

Skin Irritation or Seizures?

Flea allergy may cause chronic itch.

J. Veronika Kiklevich, DVM

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Q. My 4-year-old, spayed Push-Push sometimes appears to have a chronic itch. Her fur seems to move as she twitches and jerks around. She also bites and tugs on her nails, like she wants to pull them out, then takes off running like a lunatic.

This behavior is becoming more frequent. I'm not sure if this is happening because Push-Push is obese or if she has a skin problem. I mentioned her mien to our vet, but he had no comments or suggestions.

A. The symptoms you are describing sound as though Push-Push has an itch she can't scratch. This is a fairly well-described syndrome in cats and sometimes the behavior becomes so dramatic that the cat appears to be having seizures. Until the source of the irritation is determined, the cat can be managed with phenobarbital, an anti-seizure medication. Rarely do we have to go to such extreme measures, but I want you to understand that this can become a serious condition.

The most common cause for such symptoms is flea allergies. When I say a flea allergy, I am not implying that your cat is riddled with the little buggers. I'm saying that one or two fleas could have jumped on, had a blood meal and left some irritating saliva behind. This is all it takes to set up a cascade of allergic events that can lead to what you have described. The first thing I recommend is a good flea product, which your veterinarian can recommend. If the behavior goes away, then we found our answer and we need not look further. Of course, medicine is not that simple. Often if the behavior persists, we have to look for other potential allergens either in the cat's diet or in the environment.

In a few cases, these symptoms can be caused by a neurological problem, although I doubt this is the case with Push-Push. Still, if the episodes continue and worsen, consider consulting a veterinary neurologist.

Another thing to remember is that serious health consequences can be associated with obesity. I have found that 85 percent of my patients are overweight and approximately 50 percent fall into the truly obese category. We see an increased incidence of diabetes mellitus, heart disease, kidney disease, pancreatic disease and cancer, sometimes associated with overweight felines. In addition, overweight cats are prone to developing a problem called hepatic (liver) lipidosis (accumulation of fat) or HL. This can be fatal if not treated promptly. At the very least it can be life threatening. I highly suggest starting a weight reduction program today for Push-Push.