

Stop the Itch!

A single fleabite, fungal disease or food allergy can cause constant scratching.

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Q. My 3-year-old Munchkin cat suddenly started licking and cleaning himself more than normal. It's almost constant. About two months ago I noticed he had scabs on his neck and chin from excessive scratching. He doesn't compulsively clean in one particular area, but more all over. Fortunately, he has no hot spots or open sores and does not pull out excessive amounts of hair.

I've tried using a flea comb on him several times over the past few weeks and found no signs of fleas or flea dirt. He's been bathed recently with an anti-bacterial shampoo, which had no effect. My little guy is a strictly indoor cat, and nothing in his environment has changed. His food, litter and everything have remained the same for the past three years of his life, and I don't think it's his diet.

A. There are several possibilities for your cat's itchiness. Though you're certain that fleas are not the problem, however, just one fleabite can set off a chain of allergic events in some sensitive pets that can manifest long after the flea has departed. The very first thing I do with cats like this is to have the owner apply a prescribed topical flea product. If the itching stops shortly thereafter then we simply continue that treatment for life, assuming that your cat has developed a flea allergy.

Although rare, some of the dermatophyte (skin fungal diseases) can manifest this way. The typical ringworm cases are associated with hair loss as well as itching, but there are a few atypical culprits that can make a kitty do exactly what your cat is doing. Selecting some hairs for culture on dermatophyte test media is easy and relatively inexpensive, so we do it on all itchy kitties before we start pursuing other diagnostic tests.

In most cases, especially in cats with these symptoms, they have an allergy to either a food component or an environmental stimulus. Cats (and dogs for that matter) manifest their allergies primarily in terms of skin problems because the cell that mediates allergies (mast cell) is found in their skin in high numbers.

The offending allergen or allergens can be difficult to pin down, and working with a veterinary dermatologist is your best bet. I generally put these kitties on an eight- to twelve-week hypoallergenic food trial (there are commercial veterinary diets that can be obtained from your veterinarian) to see if the itching stops. There are no real over-the-counter hypoallergenic diets available, so it is best to go with a prescription diet at the start.