

Why Does My Kitten Attack Her Tail?

Our vet expert explains what Feline Hyperesthesia Syndrome is and how it affects cats.

Q: My 1-year-old kitten constantly meows and bites her tail. We have tried flea treatments and flea and tick shampoos to help her, but it is not working. Our new theory is that it's a behavioral reaction because she does this more when my partner is around than with me. She has not injured her tail as far as I know; we cannot see any scratches or cuts. We want to rule out anything else before taking her to the vet. Any idea what this could be?

A: Your cat might have a condition called Feline Hyperesthesia Syndrome, or "rolling skin syndrome." It usually appears in cats between the ages of 1 and 4. Siamese and other Asian breeds have a higher prevalence of this syndrome.

Clinical signs of Feline Hyperesthesia Syndrome include sudden bouts of weird hyperactive (sometimes aggressive) behavior, frantic grooming around the tail or flank, an obsession or fixation with their tails — including occasional attacks directed at their tails — and rolling skin (hence the name "rolling skin syndrome"). Other symptoms include dilated pupils with a strange look to the eyes, extreme sensitivity to touch along the spine (sometimes petting or scratching the cat along the spine can trigger a bizarre behavior spell), sudden mood swings and loud crying or meowing. Cats can show any or all of the behaviors described above.

The cause of Feline Hyperesthesia Syndrome is unknown, but there are a few possible explanations. The condition might be a type of seizure activity. Supporting this theory is the fact that some affected cats respond to anti-convulsant medications. Another possibility is that this is a form of obsessive-compulsive disorder. The fact that many cats respond to anti-obsessional medications supports this diagnosis. Some professionals say it is a combination of the two. There is no test to diagnose Feline Hyperesthesia Syndrome. A diagnosis is made after excluding other causes of the clinical signs and receiving a positive response to treatment. Blood tests and other diagnostic tests likely will be necessary to rule out medical causes that might be confused with Feline Hyperesthesia Syndrome, such as hyperthyroidism, parasitic skin infections and skin allergies.

Effective anti-obsessional drugs include clomipramine (Clomicalm) and fluoxetine (Prozac). It might take three or four weeks for an initial response to the drug. By 16 weeks, the full effect of the drug should be known. When anti-obsessional therapy is ineffective or only marginally effective, anti-convulsants can be tried. The first drug to try in cats is usually Phenobarbital. With appropriate environmental and pharmacologic treatment, affected cats often can be rehabilitated and lead a normal life.

Regards,
Arnold Plotnick, DVM