

## **Hyperesthesia**

**By Dr. Karen Becker**

Hi, I'm Dr. Karen Becker. If you're owned by a kitty, you are already aware that you're sharing your life with a very unique little creature. His physiology is unique, and his nutritional requirements are unique. I'm sure you've noticed even his incredible physical flexibility is very, very unique.

Another very unusual thing about cats is their tendency to develop a rather strange, bizarre disorder called hyperesthesia. That word actually means "abnormally increased sensitivity of the skin." Other medical names for this very strange condition are neuritis and atypical neurodermatitis. In layman's terms, it's often called rippling or rolling skin syndrome, or twitchy cat syndrome.

In kitties with hyperesthesia, the skin on the back ripples from the shoulders all the way down to the tail, and sometimes up the tip of the tail. The movement is actually clearly visible in some cats, but it can be harder to discern in other cats. What many pet parents do notice instead is their kitty suddenly jumping and turning towards their back end, like something's biting them or bothering them. They can be sleeping and resting very, very peacefully, and then they jump up and turn and typically run away, and sometimes vocalize.

Oftentimes, cats will also lick or bite at the area over their pelvis. When a rippling case strikes, many cats take off running down the hall, or they end up being very, very peaceful and then instantly crazy. You may not see the skin ripple, but you're like, "Oh my gosh. My cat just flipped out out of the blue," and you don't know why. You need to be thinking about this. If you have a cat that appears bipolar and goes from happy and resting to amped up and crazy, especially if there's any clear indication that the skin over the pelvis is irritated, you need to be thinking about hyperesthesia.

Kitties with hyperesthesia can also have muscle spasms and twitches, as well as a full-out tail twitching. Your cat can have a bunch of different symptoms within the syndrome. He can also actually look like he is focused, fixed or kind of glassy-eyed. He could be very, very sensitive to having his back or spine touched at all. In fact, for a lot of cats, that is a no-touch zone. If you even try and pet him there, they say, "Absolutely not."

You can see cats chase their tail or bite at themselves, or turn at their tail, hiss or cry, jump and run, hide from you, thinking that maybe you were somehow responsible for this pain that they're experiencing. Some owners report that their kitties actually appear to be hallucinating as well. Their eyes are fixed and dilated. Sometimes, in worst-case scenarios, there can be mutilations. Cats end up biting and licking themselves, or chewing or pulling their fur out because the nerve irritation is so profound.

These poor cats suffer not only from the hair loss, but actually a lot of potentially secondary infected lesions from trying to relieve this uncomfortable symptom. I think of it – although it's hard to explain – as, you know, when our feet fall asleep and there's that tingling sensation. I think it could be similar to that, maybe combined with a little bit of sciatica – so, really uncomfortable nerve-based pain.

No one knows for sure what causes hyperesthesia in cats, but there are a lot of possibilities. One of the things that's important that you not confuse this condition with is another common condition called flea allergy dermatitis, which can actually have very similar behavior attributes. Pets with severe flea allergies, which means the bite of one flea can cause this really significant skin reaction – It can cause very long-term itching and a lot of skin irritation, even though you don't necessarily see fleas on your

cat. A bad case of flea allergy dermatitis can actually cause your to lick and scratch so aggressively that they pull all of the hair out. They end up kind of being covered with scabs on that part of their body, the hair over their pelvis and tail.

Sometimes dry skin or itchy skin can induce or aggravate an episode of hyperesthesia. This is actually more common in kitties that are really flakey, who have a lot of dry skin. That can be a sign of an omega-3 fatty acid deficiency, which is actually common with animals that are fed dry foods or animals that are on an unbalanced homemade diet.

There's also a possibility that feline hyperesthesia is related to a seizure disorder. Some kitties experience a grand mal seizure during an episode or right after an episode of hyperesthesia. Some experts hypothesize that this syndrome could be caused by a problem with electrical activity in the areas of the brain that control grooming, emotions and predatory behavior. It could also be a form of obsessive-compulsive disorder, or OCD, with the obsession being fearfulness, grooming or aggressive behavior.

Seizure activity is also known to lead to obsessive-compulsive disorders. It could be electrical-neurological blended with behavioral issues, blended with musculoskeletal issues. Another theory is that certain cat breeds are predisposed to develop this mania as a result of stress. Oriental breeds, for instance, seem to have more hyperesthesia than other general populations of felines. Stress tends to trigger more episodes in oriental breeds.

Also, kitties with this condition have been found to have lesions in the muscles of their spine. It's possible that the lesions cause or contribute to some of the sensations and the symptoms that cats are having. I have found that feline chiropractic is one of the best ways to treat this strange disorder, so an underlying neuromuscular disorder should also be considered, because chiropractic is so beneficial for this condition.

Feline hyperesthesia is diagnosed, really, by exclusion, meaning once you rule all of these other issues out, you can surmise that potentially your cat is dealing with this. It is important that you're looking at underlying skin conditions, including allergies, parasites and infections, for this behavior. It's important that you rule out conditions for painful spine. If there have been injuries to the back, spine, joints or muscles, or if there has been pain or irritation associated with a bite wound, an abscess or an anal sac problem, which is also kind of back in that area that kitties tend to be hypersensitive about.

You also want to make sure that nothing else is going on inside of your cats, like organ damage or, god forbid, some type of cancer, or hyperthyroidism. Problems in the brain as well, like trauma, tumors or infection, can cause abnormal behavior. Needless to say, poisoning, as well as some types of nutritional deficiencies can all lead to symptoms that are very similar to hyperesthesia.

If possible, if you're noticing the symptom in your cat, if you can get a video on your smart phone to take with you, that can help your veterinarian discern potentially what's going on. Your vet should perform a complete physical exam on your cat. He's going to take a behavior history as well, and order a complete blood count, including chemistry CBC and a T4, or thyroid hormone level blood test. Other diagnostic tests may also be required. For instance, if your cat has potential flea allergies, your doctor may test for that. If your vet thinks that there's an abnormality within the pelvic structure, an X-ray may be warranted.

If your pet has specific abnormalities, it's possible that your veterinarian will want to refer you to a specialist in dermatology or neurology as well. It's only when all of the other potential causes for all of these symptoms had been ruled out that feline hyperesthesia can be confidently diagnosed.

### **Treatment Options for Hyperesthesia**

The treatment for feline hyperesthesia syndrome, like the treatment for virtually every other feline condition, involves reducing your cat's stress level. The first place I always start is with diet, of course, because the wrong diet creates physiologic stress and metabolic stress.

Your kitty should be eating a species-appropriate, nutritionally balanced fresh food diet that contains no carbohydrates. That eliminates all kibble right there. Kibble has to contain carbohydrates at a minimum – potato or pea – to help the kibble stick together. It's important that you eliminate all extra sources of those pro-inflammatory carbohydrates, because kitties don't need additional inflammation when they're dealing with this condition.

What is appropriate for your cat is moderate amounts of animal fat and a high level of really healthy fresh whole protein. Feeding a different variety of proteins is important for nutritional diversity, as well as reducing the chances that your kitty will become sensitive to any one food. I will tell you that I have seen food allergies manifest in some of these episodes, specifically to poultry or seafood. Eliminating foods that are highly allergenic, like trying your cat that may have been eating seafood and chicken its whole life, trying a kitty on rabbit or a different type of protein is a great idea.

I would also recommend that you eliminate all sources of chemical preservatives. Look on the back of your cat food bag. You want to be able to pronounce everything and know exactly why every ingredient is in there. You're going to eliminate all foods that contain dyes. If you see FD&C red or yellow, those foods go. Any artificial colorings also need to go. These are sensitive cats and you want to eliminate anything that can be exacerbating their sensitivity.

I also recommend that you consider supplementing with an omega-3 fatty acid supplement. That can be very beneficial in terms of a natural anti-inflammatory, as is curcumin, at decreasing inflammation in your cat's body. I also recommend that you purify your cat's water. Actually, your cat's whole home environment. Get the fluoride and the chlorine out of your cat's water, switch to non-toxic cleaning products around the house. If you smoke, don't smoke around your cat. [These are] all really good ideas for decreasing environmental stress in your cat's life.

To eliminate other stress-related triggers, you'll need to take steps to make your cat as comfortable as possible, which means you want to practice consistency in your daily routine with your cat. You also want to focus on really improving environmental enrichment. So you'd want to make sure that you're providing a very safe, quiet, secure area where your cat feels relaxed, where he can eat and sleep and go to the bathroom, use his litterbox. You want to provide places for your cats to climb, scratch, rest and hide all without any stress.

Consistency in your interaction with your cat is really important, and appropriate environmental enrichment. A lot of cats are just plain bored all the time, which leads to them lying around a lot of the time. You engaging your cat, if your cat is lonely, consider getting a buddy for your cat. It's important that you set aside time every day to interact with your cat, especially get them physically moving.

Those of you who have sciatica and recognize that there's excruciating nerve pain, sitting around doesn't help your sciatica. We do want to keep these kitties moving in a healthy way. Using interactive toys to engage your cat is a great idea. Laser toys, ping-pong balls, rolls of bits of paper, feathers – all great ways to get your cat's body moving. Kitties have really short attention spans. Breaking up play sessions into three to four short play sessions a day is a great way to keep your cat moving throughout the day.

Actually, my favorite, if you're capable of taking these cats outside, it's wonderful. Giving your cat access, whether you get them acclimated to a harness or you have a cat cage attached to a window, allowing your cat to be able to touch the earth and ground out and get direct sunshine and feel the breeze and hunt bugs, if possible, he's going to be on the grass. It's really, really great for their emotional and mental well-being. That's a great way to help decrease cat-related stress.

While many veterinarians recommend drug therapy immediately for hyperesthetic cats, in my opinion giving your cat antidepressants, anticonvulsants or other drugs to curb obsessive behavior should be considered only when all other treatment options have been ruled out or exhausted.

A clean species-appropriate, nutritionally balanced diet is critical. Environmental enrichment is critical. Natural calming remedies can be incredibly beneficial in alleviating the stressors that could trigger episodes of hyperesthesia. I've had my best success using a multimodal approach in these cats, which is I blend acupuncture, which reduces the nerve wind-up or the nerve pain that cats can experience with this condition, with chiropractic care that can absolutely help reduce the dermatome neuritis that cats can experience.

Kitties have whole areas of body sensitivity when they have this condition going on. Chiropractors, so those are human chiropractors that have taken the animal course, or veterinarians who have taken the animal chiropractic course, both of those qualified individuals are capable of identifying those areas of inflammation and then chiropractically manipulating the spine to help decrease sensitivity and irritation in those areas.

TTouch is a special form of massage that can also help reduce skin sensitivity in some cats. I've also had really good success using homeopathic aconitum and hypericum, as well as some other remedies to help dampen the emotional and neurologic reactivity that can happen to some of these symptoms that come about really instantaneously. Homeopathy can be a great go-to ER protocol as well.

I also use DMG, dimethylglycine, and cannabidiol (CBD) oil, which is no to low-THC, just CBD. Both of those nutraceuticals can be really beneficial at quieting down a cat's central nervous system. Both of those natural remedies can be blended with other calming herbs, such as chamomile, valerian, hops and passionflower. All of these things can be done at the same time to help decrease your cat's overall inflammation, but also decrease the frequency and the intensity of the windups that are created by this very strange neurologic disorder.

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