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Cat's grooming habits can point to health problems

Lick, lick. Rub, rub. Switch to the next leg. This pattern is very familiar to owners who watch their cat groom. Each cat has its own grooming routine and, if



DR. ELAINE WEXLER-MITCHELL
THE CAT DOC

time allows, may also groom other cats in the home.

Some cats even like to groom their owners. My cat, Shaka, loves to jump on

my desk and lick my hair.

How much grooming is normal? Normal grooming ranges between "not much" to complete obsession. Cats that are poor groomers have dull, dry, matted coats. Those that groom excessively will mow down their hair and even create bald spots. A cat's general health and his environment both can impact grooming behavior.

Why do some cats groom excessively? Itchiness is one reason. Cats may itch due to allergies, inflammatory conditions, fleas or other skin parasites, bacterial or fungal infections or dry skin. Some cats groom as a response to stress – the equivalent of people who bite their fingernails. If your cat grooms excessively or has any other hair or skin abnormalities, have him or her checked out by your veterinarian.

Treatment for behavioral or psychogenic alopecia (hair loss) can involve an Elizabethan collar to prevent grooming, unpleasant-tasting sprays or creams, herbal calming remedies, or even prescription anti-anx-

xiety drugs. Whatever treatment your vet recommends, it should not be discontinued until the behavior has stopped and the skin has adequately recovered.

Why are some cats poor groomers? Obesity is one reason. Cats that are overweight are unable to reach certain parts of their bodies for grooming. Age is another. Older cats may develop arthritis that makes twisting during grooming difficult. Dental disease in any age cat can decrease grooming, since a painful mouth will discourage normal grooming. Length and

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texture of hair also affects grooming habits. Long-haired cats sometimes have too much coat to handle. Finally, some breeds just don't care as much about keeping their looks up!

You don't want to confuse poor grooming habits with a poor coat. Diet, metabolic status, weather and overall health all affect the way a cat's coat looks. If you have a cat that is a poor groomer, he or she needs your help. Combing is generally preferred over brushing since it is easier to get a comb down deep in the fur. Most brushes tend to ride on top of the fur and don't reach the undercoat. I recommend flea combs as a rou-

tine grooming tool for short-haired cats, and a metal, medium-toothed combs for longer coats.

Do cats need baths? Some cats never have a bath during their lifetime, while others need monthly bathing. The frequency of bathing depends on how oily or dry a coat is and how well a cat is able to keep himself clean. Bathing as frequently as every few weeks is sometimes needed. Some brave owners bathe their own cats, while others seek help from grooming shops and veterinary offices.

What if your cat is matted? Combing or shaving is needed to remove mats, and some cats need body shaves by groomers to get their coats back in shape. I discourage owners from cutting mats with scissors at home since I frequently have to stitch up areas where cats have been accidentally cut. If there is a small mat that you want to remove, work a comb between the mat and the cat's skin and cut to the outside of the comb. This prevents you from cutting your cat.

Does your cat have a messy rear end? A hygienic clip of the hair under the tail helps keep urine and feces from sticking to the hairs in this area. This may be needed every three months.

Don't wait until a grooming problem gets out of hand and is uncomfortable for your cat. Monitor your cat's coat and grooming behavior at home to keep him or her healthy and looking his or her best.

Dr. Wexler-Mitchell owns The Cat Care Clinic in Orange. Find her online at catcare.com