

Is Your Cat Allergic?

You can help stop the itching, licking and biting that drives your cat crazy.

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Andrea Sullivan remembers the first time she saw the bald patches on Southpaw's flanks. They had just moved from the East Coast, where Southpaw had been an indoor cat, to the West, where she was starting to go outside. "Soon I started to notice she was licking and biting at herself a lot more than she used to, and she was bald from her middle all the way down to the insides of her back legs," Sullivan says. After over-the-counter skin treatments proved unsuccessful, Southpaw had a series of cortisone treatments from several veterinarians. The shots provided temporary relief, but in time Southpaw went back to licking herself bald and scratching her neck until it scabbed over.

Sullivan then took Southpaw to a veterinary acupuncturist. Treatments helped, but they were expensive and Andrea couldn't afford to keep them up. She also tried changing Southpaw's food, to no avail. Finally, Southpaw solved the problem herself: She lost interest in going outside. When Southpaw became an indoor cat again, the itching stopped.

Does Southpaw's story sound familiar? If it does, your cat suffers from allergies.

Cats have allergies just like humans and as with human allergies, cat allergies vary in severity and can only be managed, not cured. Cats can develop allergies from flea bites to food to airborne pollens. Reactions often severe ones may appear suddenly at any age. Some cats develop respiratory allergies (usually asthmatic wheezing) or digestive allergies (vomiting and diarrhea), but skin allergies are the most common.

A single cortisone shot from a general practice veterinarian or even an over-the-counter skin treatment can provide sufficient relief if symptoms are mild. But if basic treatments don't work or stop working, specialty intervention might be needed from a holistic practitioner or a dermatology/allergy specialist.

First Things First: The DiagnosisWhere do you begin if watching your cat scratch, bite and lick itself bald is driving you crazy? Phillip Raclyn, DVM, who practices both holistic and traditional veterinary medicine in New York City, says his first order of business is determining whether the cat's symptoms are allergy-related rather than the result of another problem such as an autoimmune disorder or parasites.