

Tiny Specks on Your Pet's Skin That Won't Wash Off – What Now?

They can look plenty innocent, but can also erupt into a painful oozy mess. How to figure out the underlying cause, rule out look-alikes and more. Plus the one thing you should avoid like the plague, unless you want to experience your kitty's wrath.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Among the many unique disorders afflicting cats is feline acne, or chin acne, which is characterized by bumps on kitty's chin which can look like dirt
- Chin acne is the result of hair follicles that become clogged with oil and dead skin cells. The exact cause for the condition isn't known, but a number of potential contributing factors have been identified
- Since feline acne can be easily confused with a number of other skin conditions such as mange or a yeast infection, it's important to get an accurate diagnosis
- Cats with mild chin acne may require no treatment other than regular disinfecting of the area with diluted povidone iodine, and a review of potential environmental and dietary triggers
- If your kitty's chin acne progresses from blackheads to pimples, you should make an appointment with your veterinarian

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Among the many unusual disorders that affect cats, and cats alone, is a condition called chin acne, or feline acne. It is characterized, as you might guess, by bumps on kitty's chin. These bumps can progress from barely noticeable to a mess of open, oozing and painful sores if left untreated.

How Chin Acne Develops and What to Watch For

There are many sebaceous glands in the skin of your cat's chin that produce an oily substance called sebum. In some kitties, an excessive amount of sebum is secreted, which attracts dead skin cells that clog the hair follicles in the chin.

The clogged hair follicles turn into blackheads (comedones) on the chin and lips and often look like dirt that can't be washed away.

The blackheads can progress to red itchy bumps, then to pimples and finally to abscesses that rupture, bleed and crust over. Once the situation has reached this advanced stage, it's called furunculosis.

In severe cases of chin acne, there can also be swelling, hair loss and the development of draining tracts. Often the area is very itchy, and cats can cause additional trauma to the skin by scratching. Secondary bacterial infections such as cellulitis are common in advanced cases of chin acne.

Some cats develop a single outbreak of chin acne that resolves and never returns. In other kitties the condition recurs, and some cats even develop permanent chin acne.

Causes of Feline Acne

The precise cause of feline acne isn't known, but there seem to be several contributing factors, including hyperactive sebaceous glands, and contact or atopic dermatitis (allergies).

Cats "anoint" things with their chins, meaning they rub things they like with their chins (including people and other animals), so any surface they rub against could cause irritation or inflammation, which is contact dermatitis.

Sensitivity to foods or chemicals in the diet can be a cause, as can reactions to certain medications, hormone imbalances and poor grooming habits. Acne can also be secondary to an underlying systemic condition like an infection. Other causes of feline acne can include:

- Compromised immune system
- Allergy to plastic food or water bowl
- Stress
- Bacterial contamination from food or the environment
- Chin trauma (excessive rubbing or scratching)
- Seborrheic dermatitis

Diagnosing Chin Acne

Your cat's chin acne can be confused with other types of dermatitis, including parasitic and fungal infections, as well as atopic dermatitis and environmental chemical exposure, so it's important that your veterinarian correctly diagnose kitty's skin condition.

Skin scrapings or even a biopsy may be needed to rule out similar-appearing conditions like mange, a yeast infection, allergies, ringworm or eosinophilic granuloma complex.

If a bacterial infection is suspected, a culture and sensitivity test should be performed.

Treatment Options

Mild cases of feline acne may not need treatment, but you should keep a close eye on your kitty's chin to make sure the blackheads aren't progressing to something more serious. And as tempting as it may be, you should not try to squeeze or otherwise extract blackheads from your cat's chin.

Little Tiger or Fluffy will not appreciate it one bit, and it can lead to a more serious skin infection. In many cases of feline acne, the symptoms are significantly more annoying to the cat's owner than the cat!

It's important that any underlying conditions like mange, a yeast infection or allergies are identified and resolved.

Disinfect the area with either dilute povidone iodine (Betadine) or any gentle, organic soap on a daily basis. It's also recommended you dab on a little colloidal silver, fresh aloe gel or manuka honey after each disinfecting session.

Manuka honey is a special type of therapeutic honey with significant antibiotic properties. You can buy it at any local health food store.

If your cat has intermittent recurring acne, you can proactively swab her chin with a cotton ball dipped in witch hazel or hydrogen peroxide once a week to prevent or control flare-ups.

Remember to never, ever try to treat your cat's skin condition with any sort of medicated cream or ointment intended for humans. Topical products containing hydrocortisone, "triple antibiotic" preparations, antifungal creams, lotions containing zinc oxide and other similar products can be toxic to cats.

If the blackheads progress to open pimples, you should make an appointment with your veterinarian for further treatment.

If your cat's food or water bowl is plastic, you might also consider switching to a shallow stainless steel or nontoxic ceramic to eliminate a potential plastic or dye allergy as the cause of the acne.

It's also important to evaluate your cat's vaccine load, environmental chemical load (eliminate chemical cleaning products, imported nonorganic cat beds) and the water and air quality in your home.

Reviewing Your Cat's Diet

Many cases of feline acne have improved with an improvement in the quality and type of cat food being fed. Pets with itchy skin should be fed an anti-inflammatory diet.

Since diets that create or worsen inflammation are high in carbohydrates, removing unnecessary grains and carbs from the diet, as well as giving cats a break from both seafood and poultry as protein sources, can make a huge difference in preventing a recurrence of chin acne.

If you adhere to Chinese food energetics and principles, you'll also want to avoid feeding "energetically warm" or hot foods during flare-ups of chin acne. This means avoiding chicken and beef as protein sources. Omega-3 fatty acids also decrease inflammation throughout the body. Adding them into the diet of a cat with a skin disorder can be very beneficial. The best sources of omega-3 are krill oil, salmon oil, tuna oil, anchovy oil, sardine oil and other fish body oils.

Coconut oil is also recommended because it contains lauric acid, which helps decrease the body's production of yeast. Using fish body oil with coconut oil can help moderate or even suppress the inflammatory response.

Sources and References

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