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## Agitated licking, biting can be trouble signs

Timothy is a very large, 5-year-old male tabby whose owner is concerned about a peculiar habit. When she touches, pets, strokes, or even taps Timothy's back, he begins to frantically lick himself.



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THE CAT DOC

The more he is touched, the more agitated he becomes, and the licking behavior can progress to him biting at the air around

him. At first this behavior might seem funny, but then realization dawns that the cat is really irritated. So, what can you do to help?

I see a lot of cats like Timothy at my clinic. Sometimes owners bring their cats in for this problem, and other times I discover the problem when I comb or examine a cat during an office visit. What is the problem? It is called feline hyperesthesia syndrome.

Unfortunately, not much has been studied or published regarding this condition. FHS is also known as rolling skin syndrome and self mutilation syndrome. Not every cat with feline hyperesthesia reacts in the same way, but most seem to become overly stimulated when they are scratched right above the base of their tails.

Other common reactions are excessive self grooming, skin twitching or rippling, tail swishing, vocaliz-

ing or hissing, tail chasing, biting at the air, dilated pupils or a glazed look to the eyes, frantic licking and chewing, and even seizures.

There are three categories of causes of FHS: behavioral, dermatologic, and neurologic. Anything that causes stress from the cat's perspective also acts as a trigger.

If your kitty has any of the hyperesthesia signs, I recommend having him examined by his veterinarian. To determine a specific cause, both physical and neurologic exams should be performed. The cat's skin should be thoroughly checked for dermatologic problems including fleas. Diagnostic testing such as blood work or spinal X-rays may also be needed.

The most common causes of FHS that I see are obesity and flea infestations. Overweight cats are unable to groom and scratch themselves, and when they are stimulated around their tails, they bite and chew at their front legs or at the air, because that is all they can reach.

Poorly groomed, greasy coats and a buildup of dead hair make the skin underneath very sensitive. Fleas love to hang out around the tail base, too, and they make FHS cats very itchy.

If this sounds like your cat, you need to work on a weight-loss program (for hints see my previous articles on feeding and dieting cats), groom your cat several times a week or have him groomed professionally, and use flea control as needed.

If obesity and fleas are not the problem, blood tests and X-rays do not reveal any other underlying medical conditions, and your cat is uncomfortable and twitching on a regular basis, then medication trials are needed.

There are a variety of medications used to control hyperesthesia, but unfortunately there are no cures. Anti-seizure medications like phenobarbital and diazepam help some cats. Drugs that address nerve inflammation and pain work in certain cases. Anti-anxiety medications can be useful. Most of the time, a veterinarian will have to try several things.

Creating a less stressful environment for an FHS cat is also important. These cats require daily exercise, regular feeding schedules and an interesting environment so they are not bored. Active play with feathers or fishing pole toys is recommended. High perches where they can hide or sleep in an uninterrupted manner are also good.

To sum things up, cats with mild signs may not need any treatment. Those with more irritation and discomfort require examination, diagnostics, an assessment of the home environment and medication. I think Timothy's problems will improve if he is dieted to a better weight and if his coat is kept clean, healthy and flea-free.

Dr. Wexler-Mitchell owns The Cat Care Clinic in Orange.

Read more online at [catcare.com](http://catcare.com) or call (714)282-2287