

Ask the vets+++

Have you got a question?

Send your questions to:

Ask The Vets, The Cat magazine, National Cat Centre,
Chelwood Gate, Haywards Heath, RH17 7TT or email:
editorial@cats.org.uk

CP's team of veterinary experts tackle your feline-related questions...



Q I have two cats, one is a Bengal and the other is a short haired black and white. They get on well together. Over the last year or so our black and white has been over-grooming, so much so that he has a very bald tummy and legs. I have visited three different vets without much success. We have tried Feliway, Bitter Apple spray and Zykline capsules all to no avail. He is happy in himself and eats well. I would be grateful for any advice.

Mrs D Evans, Denbigh

A It's good that you've been to the vets as this is always the first port of call for any behavioural change. Has your cat been for a health check with the vet to specifically rule out medical problems for this problem?

Over-grooming can be caused by a number of factors, which may be medical, behavioural or a combination. For example, over-grooming could be caused by an allergy, making the cat itch and therefore groom excessively to try and alleviate the itching. Allergies could result from fleas, diet or the environment. Your vet can help with diagnosis and designing an appropriate management and treatment plan specific to your cat if this is the case.

It may be due to pain – for example, a common cause of over-grooming is cystitis. The cat will lick its stomach and eventually its legs in an attempt to relieve the pain. If your cat is showing any other symptoms of cystitis such as squatting to urinate with blood in the urine, crying out in pain when urinating or producing no urine, please do take your cat to the vet as soon as possible.

Another possibility is that over-grooming may be in response to stress or boredom. The cat may groom in order to relieve stress as a way of comforting itself, but if the source of stress does not go away, the behaviour may become an obsessive one. Stress may be caused by a cat in the house or neighbourhood, a change in its environment such as a new baby or rearranged furniture etc. A cat may become bored if it is an indoor cat and has not been given enough environmental enrichment to keep it entertained and able to express its natural behaviours. Ensure the cat has plenty of high vantage points and several places to hide such as a box or igloo bed. Make sure that there are plenty of interactive toys for the cat to play with and that you play little and often with your cat. Try introducing puzzle feeders to your cat so that it has to work for its food. These measures should all help to alleviate potential boredom and stress.

You mention that your two cats get on well, but it may be worth looking hard at their relationship. It is common for cats

living in multi-cat households, particularly unrelated cats, to perceive each other as threats, even if they don't actively fight or hiss. Look for clues that they are in the same social group, such as sleeping, touching each other, rubbing against and frequently grooming each other. If they aren't doing this, they may find each other's presence a little stressful, in which case it is particularly important that they have plentiful resources distributed around the house – such as hiding areas, toileting areas, food and water – that they can access without having to pass each other.

It is worth persisting with the Feliway as this mimics the facial pheromones that cats deposit when they rub their cheeks on people or objects in the home that makes them smell more familiar. It can have a calming effect, which is useful if stress is an underlying cause.

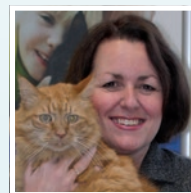
In order to resolve your cat's over-grooming, it is important to identify the underlying cause. For specific guidance and help with your cat, we would highly recommend that you go back to your own vet to discuss your concerns. If your vet feels that the problem is purely behavioural, they may recommend a referral to a suitably qualified behaviourist or alternatively go to the Association of Pet Behaviour Counsellors (APBC) website www.apbc.org.uk to find your nearest qualified behaviourist.

Q My mother has recently moved in with me and my two cats and although all has gone very well so far with the cats taking to her and enjoying her company, I am concerned that their health may be at risk. My mother is a regular smoker and despite me asking her to smoke outside I know that she ignores this while I am out. Not only is there a lingering smell around the house but I've noticed it on the fur of my cats too. What are the dangers to animals regarding passive smoking? I'm willing to get tough with Mum on this one!

Eleanor Fitzgerald, Middlesbrough

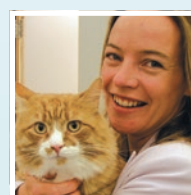
A There have not been many studies looking at the effects of environmental tobacco smoke (ETS) on cats, especially when compared with those appraising the risks to people, for example. However, there is evidence that exposure can be associated with disease in pets. Cigarette smoke contains potentially harmful chemicals that are found in high concentration on the furniture and carpets of smokers' homes. Cats may be exposed through passively breathing in tobacco smoke (accumulation of tars have been found within the lungs in pets that co-habitat with smokers), or through

THE EXPERTS



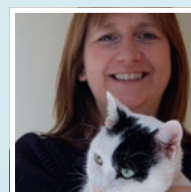
**Maggie Roberts BVM&S
MRCVS**

After qualifying at Edinburgh University in 1986, Maggie went on to work primarily in private practice. Maggie first worked for CP as Veterinary Officer from 1997-99; her interest in feline medicine brought her back to the charity as Director of Veterinary Services in 2006. She has three cats, Trevor, Frankie and Ronnie.



**Beth Skillings
BVSc MRCVS**

Beth qualified at the University of Liverpool in 1998 and went on to work in general veterinary practice until 2005 when she joined CP as Head of Veterinary Services. Beth moved into a new role as Clinical Veterinary Officer in November 2006. Beth has a CP cat, Humphrey.



**Lisa Morrow BMLSc,
DVM, MSc (Vet Epi)
MRCVS**

Lisa graduated from the Ontario Veterinary College at the University of Guelph, Canada in 2000. Lisa first worked with CP as an Adoption Centre Vet at Derby Adoption Centre and was CP Head of Veterinary Services from 2003-2005. Lisa recently rejoined CP as Field Veterinary Officer in the northern region of the UK. She has two black cats, Kiwi and Mango.



**Karen Hiestand
BVSc MRCVS**

Karen graduated from Massey University in New Zealand in 2001 and spent two years in mixed practise in her home country. Since then, she has interspersed locumming around the UK with volunteer veterinary work. Karen is the Field Veterinary Officer for the southern region of the UK. She has one cat called Dexter.

Our veterinary surgeons have provided the advice on these pages, but for specific cases and health concerns it is important that you consult your own vet who will be able to look at your cat's history and do a clinical examination.



ingesting chemicals that have accumulated on their coat when grooming – such chemicals can be found at significant levels on the furniture and carpets of smokers' homes.

It has been shown that cats exposed to ETS do take tobacco-specific chemicals into their systems and living in a household where owners smoke appears to increase the risk for developing two of the most common cancers affecting pet cats. Research has shown that cats exposed to many years of ETS have a higher risk of developing lymphoma than cats living in smoke-free homes and there may be an association between the most common type of mouth cancer to affect cats (squamous cell carcinoma) and exposure to ETS. Research in dogs has shown an association between cancers of the nose and lower respiratory tract with exposure to ETS, and in cats that suffer with feline asthma-type signs ETS can worsen the clinical signs of disease.

Though the scientific studies are not in abundance, there appears to be enough evidence to advocate the avoidance of pets' exposure to ETS.

Q I have a four-year-old male cat that has recently started 'humping' a specific blanket I have. He has been 'done' and had the op when he was old enough so I find it strange he has just started to do it now and I think he is getting worse! What can I do to stop him? Why start this now?

Lisa Smith via Facebook

A I am sorry to hear your male cat has recently starting to exhibit this behaviour. In order to try to address any unwanted feline behaviour, it is important to identify its underlying cause. Therefore, the first thing we would recommend is to discuss this in more detail with your vet. They may want to do a health check and/or run some tests, such as blood tests to measure testosterone levels.

If a health check and/or tests reveal that everything is all normal and your vet feels that this is purely a behavioural issue, then they may recommend a referral to a suitably qualified behaviourist or alternatively go to the Association of Pet Behaviour Counsellors (APBC) website www.apbc.org.uk to find your nearest qualified behaviourist. Inappropriate mounting is more common in male cats than females – it is unusual in neutered cats but is still exhibited by some. The behaviour can be directed towards other cats, other species and inanimate objects. The cause of the behaviour varies, depending on sexual and environmental factors. If the cat isn't causing any harm, it might be best to allow him to continue, while ignoring the behaviour. You may find the behaviour disagreeable, but it is important not to punish the cat or tell him off as it could even make the behaviour worse. If the underlying cause is anxiety-related, the use of a synthetic pheromone such as Feliway may be beneficial if used in conjunction with medical advice and, if necessary, a behaviour modification programme.