

Cats & Bald Spots

One of the pluses to cat ownership is that they groom themselves. Many cats live their entire lives without being brushed by their humans because the cats take care of it themselves. Sometimes, cats over-groom, it seems, or actually pull out some of their hair.



The most likely reason for licking is not behavioral disorder but an allergy. When cats seem to take delight in licking and pulling out their hair, the first line of defense is a thorough physical examination for signs of allergic dermatitis or itchiness. Allergens can be difficult to identify without specific testing - in some cases the diagnosis can only be made by empirical treatment with (and a favorable response to) an anti-inflammatory medication.

The veterinarian may remove a few hairs to examine under a microscope, which should reveal whether the hairs have been broken (by biting and pulling) or are abnormal and spontaneously falling out. Some hormone disorders can result in thinning of the hair coat, and may require blood tests or skin (and hair) biopsy for diagnosis.

If no allergy, skin disorder (such as fungal disease), hormonal disorder or parasites can be detected, the cat should then be evaluated for a behavior problem. Excessive grooming may be associated with psychological or behavioral, reasons. This may occur spontaneously or may be associated with anxiety. In some cases anxiety may lead to a problem resembling obsessive-compulsive disorder in people. To help discern patterns in a cat's behavior (which would help point to a behavioral diagnosis), it is helpful to keep a log of the cat's licking and hair-pulling - including time of day and the circumstances immediately surrounding the behavior. Armed with such information, a veterinary behaviorist can infer the reasons for the cat's excessive grooming. In some cases it can be stopped with behavioral or environmental modification; in others a course of anti-anxiety or anti-obsessional medication may also be needed.