



OVER-GROOMING

OVER-GROOMING in cats, refers to behaviour that goes beyond normal grooming for coat maintenance, and scent distribution.

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS OF OVER-GROOMING?

Cats that are over-grooming will have patches of broken or sparse hair, and may have complete hair loss in some areas, and occasionally damage to the underlying skin. Affected cats may lick, chew, pluck or bite areas of hair or skin, with extreme cases resulting in severe trauma (usually to the feet or tail), which in the case of tail trauma, may require partial amputation. This behaviour can become “obsessive” and difficult to interrupt.

WHAT CAUSES OVER-GROOMING?

The majority of over-grooming cases are initially caused by a skin complaint (such as external parasites), or an underlying pain issue, such as arthritis or cystitis (bladder pain). However, it is thought that most cases also have a stress component.

Some cats use overgrooming as a way to cope with stress or boredom. It is thought that grooming releases **endorphins** (feel-good chemicals) that help relieve anxiety, so when a stressed cat finds relief in licking, it can turn into a habit.

Compulsive grooming, known as **psychogenic alopecia**, is usually triggered by a change in the cat’s daily routine or environment, such as moving to a new house or the arrival of a new family member or pet. Cats are very observant and may even feed off our own stress levels.

Cats are also highly intelligent and prone to boredom if their daily routine lacks proper enrichment. Domestic cats still retain the same natural hunting instincts as their wild counterparts, and so an environment that lacks hunting opportunities or appropriate outlets to demonstrate their highly tuned hunting skills, will likely lead to stress and frustration. This cause of overgrooming is especially common in indoor cats that are alone for a large portion of the day, where grooming helps make up for the lack of mental or physical stimulation.

There have also been anecdotal reports of some **Oriental breeds** being more likely to develop a purely stress-related over-grooming issue, often involving plucking the hair, but at present there is no conclusive evidence to suggest how common this is.



COMMON AREAS FOR OVER-GROOMING

Over-grooming can basically occur on any part of the body that the cat can reach with its tongue. The most common areas presented are the abdomen, inside of the back legs, and the flanks, and these patches will often appear symmetrical on either side of the body. Some cats may also obsessively bite and pull at their feet or claws.

Cats can be very good at being secretive when over-grooming, so the behaviour is not always obvious to the owner. Over-grooming can be distinguished from true alopecia (hair-loss), by the feel of the skin of the affected area. If the hair has fallen out due to true alopecia, then the skin will feel smooth to the touch, whereas in over-grooming cases, the area will feel rough and stubbly from where the hair has been bitten off close to the root.

Another symptom of over-grooming can be regular regurgitation of hairballs, and in some cases this may be the only apparent symptom, as the loss of hair may not be sufficient to be visually evident without close examination.

CAN OVER-GROOMING BE A SIGN OF ILLNESS?

Diseases that can result in over-grooming are generally problems that cause intense itching or pain. One of the most common would be a hypersensitivity to flea saliva (flea allergic dermatitis). Skin reactions to dietary substances or environmental pathogens can also cause intense irritation.

As previously mentioned, lower urinary tract diseases such as cystitis or urinary calculi, can cause pain and discomfort in the lower abdomen, and you may see cats over-grooming in a localised area where the pain is, such as a bald patch on the lower belly or genitals.

Another possible differential diagnosis would be Feline Hyperaesthesia Syndrome. This is currently a poorly understood condition, that manifests in various behaviours that include skin twitching and sudden bouts of intense grooming and self-mutilation, often of the hind feet and tail.

As also previously mentioned, other pain such as arthritic pain, may also lead to overgrooming of the affected area, such as specific painful joints.

Because there are multiple potential causes for over-grooming behaviour, it is essential that a full examination by a veterinary surgeon is carried out, which may involve further investigations such as blood tests, urine tests, skin and hair samples, and diagnostic imaging such as x-rays or ultrasound.

Once medical causes have been treated or ruled out, then your vet can look at advising on potential behavioural aspects if the problem is still not fully resolved. This can include looking in depth at your cat's home environment to assess if environmental modification can be utilised to help reduce stress and anxiety, and referral to a qualified Cat Behaviourist may be necessary for more in-depth behavioural treatment.