

HAIR LOSS (ALOPECIA) IN CATS

BASICS

OVERVIEW

- “Alopecia” is the medical term for hair loss
- Hair loss is a common problem in cats
- Characterized by a complete or partial lack of hair in areas where it is present normally
- Pattern of hair loss—varied or symmetrical

SIGNALMENT/DESCRIPTION of ANIMAL

Species

- Cats

Mean Age and Range

- Cancer-related hair loss (alopecia)—generally recognized in old cats

SIGNS/OBSERVED CHANGES in the ANIMAL

- Hair loss; pattern of hair loss varies—may be localized or widespread
- Skin itself may appear normal or may be abnormal (such as redness; multiple, pinpoint bumps or scabs; or loss of superficial layers of the skin [known as ulceration])
- Other signs depend on the underlying cause of hair loss

CAUSES

- Nervous system or behavioral disorders—obsessive-compulsive disorder, in which the cat over grooms, with resulting hair loss
- Hormonal disorders—sex hormone hair loss (alopecia); excessive levels of thyroid hormone (known as “hyperthyroidism”); increased levels of steroids produced by the adrenal glands (known as “hyperadrenocorticism” or “Cushing’s disease”); diabetes mellitus (“sugar diabetes”)
- Immune-mediated disorders—skin allergies (known as “allergic dermatitis”); specific condition characterized by multiple patches of hair loss (known as “alopecia areata”)
- Parasites—demodectic mange (known as “demodicosis”)
- Fungal infection—ringworm (known as “dermatophytosis”)
- Physiologic disorder—condition characterized by multiple areas of hair loss with reddened skin, scales (accumulations of surface skin cells, such as seen in dandruff), and signs of itchiness (known as “pruritus”) with inflammation of the sebaceous glands, the glands that produce oils in the hair coat (condition known as “sebaceous adenitis”)
- Cancer or cancer-related hair loss
- Unknown cause (so called “idiopathic disease”)
- Inherited hair loss

RISK FACTORS

- Feline leukemia virus (FeLV) infection and feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV) infection—for demodectic mange (demodicosis)

TREATMENT

HEALTH CARE

- Treatment is limited for many of the disorders that cause hair loss (alopecia)
- Behavioral modification or use of a “T-shirt” on the cat may help prevent excessive self-grooming
- Shampoo and treatment applied directly to the skin may help secondary problems, such as increased thickness of the outer, keratinized layer of the skin (known as “hyperkeratosis”) in sebaceous adenitis (condition with hair loss, reddened skin, scales and inflammation of the oil-secreting sebaceous glands); dried discharge on the surface of the skin lesion (known as a “crust”) in demodectic mange (demodicosis); secondary bacterial infections; and malodor for greasy conditions

DIET

- Removal of an offending dietary item may alleviate signs of food allergy (such as hair loss, scratching at skin)

SURGERY

- Biopsy of a tumor or the skin may be indicated in the diagnostic work-up for some causes of hair loss (alopecia)
- Excessive levels of steroids produced by the adrenal glands (hyperadrenocorticism or Cushing’s disease)—surgical removal of the adrenal gland
- Surgical removal of skin cancer or tumors

MEDICATIONS

Medications presented in this section are intended to provide general information about possible treatment. The treatment for a particular condition may evolve as medical advances are made; therefore, the medications should not be considered as all inclusive.

- Obsessive-compulsive disorder—amitriptyline
- Hormonal hair loss (alopecia) in males—testosterone supplementation
- Skin allergy (allergic dermatitis)—antihistamines, steroids, “allergy shots” (known as “hyposensitization vaccine”)
- Excessive levels of thyroid hormone (hyperthyroidism)—medications given by mouth, such as methimazole (Tapazole®), or radioactive iodine therapy
- Diabetes mellitus (“sugar diabetes”)—regulation of glucose levels with insulin
- Excessive levels of steroids produced by the adrenal glands (hyperadrenocorticism or Cushing’s disease)—surgery; no known effective medical therapy
- Cancer-related hair loss (alopecia)—no therapy for many types of cancer-related hair loss; disease often fatal
- Epidermotropic lymphoma (type of cancer in the skin characterized by the presence of abnormal lymphocytes; a lymphocyte is a type of white-blood cell, formed in lymphatic tissue throughout the body)—retinoids (isotretinoin), steroids, interferon, cyclosporine, lomustine
- Sebaceous adenitis (condition with hair loss, reddened skin, scales and inflammation of the oil-secreting sebaceous glands)—retinoids, steroids, cyclosporine
- Squamous cell carcinoma (type of skin cancer)—retinoids (applied to skin directly [topical] and administered by mouth [oral]), topical imiquimod cream
- Alopecia areata (specific condition involving multiple patches of hair loss)—no therapy; possibly counterirritants
- Demodectic mange (demodicosis)—lime sulfur dips at weekly intervals for 4 to 6 dips; Mitaban® and ivermectin have been tried with variable success
- Ringworm (dermatophytosis)—griseofulvin, ketoconazole, itraconazole (best choice), lufenuron

FOLLOW-UP CARE

PATIENT MONITORING

- Depends on specific diagnosis

PREVENTIONS AND AVOIDANCE

- Depend on specific diagnosis

POSSIBLE COMPLICATIONS

- Depend on specific diagnosis

EXPECTED COURSE AND PROGNOSIS

- Depend on specific diagnosis

KEY POINTS

- “Alopecia” is the medical term for hair loss
- Hair loss is a common problem in cats
- Pattern of hair loss varies—may be localized or widespread
- Skin itself may appear normal or may be abnormal

