



Overgrooming in cats due to stress

In some cases, cats will overgroom due to stress resulting in hair loss and bald patches.

To diagnose a behavioural cause, the following must be ruled out first:

- Flea allergy
- Environmental allergy
- Dietary allergy
- Concurrent health problems e.g. lower urinary tract disease.

Management

1. Remove any obvious sources of stress (if possible!). Common causes would be new pets in the household, building work, and stray or neighbouring cats. If the source of stress can be removed, then do so. If not, try to keep to a regular routine for your cat and concentrate on making him or her feel safe and secure. Frighten away neighbouring cats with a water pistol. Lock cat flaps if stray cats are using them to enter your house or to bully your cat. Microchip cat flaps can be an excellent way of allowing your cat access outside but preventing unwanted cats from entering the house.

Provide a safe hiding place or cat bed in a quiet place in the house, preferably in an elevated position. Further tips on providing a cat friendly home are available at www.icatcare.org

2. Try to distract your cat from the overgrooming behaviour. It is recommended that you use a whistle or horn to distract the cat when they are overgrooming. Once the behaviour has stopped, encourage alternative behaviours such as playing with people in the household, or with toys.

3. A synthetic pheromone product is available, known as Feliway. This is available as a plug-in diffuser which releases synthetic pheromones into the household environment. These pheromones mimic the pheromones released by a mother cat when she is suckling her kittens and are believed to make cats feel relaxed and comforted.

4. Zylkène is a natural product, derived from casein, the protein in milk. This can be used to help your cat feel more relaxed and comforted.

5. Kalmaid contains L-Tryptophan which is an essential amino acid which affects production of serotonin. Serotonin has a calming and relaxing effect.

In some cases behavioural overgrooming is not treated beyond the steps described above. If the compulsive behaviour is not causing physical harm to the cat and is minimally distressing for the cat and the owner it may turn out to be the most practical outlet that your cat has to deal with stress (for example if there is a new baby or pet in the home). However, if the cat is breaking the skin with the overgrooming behaviour, or it is otherwise unacceptable to leave the problem untreated, drug therapy may be necessary to control the compulsive behaviour.

6. Drug therapy. Antidepressant-type medications may be used to normalise the balance of chemicals in the brain. There are several different medications available. They are not specifically licensed for use in cats, but they have been widely used in cats and good results have been achieved.