

## Cat Is Obsessed with Grooming

**CatChannel behavior expert Marilyn Krieger, CCBC, explains why changes in a cat's environment can bring on self-destructive behaviors.**

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Posted: July 18, 2008 2 a.m. EDT

**Q:** My friendly and loving 3-year-old shorthair, Puck, has developed a distressing habit. There have been a few recent changes in our household with graduation and the departure of our longtime roommate and the start of my new job. Puck has started to excessively groom her legs, chewing on the fur and pulling it out, leaving bald patches and wounds behind. These wounds are not present before she begins one of her aggressive grooming sessions, and she has no signs of infection (discoloration of the skin, rashes, scaly patches, redness, sensitivity, etc.) She is not prone to sensitive skin, and the only other major change is that she has become especially needy, following me everywhere and demanding attention, which I, of course, give her. How concerned should I be about this change in behavior, and how do I keep her from doing this when I am not there?

**A:** Whenever there are changes in a cat's behavior, it's always a good idea to have the cat examined by a veterinarian. Allergies to food, fleas and medications, as well as other things in the environment can cause excessive grooming. From your description though, it is more than likely that Puck is reacting to the many changes going on in her home.

An important part of a cat's world is consistency. Change can result in cats feeling insecure and vulnerable. When changes occur, sensitive cats can respond by indulging in self-destructive behaviors or through other behaviors that we don't appreciate. Puck appears to be a sensitive cat, but her behavior can be changed with a little work, environmental enrichments and consistency.

Start by putting Puck on a schedule, engaging her in activities that she enjoys. If she enjoys being groomed, have regular grooming sessions every day at the same time. Make sure to feed her meals at the same times every day. Encourage her to work a little for her food by putting treats or dry food in treat balls (hollow plastic balls with holes in them). The treats will only be available when Puck knocks and rolls the treat ball around.

Multiple play sessions are a necessity. When playing with Puck, use a fishing pole toy and imitate a hunting experience by pretending the toy on the end of the pole is a wounded animal. Toward the end of the play session, slow down the play, and then finally let her catch the toy for the last time. After she catches it, feed her a sumptuous treat or her regular meal. She will eat, groom and then go to sleep. Clicker training her every day at the same time will also help bring feelings of security and consistency back into her life.

Environmental enrichment, interactive toys and chew toys will also refocus Puck away from self-destructive activities on to more stimulating and fun pursuits. The TurboScratcher, a combination interactive toy and cat scratcher keeps kitties busy for hours. Besides the little ball that is included, treats can be placed in the channel that surrounds the cardboard scratching area. Dental chew toys and chew rings for cats also help refocus destructive energy.