

COMPULSIVE DISORDERS—CATS

BASICS

OVERVIEW

- Repetitive, relatively constant, exaggerated behavior patterns with no apparent reason or function
- Behaviors such as psychological hair loss in which the cat grooms excessively (known as “psychogenic alopecia”), compulsive pacing, frequently repeated meowing or vocalizing, and sucking or fabric chewing may be considered compulsive disorders, when other reasons for the behavior cannot be identified

SIGNALMENT/DESCRIPTION of ANIMAL

- Any age, sex, or breed of cat may have compulsive disorders
- Siamese, other Asian breeds and Asian-breed crosses may be more likely to demonstrate repeated vocalization and fabric chewing

SIGNS/OBSERVED CHANGES in the ANIMAL

Signs or observed changes are determined by the abnormal behavior itself. A cat may demonstrate one or more abnormal behaviors.

- Psychogenic alopecia—localized, symmetrical hair loss; most commonly involving the skin of the groin, lower abdomen, and inner thigh or back of thighs; appearance of the skin may be normal or may be abnormal, with redness or abrasions from excessive grooming
- Compulsive pacing
- Repeated meowing or vocalizing
- Fabric sucking/chewing—secondary gastrointestinal signs, such as vomiting, may develop

Once started, these behaviors may quickly increase in frequency if they are reinforced in some way, such as the owner feeding or giving attention to the cat while it is exhibiting the abnormal behavior

CAUSES

- Unknown
- Organic or physical causes for the abnormal behavior should be ruled out before a psychological basis is presumed

RISK FACTORS

- Changes in surroundings may lead to abnormal behaviors
- More commonly reported in indoor cats; may be an artifact of the higher level of attention such pets receive or may be related to the stress of confinement or social isolation similar to the pacing and other forms of barrier frustration seen in large cats in zoos

TREATMENT

HEALTH CARE

- Reduce environmental stress—increase the predictability of household events by establishing a consistent schedule for feeding, playing, exercise, and social time; eliminate unpredictable events as much as possible; avoid confinement
- Psychogenic alopecia—topical agents to discourage licking/grooming are usually ineffective
- Compulsive pacing—allowing the cat to go outside after the start of this behavior may reinforce it; if possible, let the cat out before the behavior begins
- Repetitive vocalizations—breed or spay an intact female; castrate an intact male
- Fabric chewing/sucking—keep fabrics of interest out of the cat’s reach; increase dietary roughage
- Do not reward the behavior
- Ignore the behavior as much as possible
- Note details of the time, place, and social environment so that an alternative positive behavior (such as play or feeding) may be scheduled
- Any punishment for an unwanted behavior associated with the owner’s voice, movement, and touch may increase the unpredictability of the cat’s environment, may increase the cat’s fear or aggressive behavior, and may disrupt the human/animal bond.

ACTIVITY

- Playing or exercise on a consistent schedule

DIET

- Increase dietary roughage for cats with fabric chewing/sucking behaviors

SURGERY

- Spay or neuter intact cats for repetitive vocalization

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.

- Environmental control—preferred method of management; psychologically active drugs may be needed as well
- No drugs are approved by the FDA for the treatment of these disorders in cats; your veterinarian will discuss the risks and benefits of using these drugs
- Goal—use drugs until control is achieved for 2 months; then attempt gradual decrease in dosage
- Tricyclic antidepressant—amitriptyline or clomipramine
- Selective serotonin re-uptake inhibitor---fluoxetine
- [Phenobarbital](#)
- Deprenyl (seligiline), if signs related to cognitive dysfunction (changes in behavior and awareness related to aging of the brain)

FOLLOW-UP CARE

PATIENT MONITORING

- Before initiating treatment, record the frequency of abnormal behavior that occur each week so that progress can be monitored
- Successful treatment requires a schedule of follow-up examinations
- Environmental modification program and/or psychologically active medications must be adjusted according to the cat's response
- If a medication is not effective after dosage adjustment, another drug may be prescribed

PREVENTIONS AND AVOIDANCE

- Do not reward the behavior
- Ignore the behavior as much as possible

POSSIBLE COMPLICATIONS

- Fabric chewing/sucking—gastrointestinal problems, such as vomiting or blockage
- Irritation or frustration of people in household

EXPECTED COURSE AND PROGNOSIS

- Realistic expectations must be understood; changing a behavior that has become a habit is very challenging
- Immediate control of a long-standing problem is unlikely

KEY POINTS

- Any cat may develop repetitive, exaggerated behavior patterns that apparently have no reason or function
- Ignore the behavior as much as possible and avoid rewarding the behavior
- Abnormal behavior should be evaluated by your veterinarian as soon as possible to determine if a physical cause exists
- Treatment may include behavioral modification and psychologically active drugs if no physical cause is identified

