea alongside skin disease.

Cats can be allergic to:

- **fleas.** This is the most common cause of allergies in cats
- **food.** The most common trigger is protein within a cat's food. Cats can develop allergies to foods they've previously eaten without issues
- **other substances in the environment.** Anything from pollens and house dust mites to chemicals within the home have the potential to cause a skin allergy. Sometimes the area of skin in contact with the allergen will become sore, known as a contact allergy

Chin acne.

This occurs where hair follicles produce too much keratin (the substance which forms hairs and nails) and become blocked and occasionally infected.

Although the cause is not always known, some cats improve when their bowls are changed from plastic to ceramic, suggesting an allergy.

Sun damage

Just like people, too much sun can be a problem for cats, particularly for white cats. White ears, noses and eyelids are particularly susceptible to sun damage.

Cancer

A variety of growths and tumours are seen in cats, some of which are more serious than others. Following sun damage, cats can develop a skin cancer called squamous cell carcinoma.

Drug reactions

Cats can occasionally develop skin damage when given certain medications.

Immune mediated disease

Immune mediated or autoimmune disease is where the body starts to attack itself.

Trauma

Cat bites, fight wounds and involvement in road accidents can all cause skin damage.

Poorly fitting collars can also cause serious skin wounds if a cat's front leg becomes trapped inside the collar. This is one of the reasons why Cats Protection recommends microchipping as the best way of identification of your pet. If you do choose to use a collar, ensure it fits well and has a quick-release mechanism.

Other problems

- Obesity, arthritis or dental disease can make it difficult for a cat to groom themselves properly. This leads to poor coat condition, hair matting and scurf or dandruff
- Stress may cause cats to overgroom. However, stress is rarely a single cause of skin disease and frequently aggravates other skin problems
- Other medical conditions such as hyperthyroidism, diabetes, liver disease or infection with feline immunodeficiency virus or feline leukaemia virus can also lead to skin problems
- Pain elsewhere in the body. For example, cats with feline lower urinary tract disease frequently overgroom the skin on their abdomen, leading to baldness of their tummies

Signs of skin disease

A variety of signs may be seen, dependent on the condition and cause. Often, the pattern of signs seen isn't specific to the cause. A cat may show one or more of the following signs in various locations, for example, the ears, face or back, or more generalised over the body. Signs include:

- skin wounds
- irritation of the ears shown by shaking of the head or scratching at the ears
- itchiness which leads to scratching, biting or excessive licking of the coat
- redness of the skin
- spots or scabs
- crusting
- dandruff
- lumps
- baldness
- matting of the hair
- excessive grooming activity
- possible vomiting of hair balls or constipation due to overgrooming

- disorders affecting the feet such as the claws, nail beds or paw pads which may lead to limping

Many skin disorders can cause cats to feel itchy, but they can be very secretive about this and only scratch, bite and lick themselves when alone.

Because they have such rough tongues, cats can break and damage their hairs when grooming themselves excessively, as well as damaging the skin. They can also create areas of baldness. Your vet may examine hair under a microscope to tell whether your cat is damaging the hairs.

Diagnosis

Your vet will need to piece together a number of clues when considering the cause of your cat's skin problems. They will need to know about your cat's lifestyle and the signs you have seen. Your vet will also examine your cat carefully. This can help them to select appropriate tests or treatments.

Further tests may include:

- examination of samples under the microscope
- culture of samples for fungi and bacteria
- analysis of scabs and/or skin biopsies
- allergy tests, either blood testing or performing direct skin allergy tests

Treatments can not only ease skin disease but sometimes can help to diagnose the cause of a skin problem. This may include:

- assessing the response to suitable parasite treatment
- trialling a special diet. This should always be done under the advice of your vet, to ensure the diet is safe and balanced. The diet may need to be fed for around six weeks to see the full effect, but often there will be a response sooner. Sometimes more than one type of diet will need to be tried. To identify the triggers, certain foods may be fed once the cat is better to see if their skin disease returns. This should be done under veterinary guidance. Diets can include:

- a 'novel protein' diet where the food contains proteins your cat hasn't eaten before
- a 'hydrolysed' diet, where the proteins are broken up into smaller units, less likely to cause an allergy

- other tests, such as blood tests, may be needed to assess your cat's overall health and look for conditions such as hyperthyroidism or diabetes
- in some cases, your vet may recommend referral to a specialist veterinary dermatologist

Treatment

The treatment needed depends on the cause identified. Your cat may need a combination of treatments to manage the underlying cause together with symptomatic treatment to relieve any itchiness, discomfort or secondary infections. Some skin conditions cannot be cured but may be controlled through lifelong treatment. Your vet may recommend one or more of the following treatments:

- parasite control
- anti-inflammatory medications
- antihistamine medications
- omega 3 fatty acid dietary supplements
- topical treatments, such as washes, creams, ear cleaner and/or drops
- antibiotic treatment
- antifungal treatment
- exclusion diets
- surgery may be required for some disorders such as severe, longstanding ear infections, or to treat some cancers
- treatment of any underlying disease such as hyperthyroidism or diabetes

- veterinary buster collar to prevent self-trauma while other treatments are given time to work
- stress management is helpful when stress is thought to be a factor in the disease
- immunotherapy. Following allergy testing, cats can be gradually exposed to allergens using a course of injections

Prevention

Some skin disorders cannot be prevented but can be managed with appropriate care and treatments. However, the following options may be helpful:

- talk to your vet about parasite treatment for fleas and worms. Treatment will depend on your cat's lifestyle and individual risk. For more information see cats.org.uk/health
- feed your cat a complete, balanced cat food
- have a cat-friendly home to minimise stress. For more information see cats.org.uk/cat-stress
- have your cat neutered. This can reduce any involvement in cat fights as well as bringing other health benefits. For more information see cats.org.uk/neutering
- groom your cat regularly to remove dead hairs and prevent matting

- avoid exposure to allergens if you know your cat is sensitive to them. For example, avoid giving them diets you know they react to
- seek veterinary advice before using washes or creams on your cat. Cats don't usually like being bathed. Shampoos, creams and ear cleaners or drops can upset the skin's natural oil balance and cause or exacerbate skin disease. Many human skin washes and creams are not safe for cats
- keep white cats and those with white ears, noses and eyelids out of the sun between 11am and 4pm during the summer months, and consider applying a cat-safe sunscreen

Ringworm

Ringworm is the common name given to an infection of the surface of the skin, hair or nails with a type of fungus called a dermatophyte. It is not caused by a worm. There are different types of dermatophyte and some are more common in cats than others. Ringworm can spread from a cat to other animals and people too, so care should be taken when handling any suspected cases.

Cats most susceptible

Ringworm can affect any cat, but it is most often seen in:

- young or very old cats
- ill or debilitated cats, or those with a weaker immune system
- long-haired cats
- cats with skin damage

How cats become infected

The infective part of the fungus, called a spore, is shed on the hairs of affected animals and people and can survive for many months or even years. Cats become infected through exposure to these spores, usually through contact with an infected animal. More rarely, infection can occur due to exposure to a contaminated object or environment.

Signs

Ringworm in cats is most commonly seen on the face, ears and forelimbs, but will be present throughout the coat. The fungus invades the hair shafts and surface layer of the skin leading to:

- hair loss
- crusting and scaling
- some cats may become itchy, but others won't

More unusual signs include scabs all over the body or lumps on the skin. Ringworm can sometimes look very similar to other skin diseases.

In affected people, the skin often shows small, rounded, thickened red patches or patches of hair loss with scaling which may be itchy. People are more likely to be infected if they are children, very old or immunosuppressed. Consult your doctor if you develop skin lesions.

Diagnosis

There are various ways a cat can be tested for ringworm including:

- culture. Brushings of the coat or crusts are cultured in a lab and if present, ringworm will grow. This may take up to 14 days but culturing is accurate and also allows the type of dermatophyte to be identified
- Wood's lamp. This is a special-frequency, ultraviolet light that is carefully shone at affected hairs to look for apple-green fluorescence. This does not give a definite result because not all types of ringworm fluoresce and sometimes skin debris or other infection can fluoresce
- microscope examination of hairs. Sometimes fungal spores can be seen attached to the hairs

- testing samples for genetic material of ringworm
- skin biopsy. Occasionally a section of skin is needed for diagnosis

Treatment

Although healthy cats will normally recover from ringworm eventually on their own, treatment is highly recommended to speed up this process and lower the risk of it spreading to humans and other animals. All cats in contact with ringworm-positive cats should also be treated as they are likely to be carrying the fungal spores without showing signs. They can reinfect themselves or other individuals. Treatment may include:

- antifungal medicine given by mouth
- topical treatment, by applying a medicated wash to the coat, in addition to treatment by mouth
- treatment of other problems affecting the skin, such as fleas or other skin diseases
- decontaminating the environment with thorough vacuuming and regular disinfection to remove spores
- avoiding grooming affected cats until they are better, if possible, to reduce the risk of spreading spores through the coat or environment
- minimising direct contact with infected cats

Will my cat get better?

Most cats respond well to treatment and are cured in several weeks to months.

Treatment failure

It is extremely rare for ringworm not to resolve.

If initial treatment does fail it could be due to:

- reinfection occurring when a cat is exposed to a contaminated environment or other cats carrying the spores
 - the cat being infected with a type of ringworm that is resistant to antifungal drugs
 - the cat suffering with another illness for example, feline immunodeficiency virus, feline leukaemia virus or another disease that suppresses their immune system and makes recovery more difficult.
- For more information see cats.org.uk/fiv-in-cats and cats.org.uk/feline-leukaemia-virus
- the cat being treated for another illness with medication that suppresses their immune system and makes recovery more difficult

Protection

There is no vaccination to protect against ringworm. However, most affected cats respond well to treatment and many cats won't develop ringworm in their lifetime.

Looking for cat advice?

The following vet-approved guides
are available to download from
cats.org.uk/information-leaflets

Essential guides

Behaviour: Understanding your cat's behaviour W84009

Behaviour: Managing your cat's behaviour W84010

Bringing your cat home W84002

Caring for your cat W84001

Caring for your kitten W84015

Cats and people W84014

Cats living together W84011

Elderly cats W84016

End-of-life, grief and loss W84007

Feeding and obesity W84004

Feral cats W84017

Indoor and outdoor cats W84012

Keeping your cat safe W84005

Microchipping W84008

Moving home W84003

Neutering W84006

Pregnant cats, birth and care of young kittens W84018

Veterinary guides

Arthritis W83201

Cat flu W83216

Digestive disorders: vomiting and diarrhoea W83218

Feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV) and feline leukaemia virus (FeLV) W83209

Feline lower urinary tract disease (FLUTD) W83202

Fleas and other parasites W83215

Heart murmurs and heart disease W83211

Hyperthyroidism W83212

Infectious disease and vaccination W83217

Kidney or renal disease W83206

Skin disorders W83204

Teeth and oral health W83214

Please see cats.org.uk for more information on:

Cats and pregnant women: toxoplasmosis

Cats and the law

Cats with disabilities

Diabetes

Feline asthma

Feline coronavirus (FCoV) and feline infectious peritonitis (FIP)

Feline parvovirus (FPV)

Hypertension

You and your vet

For more information about Cats Protection or to find out how you can support us, go to **cats.org.uk**



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