

## Ten Signs Your Cat Has Fleas

**Don't know why your cat is scratching? Here are specific things that cat owners should look for to keep kitty flea-free.**

*By Rebecca Sweat*

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When your cat is biting himself, you should check to see if he has fleas. Fleas! Disgusting! Good thing your cats don't have fleas, or do they? How can you tell? If you regularly spend time with your cats, you'll be able to figure it out pretty quickly. You will know what's normal behavior for them and what their coat and fur usually look like. But if they become infested with fleas, there will be both physical signs and behavioral changes that will alert you that something is wrong. Exactly what's going on, you may not know for sure. But if you notice any more than a few of the following signs, you can be pretty sure fleas are the root cause of your cat's problems: Intense and frantic scratching or biting of their coat. Flea bites can cause a cat's skin and fur to feel very itchy. Your cat may suddenly start scratching his body with his paws or chewing his skin, in an attempt to get some relief from the itchy feeling.

**Excessive grooming.** Fleas can turn cats into nonstop groomers, especially around the hind legs and base of the tail. A cat may lick repeatedly to try to eliminate the itchy sensation.

**Hair loss.** Your cat may groom himself to the point that you start to see bald patches, especially on the back of the legs, neck and around the base of the tail.

**Avoidance of certain parts of your home.** If some of your rooms have hardwood or tile flooring and others are carpeted, it's the latter that's going to harbor most of the fleas. Your cat may typically prefer the carpeted rooms, but if he's been bitten by a lot of fleas in those rooms, he might quit going to those places.

**Agitation, edginess and restlessness.** Your cat may suddenly behave like a wildcat. He might start growling a lot, shaking his head, hysterically rubbing his head and body on the floor or darting from one end of the room to the other. He's doing these things because the fleas are literally driving him crazy.

**Red skin lesions or scablike bumps.** Some cats are so sensitive to flea saliva when they are bitten that their skin becomes red and inflamed. These lesions are extremely itchy. If the cat chews on them, they can start to ooze.

**Muscle loss, pale gums and lethargy.** These signs indicate anemia (low red blood-cell count), which can result when a huge number of fleas consume a cat's blood or if the cat bites his skin so deeply that he bleeds excessively. Flea anemia is most often seen in kittens, seniors or sick cats.

**Tiny pepperlike specks on your cat's fur.** Known as "flea dirt," these dark brown specks are actually the feces of the flea. They're most often seen on the neck and rump areas, but you may also see some of these specks on your cat's comb or brush. If you put some of these granules on a paper towel and mist them with water, they will turn red. That's because the feces are composed of digested blood.

**Red spots in your cat's bedding fabric.** This is flea dirt that fell off your cat's fur and onto the bedding, and then turned red when the cat's warm body rubbed against it.

**Pinhead-sized black or reddish-brown insects crawling on your cat's fur.** These are the fleas themselves. If your cat is heavily infested, there's a good chance you'll see them. Part your cat's fur in several places to see the skin. Fleas gravitate to the neck, lower back, hind legs and tail. But even if you don't see any, don't assume there are no fleas in your home. Fleas go through four stages in their life cycle — egg, larva, pupa and adult. Even if there are no fleas on your cat's body, there could still be fleas in the three developmental lifestages in your furniture, carpet or baseboards, just days or weeks away from turning into adults and invading your cat. That's why it's important to always be tuned in to the signs of flea infestation. Today, your cat may be flea-free. Tomorrow, he might not be.

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