

Stop the Itch

Soothe your cat's dry, itchy skin naturally.

By Lisa Hanks

Figgy scratched her red, itchy bumps until she developed bloody sores. Jasper clawed constantly at his irritated face, neck and ears. Maya fretted and scratched her dry, flaky skin.

While all of these cats were plagued with itchiness, each one probably had a vastly different illness.

"Whether using conventional or alternative treatments, it's best to start with a diagnosis," says Pam Truman, DVM, a holistic veterinarian based in Overland Park, Kan. "That way, you can formulate a methodical treatment plan."

Common causes of itchy feline skin include allergies to food, inhaled materials (such as pollens and airborne particles) or things that touched the skin (such as carpet); fungal infections (such as ringworm); parasites (including fleas, ticks and mites); autoimmune diseases; matted, poorly groomed fur; and a shoddy diet.

Improving your cat's diet is a simple place to start.

"I've definitely seen improvement or resolution of symptoms after a diet change or the addition of skin-soothing supplements like fish oil, digestive enzymes and herbs," Truman says. If you or your veterinarian suspects a food allergy, one of the first steps is to switch to a grain-free diet or one that's based on a different protein.

Supplements that can help reduce skin inflammation include fish oils, which contain beneficial omega fatty acids, and evening primrose oil.

"Digestive enzymes and probiotics may be helpful, too, if a cat has digestive issues on top of skin problems," Truman says. "Vitamin C and locally-produced bee pollen might work with possible inhalant allergies."

The Western herbs licorice (which is an anti-inflammatory) and Oregon grape (which is an anti-inflammatory and antibacterial) might also be prescribed.

Holistic treatments such as acupuncture, herbal therapy and homeopathy all can reduce the itch. These therapies work best if the underlying cause — stress, illness or imbalance, for instance — is identified and addressed.

"Chinese herbs and acupuncture can be useful if a correct diagnosis is made by a qualified practitioner," Truman explains. "In Chinese medicine, skin diseases are categorized as an excess or a deficiency, depending on the lesions and the other symptoms. As with any holistic treatment, Traditional Chinese Medicine is most effective when a customized plan is created based on the cat's entire health picture and diagnosis.

You can soothe your kitty's itch with several at-home strategies, but check with your holistic veterinarian first to ensure they're safe and won't interfere with the cat's treatment.

Experts recommend calendula ointment twice a day and cooling aloe vera gel three to five times a day.

"Although the aloe vera plant is considered toxic, the gel part is edible and nontoxic," Truman says. "The toxic component is the whitish sap right below the skin."

Also try a cool, wet compress of black, green or chamomile tea.

"Black tea has more tannins than some other teas and may have more anti-inflammatory action," Truman says. Start with 1 cup of strong, cooled tea, and apply a washcloth or the used tea bag to itchy spots for three to 10 minutes, two to five times a day. Be aware that this might temporarily discolor your cat's fur, but it will fade in a few weeks.

"If it doesn't stress your cat, try a cool oatmeal bath," Truman suggests. Typically, you'll find finely ground (colloidal) oatmeal in shampoos, conditioners, soaks, sprays and lotions. It seals in moisture and reduces redness and swelling.

“Conventional treatments of oral or injected corticosteroids (anti-inflammatories) can effectively eliminate the itch,” Truman says. “When used infrequently, it appears to be safe with few side effects. But for ongoing or recurrent skin disease, you must determine the underlying cause to discover the best treatment.”

Lisa Hanks is a freelance writer based in Newport Beach, Calif. As she writes each day, her three cats rotate lap duties to be sure she is never catless.