

THIS JUST IN

## Jobs for Feral Cats

*It's a win-win situation for everyone (except the rats)*

**R**ats love cities, and fighting rat populations is difficult. Poisons can affect other animals and children. Traps also may catch innocent bystanders. Some cities are helped periodically with rat-fighting terriers, but that is sporadic. The Blue Collar Cats for 24/7 rodent control, however, is ready.

This is a program instituted by the Humane Rescue Alliance to find homes for feral cats. These are cats who have been “living wild” and surviving on their own. Once trapped and spayed or neutered, they still needed somewhere to go. Enter the Blue Collar Cat program. Think of these felines as urban barn cats.

Applicants need to provide a safe outdoor shelter, make sure there is food and water available as well as the outdoor equivalent of a litterbox. Cats need to be confined and acclimated for a few weeks to accept their new home territory. Initially the working cats may be very busy, catching mice, rats, and other rodents. With time, the rodent population usually drops and rodents learn that location X is not a great place to setup living quarters.

Cats have been successfully placed in private homes and at businesses. While most of the cats are not social, some do become like pets over time. Even well fed social cats maintain their hunting instincts however, so these cats continue to earn their paychecks. ■

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## Itchy Ears: More Than Mites

*Causes of constant scratching at the ears can range from mites to allergies to infections*

**E**ar mites are usually the first thing you worry about if your cat starts scratching her ears. This is no surprise, as ear mites in cats are common, and many of us have adopted kittens with them. Plus, they do make cats’ ears itch like crazy. But, cats scratch at their ears for many reasons.

“While we certainly need to rule out ectoparasites (parasites that live on the outside of the host), such as otodectes (ear mites), notoedres (mange mites), or even demodex (another species of mange mites) on occasion, when working up pruritic (itchy) ears in a cat, there are MANY other conditions that cause itch in this location,” says Dr. Mitzi Clark, assistant clinical professor of dermatology and dermatology section chief at Cornell University’s College of Veterinary Medicine. “Cats are never boring, and their causes of itchy ears can be numerous!”

Causes of itchy ears in cats include:

- ▶ Ear mites
- ▶ Mange mites
- ▶ Allergies
- ▶ Yeast infection
- ▶ Bacterial infection
- ▶ Fungal infection
- ▶ Polyps/tumors in ear canal
- ▶ Foreign bodies in ear canal
- ▶ Infected wounds
- ▶ Immune-mediated skin disease
- ▶ Drug reactions
- ▶ Mosquito-bite hypersensitivity

If your cat has itchy ears, a veterinary exam is critical. Cats can cause significant damage to their ears while scratching, regardless of the cause.

### At the Exam

Your veterinarian will start by assessing not only the ears, but the skin, paws, and oral cavity as well. Using an otoscope, your veterinarian can visually assess the entire external ear canal all the way down to the ear drum. Sometimes this is



*When your cat is incessantly scratching her ears, it's time for diagnosis and treatment.*

all that is needed to diagnose ear mites, as the mites can often be seen partying in there with an otoscope. If they are not visible, the dark waxy discharge that is often found with ear mite infections may provide a useful clue.

If it looks suspiciously like mites, but none are observed this way, a sample will be taken and viewed under a microscope. If they are there, they can usually be found with this closer look. There are many effective treatments for ear mites these days, including some spot-on treatments used for flea control. Be sure to have all cats and dogs on the premises

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Mitzi Clark, DVM, DACVD, is assistant clinical professor of dermatology and dermatology section chief at Cornell University’s College of Veterinary Medicine.



# Why Is My Cat Howling?

*Nothing has changed in her routine*

**Q** My healthy adult indoor-only cat has started howling seemingly all day and all night. I haven't changed anything in her routine. I don't understand why this suddenly started?

**A** Thank you for getting in touch with us, and I understand that this must be a concern for you and your family. Cats can be very vocal, and they are good at getting their owners' attention, often at inconvenient times of the day or night.

There are a number of reasons that a cat may vocalize in this manner, ranging from normal to indicating disease. The first thing to rule out is a disease.

Urinary tract infections and/or stone formation in the urinary tract can be associated with pain and discomfort, and may cause cats to vocalize.

In many of these cases, they may show other signs of illness in the urinary tract, such as frequent urination, vocalizing upon urination, blood in the urine or avoidance of the litterbox. They may associate the act of urinating with pain, and therefore stay away from the place they normally urinate.

Certain diseases of the central nervous system, such as tumors or infections of the brain, can cause cats to behave abnormally. In many of these cases, cats will show some other signs of central nervous system problems, such as seizures, problems with balance, abnormal eye movements and/or lethargy/depression.

Another typical cause of excessive vocalization is hyperthyroidism, the most common endocrine (hormonal) problem in cats in which the thyroid produces excessive thyroid hormone (thyroxine), a hormone that is important in a variety of organs in the body. High thyroxine levels can cause a cat to become hyperactive, have a ravenous appetite, lose weight despite eating more than usual, drink



A cat who starts howling may be trying to get your attention.

and urinating excessively, and to have an unkempt appearance. Owners of hyperthyroid cats often report that the cats vocalize excessively at odd times.

Age-associated deterioration of vision and/or hearing, leading to disorientation and confusion can be a cause, as can dementia, which many veterinary behaviorists feel cats suffer from in a manner that is similar to that seen in humans with age-associated dementia.

My best advice is to visit your cat's veterinarian for a check-up. He or she can help rule out medical causes of excessive vocalization, treat them if diagnosed, and/or make recommendations about how to address those causes not directly associated with a disease.

Most cats can be managed well with treatment of underlying diseases, behavioral modification and/or anti-anxiety medications, if needed.

I understand that your kitty may be driving you bonkers right now, but please hang in there and seek veterinary assistance. I am sure that, with time, you will find a solution so that both you and your kitty can get some sleep! ■

(scratching, continued from page 1)

evaluated and treated, as ear mites are very contagious. Ignoring this important step could result in mite infestations going back and forth between your pets.

Once ear mites, foreign bodies, polyps, and tumors in the external ear canal have been ruled out by otoscopic examination, samples are taken from the ear canal for cytology. Cytology identifies inflammation, yeast, and /or bacterial infection. These conditions are typically treated topically. A follow up exam at the end of treatment is recommended to ensure full resolution of the problem.

Your veterinarian may also take samples from the skin and coat to rule out the other mites and fungal skin infections like ringworm, as these can cause itchy skin in cats.

"I can't emphasize enough the importance of ear cytology, in addition to the mite preparations, skin scrapings, and fungal cultures performed," says Dr. Clark.

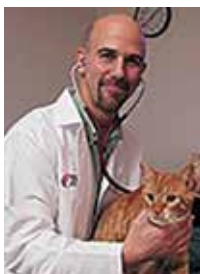
## Allergies

The biggest thing causing itchy ears in cats, once ectoparasites and infections have been ruled out or treated, is allergies. Allergies in cats cause normal healthy-looking skin, including that in the ears, to itch.

"I see cats with allergic otitis as the only sign of their food or environmental allergy," says Dr. Clark. Cats with allergic otitis often develop secondary bacterial or yeast infections, so underlying allergies should always be considered for cats with recurring ear infections.

## Bottom Line

To assure proper treatment, you need to get a proper diagnosis, which means involving your veterinarian. Just remember that itchy ears are not always due to ear mites, so don't run to the pet store for "ear mite treatment." See your veterinarian for a proper diagnosis and the best targeted treatment, so your itchy kitty can get relief as soon as possible. ■



### Do You Have a Health Concern?

Send your health questions to Bruce Kornreich, DVM, PhD, DACVIM, Director of the Cornell Feline Health Center and Editor-in-Chief of CatWatch. Email to [catwatcheditor@cornell.edu](mailto:catwatcheditor@cornell.edu) or send by regular mail to CatWatch, 535 Connecticut Ave., Norwalk, CT 06854-1713.



Scan this code for more information on the Cornell Feline Health Center.

### Coming Up ...

- ▶ Strangers in the House
- ▶ How to Help a Feral Cat
- ▶ Dental Care for Cats
- ▶ Handling Hairballs
- ▶ Multi-pet Households