



The Cat House

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Excessive Grooming

By Rebecca Arnold, DVM, PhD

Cats are usually proud of their coats. They spend endless hours grooming themselves to perfection while owners brush undercoat and help remove occasional mats. But what about the cat that over-grooms to the point of hair destruction and skin damage? There are as many reasons and an equal number of treatments which may or may not work.

Commonly there is an underlying explanation. Most often the fleas can be detected. Saliva from one flea can be enough to cause a sensitive cat to traumatize the skin. Other parasites can also be responsible. The broad and murky area of allergies causes some cats to do extensive damage to themselves. Cats become allergic via three routes; **inhalation**, or breathing, **direct contact** and **ingestion** of offending antigens.

Other conditions resulting in excessive grooming include impacted anal glands, mats, bacterial hypersensitivity and drug reactions. There are many disease processes that include an excessive grooming component. This would include hyperthyroidism, diabetes mellitus, leukemia, skin cancer and fungal infections. Feline hyperesthesia or crawling skin syndrome may progress to fur pulling and self-induced skin trauma. Although challenging, most of the above cases can usually be resolved.

The most complex cat is the over-groomer which is the product of

Psychogenic alopecia as the result. Behavioral irregularities in cats with this disorder are similar to humans with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) (Jack Nicholson in As Good As It Gets)

Triggers commonly associated with compulsive grooming include the introduction of a new human or pet into the household, a move to a new environment, the loss of a companion pet, excessive unfamiliar noise, separation from owner and boredom. Other reasons are fear, physical restraint, competition and/or an unstable social order.

Obsessive compulsive grooming is probably over-diagnosed as there is no technique to directly establish the diagnosis. Generally speaking the diagnosis is made by eliminating all other possibilities and this is a monumental task. The treatment for Obsessive Compulsive grooming is as difficult, risky and frustrating as the condition. Unfortunately even if an inducing stressor can be identified and eliminated, the behavior may not and usually does not cease.

At the current time it has been suggested that endorphins are involved in that they reduce the effect of chronic stress and simultaneously reinforce the behavior. Endorphin blockers, dopamine antagonists and a variety of anti-anxiety drugs are available therapies. Success is dependant on the actual cause and the length of time the behavior has been occurring. Editor's note: Dr Arnold is the owner of All Feline Hospital.

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Why Do Cats End Up in Shelters?

Every day in communities across the US a bond is broken. It is the bond between people and their pets, resulting in millions of pets being surrendered to shelters each year.

In a recent study conducted by the National Council on Pet Population Study and Policy (NCPSP) and published in the July issue of the Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science, researchers went into 12 selected animal shelters in the US for one year to find out why.

The results of the study show that the top seven reasons for relinquishment for both dogs and cats are the same.

- 1 Moving
- 2 Landlord not allowing pet
- 3 Too many animals in the household.
- 4 Cost of pet maintenance
- 5 Owner having personal problems
- 6 Inadequate facilities
- 7 No homes available for litter mates
- 8 Cats only-Allergies in the family
- 9 Cats only-House soiling
- 10 Incompatibility with other pets.

Specially trained researchers completed confidential individual interviews with pet owners who were relinquishing their cats to animal shelters. Owners were allowed to give up to five reasons for relinquishment. Interviewers did not, however, prioritize the re-

sponses. They recorded them in the order stated.

In addition to the reason for relinquishment, the study collected data on the pets being given up.

- ◆ The majority of cats (30.2%) had been owned from 7 months to 1 year.
- ◆ 50.8% of cats surrendered were not neutered.
- ◆ 46.9% of cats had not been to a veterinarian.
- ◆ Cats acquired from friends were relinquished in higher numbers (33.2%) than from any other source.
- ◆ Close to equal numbers of male and female cats were surrendered.

During the confidential interviews, researchers also gathered data on the people surrendering the cats. "owners represented a broad range of age, ethnicity, education, and income level, indicating continued efforts will need to reach wide and far into communities across the country," said Dr. Mo Salman, the article's senior author.

As with all research there are limitations. According to the authors, "the study was designed to describe the animals submitted to shelters. Thus, this set of data has no comparison data from the general pet-owning population. Many factors undoubtedly influence relinquishment and some critical factors may have been omitted.

Litter Box Suggestions

Adjust the location of box, height of box sides, and depth of litter for the convenience of kittens, elderly and ill cats. Place a towel or rug under the litter box so the cat can wipe his feet.

Long haired cats may prefer a course-grained litter, rather than a fine-grained variety, because it clings less to fur.

Place litterboxes in locations that are easily accessible, reasonable secluded, and quiet.

For most adult cats, place 2 to 3 inches of litter in the box.

Offer one box per cat when possible. Remove both urine and feces from boxes and add fresh litter daily.

From Understanding Your Cat & Kitten by H. Ellen Whitney, DVM