

This Common Issue Could Be Behind Your Pet's Patchy Fur

Before you blame allergies, find out why this common skin issue could be the real reason for your pet's patchy coat.

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Ringworm is not a worm — it is a fungus. This common skin infection feeds on keratin in your pet's hair, skin, and nails, causing bald patches, scaling, and irritation
- It can pass from pet to pet or even from pets to people, and fungal spores can survive in the environment for up to 18 months
- Kittens and young cats are most at risk as their developing immune systems make them more vulnerable, especially in shelters or multi-pet homes
- Diagnosis by a veterinarian is essential. Veterinarians can support a diagnosis of ringworm using a Wood's lamp test, direct examination of affected hair under a microscope, fungal culture, and PCR, as well as test to rule out other causes of hair loss
- Treatment takes time but works. With medicated baths, antifungal medications, and strict cleaning routines, most pets recover fully and regrow healthy coats

Have you ever noticed a round bald spot on your cat or kitten and wondered what could be causing it? Maybe the area looks scaly, dry, or even a bit red, and perhaps your pet will not stop scratching or grooming it. Before you panic or assume it is fleas, allergies, or stress, there is one sneaky culprit you should consider — ringworm.

Despite the name, ringworm is not a worm at all. It is a fungal infection that affects the skin, hair, and sometimes even nails. The good news? It is completely treatable with the right care and hygiene. But left untreated, it can spread quickly to other pets, to people, and all around your home.

Let's break down what ringworm really is, how to spot it early, and the best ways to help your pet heal without losing your mind (or your clean couch).

What Exactly Is Ringworm?

Ringworm is a common skin infection in cats and kittens, particularly cats or kittens in shelters or high-stress living conditions.¹ It can affect dogs, large animals, some exotic species (pocket pets), and humans too. The medical term for it is dermatophytosis,² caused by a group of fungi called dermatophytes. These fungi feed on keratin, the protein that makes up skin, hair, and nails.

When the fungus settles on your pet's skin, it multiplies quickly, breaking down keratin and damaging the hair shafts. This leads to bald patches, dry skin, and scaly or crusty lesions. Not every exposed pet will contract ringworm; there needs to be the perfect storm of decreased immune function (from stress or other illness) and microtrauma to the skin (such as from brushing, a scratch, or other small microscopic injury). A moist or damp environment on the skin helps the dermatophytes to grab hold as well.

Despite how unpleasant it sounds, ringworm is not life-threatening. However, it can be highly contagious and can become serious in kittens or pets with weak immune systems.³ Because spores can live for up to 18 months in the environment, it takes patience and persistence to get rid of it completely.⁴

How Do Pets Catch Ringworm?

Ringworm spreads mainly through contact, either with an infected animal or with contaminated items such as bedding, brushes, food bowls, or furniture. Even a simple cuddle session with an infected cat can transfer fungal spores to your hands or clothes. These spores are tiny, lightweight, and stubborn, sticking to surfaces and fabrics long after visible symptoms are gone.

However, not every exposure leads to infection. A healthy adult cat with a strong immune system may resist infection, while a kitten, senior cat, or sick animal may develop full-blown ringworm after even brief contact.^{5,6}

Environmental contamination is also a major factor. Fungal spores can settle into carpet fibers, cracks in floors, and even air vents, waiting for the next opportunity to infect a host. That is why cleaning and disinfecting are just as important as medication in treating ringworm.

Why Kittens and Young Cats Are Most at Risk

If you have ever fostered or rescued kittens, you know how fragile their immune systems can be. Kittens are especially vulnerable to ringworm because their skin barrier and immune defenses are not fully developed yet.

In shelters, ringworm outbreaks can spread like wildfire. Because it is contagious, some shelters are forced to euthanize kittens with ringworm if there is not sufficient space to keep kittens isolated and if there are no foster homes available to safely isolate and treat them. That is why fostering "ringworm kittens" can literally be life-saving.⁷

If you are fostering or have multiple pets at home, knowing how to prevent and manage ringworm can make all the difference — not just for your kittens, but for your whole household.

How to Spot Ringworm in Your Pet

Ringworm does not always look the same from one pet to another, which can make it tricky to identify. Some cats show obvious bald spots, while others may look completely normal but still carry the fungus. Here are the most common signs to look for:⁸

- Circular patches of hair loss (often with a ring-like edge)
- Dry, scaly, or crusty skin, including dandruff
- Broken or stubbly hairs

- Red or inflamed areas
- Itching or excessive grooming
- Changes in skin color (such as dark or light patches)
- Brittle or infected claws or nailbeds

In some long-haired cats, ringworm may cause only subtle "cigarette ash" scaling — a faint grayish dust in the fur that is easy to overlook.⁹

If you notice any of these symptoms, it is best to schedule a veterinary visit rather than try to diagnose at home. Hair loss can also be caused by allergies, mites, fleas, or stress, to name a few, so proper testing is important to confirm the cause.

How Veterinarians Diagnose Ringworm

There are several ways your veterinarian can confirm a ringworm infection, including:^{10,11,12,13}

1. **Wood's lamp (black light) test** — A Wood's lamp shines ultraviolet light over your pet's fur. A specific species of dermatophyte (*Microsporum canis*) glows bright greenish-yellow ("apple green") under this light, which can help spot infected hairs. However, since not all fungi fluoresce, and sometimes food residue or lint can also glow, this method is a screening tool and not a way of making a definitive diagnosis.
2. **Direct examination** — This test involves viewing the affected hair and scales under the microscope to determine if dermatophyte organisms are visibly present. This test does not diagnose the species of ringworm present, but visualizing the organisms does confirm the infection.
3. **Fungal culture (DTM test)** — A more accurate method is the Dermatophyte Test Medium (DTM), a culture that grows fungal spores collected from the pet's skin and fur. The test can take up to two weeks, but it is one of the most reliable diagnostic tools.
4. **PCR test** — PCR testing can detect fungal DNA and give faster results, sometimes within a few days. However, it can sometimes produce false positives or false negatives and may not identify the exact fungus species. Your veterinarian might use more than one of these tests to confirm the diagnosis and rule out other causes of hair loss.

Treating Ringworm — The Multi-Step Approach

Successfully treating ringworm takes time, consistency, and cleanliness. The goal is not just to kill the fungus on your pet's skin but to prevent re-infection from spores in the environment. The good news is that these spores do not replicate in the environment the way mildew or other molds do.

Most veterinarians recommend a combination approach using topical, oral, and environmental treatments.^{14,15}

1. **Step 1: Topical treatments** — Topical treatments work from the outside in and help remove fungus from the skin and fur. These may include:¹⁶
 - Medicated shampoos with antifungal ingredients like miconazole or ketoconazole repeated every 3 to 4 days. Natural ingredients such as coconut oil or apple cider vinegar can also be helpful

- Lime sulfur dips (applied one to two times per week)
- Antifungal creams or ointments, such as miconazole (the same ingredient in Monistat) or clotrimazole

For kittens or cats with mild cases, this might be enough. But for more widespread infections, oral medication is often needed.

Pro tip: Avoid bathing too often or using harsh shampoos. Frequent dips or drying products can irritate your pet's skin, which can promote reinfection. Always use treatments recommended by your veterinarian and ensure your pet stays warm after baths.

2. **Step 2: Oral medications** — Oral antifungal medications work from the inside out, attacking the fungus throughout your pet's body. These medications are usually given daily or in cycles, depending on your veterinarian's guidance. Treatment often lasts six weeks or longer, and your veterinarian may perform follow-up cultures to confirm the infection is gone.

Never stop treatment early, even if your cat's fur starts growing back. Stopping too soon can cause a relapse and prolong the recovery.

3. **Step 3: Environmental cleaning and containment** — Even if your cat looks better, ringworm spores can linger on your bedding, carpets, furniture, and even air vents. That is why cleaning is a crucial part of treatment. To protect your home and other pets:

- Quarantine the infected pet in an easy-to-clean room (like a bathroom or laundry area).
- Wear gloves and wash your hands after every interaction.
- Use washable bedding and toys or discard items that cannot be sanitized.
- Disinfect regularly with an approved cleaner such as Rescue™ or a dilute bleach solution (1/4 cup bleach per gallon of water up to 1 part bleach to 10 parts water).¹⁷ Bathroom cleaners labeled for removal of Trichophyton will appropriately disinfect organisms that are not removed mechanically by routine cleaning.
- Vacuum and mop daily, ideally, to remove shed hairs and spores.

Continue this cleaning routine throughout the treatment period — and even a few weeks after your veterinarian confirms recovery — to ensure all spores are gone.

How Long Does Recovery Take?

With diligent treatment, most cats recover from ringworm in under 12 weeks, though severe cases may take longer. If aggressive therapy is used, including oral medication, twice-weekly dips, and strict cleaning, your cat may stop being contagious after about three weeks.¹⁸

However, mild infections that go untreated can drag on for months or even a year. During that time, your pet's fur will continue to fall out, and the infection can spread to others. That is why prompt and complete treatment is key.

Can You Catch Ringworm from Your Pet?

Unfortunately, yes. Ringworm is zoonotic, meaning it can spread to humans. Children, elderly adults, and anyone with a weakened immune system are at higher risk.

If you notice red, scaly patches on your skin (especially ring-shaped ones), contact your healthcare provider. Human cases are generally mild and respond well to antifungal creams, but early treatment helps prevent spread within the household. To protect yourself:

- Always wash your hands after handling infected animals.
- Wear gloves when cleaning litter boxes, bedding, or doing baths.
- Keep your infected cat away from children until your veterinarian confirms they are clear.

Supporting Your Pet's Skin During Recovery

As your cat heals, you can help restore their skin and coat by keeping their environment warm, clean, and stress-free. Here are a few gentle ways to support recovery:

- Apply topical vitamin E oil (with your veterinarian's approval) to soothe dry skin and promote healing.¹⁹
- Feed a high-quality diet rich in omega-3s and protein to support hair regrowth.
- Use soft bedding that can be washed frequently without irritating sensitive skin.
- Provide enrichment like washable toys or puzzle feeders to keep your cat occupied during quarantine.

In addition, you should call your veterinarian if:

- You notice sudden bald patches or scaling on your pet.
- The lesions do not improve after two weeks of treatment.
- Your cat becomes lethargic, itchy, or develops sores or nodules.
- Other pets or people in your household start showing symptoms.

Your veterinarian might recommend additional testing or switching to a different antifungal medication if the infection is not responding.

Preventing Future Infections

Once your cat is ringworm-free, you will want to make sure it does not return. Here's how to lower the risk:

1. Keep grooming tools clean. Disinfect brushes and clippers regularly.
2. Avoid overcrowding in shelters or foster setups.
3. Regularly vacuum and disinfect your pet's environment.
4. Maintain strong immunity through good nutrition, stress reduction, and veterinary checkups.
5. Isolate new pets for two weeks before introducing them to your household.

A clean environment and healthy immune system are your pet's best defenses against fungal infections.

The Bottom Line

Ringworm might sound alarming, but it is a very manageable condition when caught early. Think of it like fleas — annoying and contagious, but completely curable with persistence. With the right care, your pet's coat will grow back soft, full, and healthy. More importantly, you will know how to prevent it from spreading again.

And if you are ever in a position to foster kittens with ringworm, remember — your care does not just clear up a fungal infection; it saves lives.

Sources and References

¹ [J Feline Med Surg, 2014 May 2;16\(5\):419–431](#)

^{2,4,6,9,11,15,18} [VCA Hospitals, Ringworm in Cats](#)

^{3,5,7,10,14,16,19} [Kitten Lady, Helping Kittens with ringworm](#)

^{8,12} [Cornell Feline Health Center, Ringworm: A Serious but Readily Treatable Affliction](#)

¹³ [Merck Veterinary Manual, February 2025](#)

¹⁷ [US CDC, April 24, 2024](#)
