

Cats that Lick Too Much

Some cats are more fastidious than others, but obsessive grooming signals a problem.

Nellie, a seven-year-old female spayed tortoiseshell, rolled over on her back and revealed a bald belly. That's when her owner suddenly noticed she had a cat that licked too much. Licking comes naturally to cats, but sometimes this normal grooming urge crosses the line into obsessive behavior. If your cat's licking seems



excessive in frequency or duration, don't ignore the problem. Here's what you can do if you suspect your cat's habitual grooming behavior isn't so normal anymore.

Cats typically spend between 30 and 50 percent of their day grooming themselves, says Pamela Perry, DVM, animal behavior resident of the Animal Behavior Clinic at Cornell University's College of Veterinary Medicine. "It's a huge chunk of their day," she says. "Because cats groom frequently, owners usually don't notice a problem until they observe significant hair loss or skin lesions," she adds.

Why Cats May Lick

Cats will lick when an area of their body is itchy or painful, says William Miller, Jr., VMD, a board certified specialist in dermatology and a professor at Cornell University's College of Veterinary Medicine. If pain is the issue, the licking is focused on the painful area, like in cases of disc disease or anal sac impaction. With itchy

diseases, however, the licking is more widespread.

"We call these cats 'fur mowers,' and their problem is common in cats," Dr. Miller says. "The area being 'mowed' gives us a clue as to the cause [which can include anything from parasites in kittens to neurological diseases in older cats], but there is great overlap," he says. For example, compulsive licking at the tail head may indicate a flea infestation, while cats with pollen or food allergies may lick their backs, abdomens or other areas of the body.

Licking that causes excessive numbers of hairballs or hair loss is abnormal, Dr. Miller notes. "Bald skin is more prone to sunburn, frostbite or other environmental insults," he says. "As long as the licking doesn't break the skin's surface, no infection will occur. If the cat gets more passionate about licking and abrades the skin surface [with its rough tongue], infection can occur. Infection will intensify the licking and a vicious cycle will be set up, resulting in a serious infection," he explains.

The solution to "fur mowing" is to identify the underlying cause and correct it. "The owner can check for fleas, lice and fur mats, but beyond that, a veterinarian should intervene," Dr. Miller says.

"Over-the-top" licking does not always stem from a physical health problem; the behavior can occasionally have a psychological cause. Cats like consistency and predictability, and change can be stressful, Dr. Perry says. A recent move, the addition or loss of another pet in the home, or even a change of schedule can cause anxiety in cats. Licking - which in such cases is considered a "displacement behavior" - may calm and comfort a cat, but it can sometimes become habitual if the source of the problem is not properly identified and addressed.

When It's Stress-Related

"If all medical problems have been ruled out, then we normally treat over grooming as the result of some form of stress in a cat's life," Dr. Perry says. If possible, she recommends making changes or introductions gradually; bringing familiar items (such as bedding) to a new home; adding cat-friendly vertical space - high places where cats can retreat and feel safe; and keeping their environment stimulating by finding a few minutes (ten to 15 minutes daily will do) to play with them each day.

"Most cats really enjoy interaction," Dr. Perry says. "Finding what your cat likes, whether it's cuddle time with you or a favorite toy that is like a security blanket, can relieve stress."

Finally, if your cat is seriously stressed, a form of temporary anti-anxiety drug therapy prescribed by your veterinarian may be warranted, she says.

In addition, like people who bite their fingernails, the repetitive act of licking may involve a stress-relieving pleasure component that reinforces the behavior, Dr. Perry says. Thus, feline licking can become a habit that persists after the cause is identified and resolved. "Usually, the behavior is forgotten [naturally or with the help of medication] in about a month," Dr. Miller says.

Whether the cause is physiological or psychological, solving an over grooming problem will require time and patience on the owner's part. For Nellie, who had recently endured the loss of a companion animal in her home, the solution required consistent attention, affection and routine. It took a few months, but her hair is growing back and her life has returned to normal.

By Susan Easterly