

Help! My Cat is Pulling His Own Hair!

Cats groom themselves for comfort, but excessive grooming can indicate your cat is stressed.

Q: I have a 9-year-old male Russian Blue, named Campbell. He began excessive licking and pulling out large tufts of hair from his back soon after I married my husband and moved to a new home. He was 3 years old at the time. I suspected behavioral issues because of the big life changes. I was working as a vet tech and brought him in to rule out any medical conditions. We did skin biopsies and blood work, and were unable to diagnose any allergies or disease.

Since that time we have moved twice more, and he now pulls hair from his tail, legs and tummy. I have tried different techniques to enable him to feel more comfortable in his environment.

All of the veterinarians who have examined him are unable to offer any advice except for putting him on valium. I would like to avoid medications unless he has a defined medical condition. He absolutely despises pills and becomes very stressed whenever we have to medicate him. If you have any suggestions, I would greatly appreciate hearing back from you. Thank you so much for your time and consideration.

A: It sounds like your veterinarian did a good, thorough medical work-up (blood work and skin biopsy) to rule out a medical disorder. Psychological disturbances are a very common cause of self-inflicted hair loss in cats. Cats who pull, chew, or excessively groom their fur do this despite the fact that their skin does not itch. This may be a manifestation of stress or anxiety.

We're familiar with the stresses that humans face (mortgage payments, traffic jams), but we may not be aware that our seemingly calm cat is actually stressed out about something. In many instances, the cause is obvious: a move to a new apartment, boarding, a new pet or baby in the household, hierarchical competition in a multi-cat household, etc.

Given the frequent changes in your cat's environment (your new spouse joining the household, frequent changes of residence), it sounds like your cat has psychogenic alopecia, i.e. hair loss due to psychological factors. In the past few years, veterinary behaviorists have come to realize that some cats and dogs exhibit signs of obsessive-compulsive behavior and excessive grooming can sometimes fall into this category.

Grooming is a comfort behavior, often used by cats to relax themselves. Think about the last time your cat did something foolish or klutzy, such as misjudge a leap or accidentally tumble off the sofa. We might laugh, but the cat immediately grooms. Whether they feel embarrassment is debatable, but cat lovers recognize this reflexive grooming behavior in their cat whenever uncertainty arises. It shouldn't be surprising that in the face of stress or anxiety, they may turn to excessive grooming to dispel their anxiety.

Ideally, the treatment for psychogenic alopecia involves the elimination of the potential stressors in the cat's environment. Unfortunately, this is often impossible or impractical, and anti-anxiety or anti-depressant medications are warranted to control the problem. Two commonly used drugs are clomipramine and amitriptyline. Some cats with psychogenic alopecia may also respond to chlorpheniramine (an antihistamine) or systemic glucocorticoids. I know that your cat hates being medicated, and I understand your concern about giving medication to cats unless absolutely necessary. Frankly, if the problem isn't terribly severe i.e. your cat isn't licking himself to the point where he's causing abrasions on the skin or having terrible hairball or constipation problems from excessive hair ingestion, you may not need to treat him at all.

Regards, Arnold Plotnick, DVM