

## Captivating Kitty Cat Coats



All cat owners will have at one time or other marvelled at how beautiful and luxurious a cats' coat can be. However, cats' fur does not just stand there and look pretty. It has a number of **important functions**, such as protecting the cats' skin from sun, wind and rain, shielding the skin from scratches and thorns, acting as a meshwork of super feelers telling the cat what is touching it and how, and even gives the cat another tool which it can use to communicate – Imagine a cat fluffing out its tail and fur on its back when angry. We can also make use of cat fur in another way: *to monitor our cats' health*.

Anyone who has watched a cat for any period of time will see that they are border-line obsessive about keeping their fur smooth and free of dirt or tangles. Despite this, sometimes a cats coat may just not be as shiny, smooth or soft as it should be or shows dry skin flakes coming through. This usually indicates that the cat has either got a health problem, the fur is being damaged by something environmental, or the cat cannot or no longer wants to groom properly.



Some reasons for dull, damaged or patchy coats and dry skin:

- **Dietary – You are what you eat!** If a cat gets a *low quality cat food, an imbalanced diet* or has a *problem absorbing and utilising the food* it gets, it cannot produce healthy fur because it just does not have the right building blocks to do so. Cats that are actually intolerant of or allergic to the food they get may not actually show any severe symptoms, but may develop patchy, sparse coats and dry skins or scratch some parts of their skin bare of any hair. People will often add oil to their cats food to try and improve the fur condition, but this is not the right kind of oil – only good quality, *balanced omega 3 oils* will help but you should discuss this with your vet before using it.



- **Parasites** - Remember if there is an **itch**, there will be a **scratch**, and scratching is not very good for fur and skin. One of the most common parasite problems is obviously fleas. **Fleas** can cause cats to be intensely itchy, some of them will scratch and lick all over and some of them will only cause damage around their shoulders, heads and necks. **Ear mites** can cause cats to scratch their ears and heads so much they have scabs, bald patches and sores all around the area. **Ticks** can cause itchiness and pain, and will leave a wound behind that can sometimes become infected or heal slowly. Sometimes, even **intestinal worms** and **other parasites** can cause skin problems.



- **Environment – Dry winter air** can cause fur to become more brittle and easily damaged.

- **Grooming and washing** – Unlike dogs, **cats do not regularly need bathing**. They will generally prefer to and be capable of bathing themselves. The only times cats generally need bathing is if they become *very soiled with sticky, smelly, oily or toxic substances*, if they are *ill and cannot groom* themselves, or if there is a *good medical reason*. Bathing cats, especially if done very regularly will actually damage their skin and coats and dry them out. Bathing with a **shampoo that is not designed specifically for cats** will also damage the skin, even if it is baby shampoo! Grooming by us can be very



*good for the fur* as it stimulates blood flow to the skin and follicles, and helps to spread the natural skin oils that make the fur so shiny over the body. **Brushing** will also help remove dead and dry skin flakes and hairs, reducing knotting in the coat and lowering the amount of fur a cat will ingest trying to clear that dry tissue off its skin (so less hairballs! Yay!). Cats with long, soft coats actually need regular brushing to avoid the development of dense, tangled mats which are uncomfortable for the cat and are very difficult to get out.



Another problem that can occur with cat fur is **overgrooming** by the cat itself. In this case the cat will groom till the hairs break mid-shaft or near the skin and will result in a “shaved” area on the skin, often on the back. This only happens if there is an underlying issue, most commonly an anxiety disorder, which can be treated once diagnosed by your Vet.



- **Infection – Skin infections** are relatively common in cats, sometimes secondary to wounds, bites or scratches. Some of these infections are not in the skin itself, but just below it and can take the form of abscesses or generalised subcutaneous problems. These can be dangerous as they can both make the cat **clinically ill** and **spread dramatically** in short periods of time. Very young, old or immunocompromised cats can even get *ringworm*. This fungus does not have to present as a ring, but can cause dry scabs all over the body, or in patches, or can just cause hair loss. This is more common in long haired cats like Persians. All of these conditions should be treatable once diagnosed by your vet.



- **Systemic disease** - There are many general diseases that may affect your cats fur. Cats with *hormonal problems* like diabetes or hyperthyroidism will often have fur in poor condition. *Organ problems* like kidney disease will regularly also result in a noticeable change in the fur. Cats with *cancers*, *feline immunodeficiency virus*, *feline leukemia virus* and even those undergoing *chemotherapy* will often also be unable to keep their fur healthy.
- **General** – Cats that are **overweight** will often be unable to groom properly and will need help until they can lose the dangerous extra weight. Cats that struggle with **arthritis or joint pain** will often also be unable to properly groom themselves, and will often genuinely appreciate a brushing from their owners, both for the attention and to help get that “sensory mesh” straightened out, clean and comfortable again.



So in summary:

- Feed a **high quality diet formulated specifically for cats**, and minimise the extras that do not say “for cats” on the label.
- **Omega 3 fatty acids** or a proper ratio of Omega 3 and 6 can help improve the condition of coat.
- Ensure you keep your cats **free of external parasites** (see article on fleas) and be sure that you deworm your pets 3-4 times a year.
- Give **the bathing a skip** unless it is truly necessary – if you need to bathe a cat more regularly then talk to your vet about what shampoo would be the best for the fur and skin.
- **Brushing**, especially in older or obese cats, can really boost your cats fur and skin condition, and their general mood as well.
- **Do not ignore declines in skin and coat condition** – this may be one of the early indicators of infection and systemic illness.
- If your cat is **arthritis** there are ways to improve their mobility and make them more comfortable. If your cat is “big boned” or is carrying a bit of **winter kitty fat**, please bear in mind that fat does actually have a lot of negative effects the body, other than on the fur, and will shorten your cats lifespan. Your vet would be able to help you look into either of these problems.

