

GOOD DIET = Healthy Skin and Coat

BY ARDEN MOORE

Here's the skinny on feline skin health: The skin owns bragging rights as your cat's largest organ, with the liver coming in a distant second. In fact, the skin can represent one-fifth of your cat's body weight.

Cats rely on their skin and coat to perform many duties: regulating body temperature, shielding against foreign substances and releasing oil glands to mark their turfs. Oh yeah — the coat's quality can also impact how much hair your cat unloads all over your furniture and clothing, especially during the spring and fall shedding seasons.

It doesn't matter if your cat is fluffy, sleek-coated or even hairless, the quality of her skin and other vital organs is directly impacted by what you feed her.

Good nutrition is key

"Nutrition plays an important role in the health of the skin and other organs," says Dr. Joseph Bartges, professor of veterinary medicine and nutrition at the University of Georgia in Athens. "Often a sign of inadequate or improper nutrition is a change in the coat and skin — whether it is dry or flaky or oily or hair that comes out does not grow back."

Dr. Kathryn Primm who owns the Applebrook Animal Hospital in Ooltewah, Tennessee, says, "The coat is a huge alert for me. I see an unthrifty coat in many of the common diseases in cats. Hyperthyroidism, for example, makes a cat's coat look dull."

Kidney disease, diabetes, intestinal



disease, food allergies and a poor-quality diet can also harm skin and coat.

Be proactive

"Watch for changes in your cat's appetite, appearance or weight, and report them to your veterinarian," says Dr. Primm, who also hosts the *Nine Lives with Dr. Kat* podcast show on Pet Life Radio. "Have your cat regularly screened with blood tests, because many of these diseases have to be officially diagnosed with testing."

Dr. Jean Hofve, a holistic veterinarian in Jamestown, Colorado, offers tips, studies and information on feline holistic health, behavior and nutrition on her popular website littlebigcat.com. When it comes to choosing food for your cat, she does not mince words.

"The food has everything to do with the skin and coat quality," Dr. Hofve says. "If you feed crappy food to

your cat, his skin gets bad. Cats need quality protein that comes from a real meat, not a meat by-product. They also need a diet with good quality fish or chicken oil and never vegetable oils, such as sunflower oil or safflower oil. Vegetable oils are pro inflammatory."

Is it allergies?

Also weighing in is Susan Blake Davis, a certified nutritionist consultant and pet nutritionist who's the founder of the Ask Ariel website that offers pet supplements made with human-grade products.

"Some cats can develop allergies to common proteins, such as fish and poultry," she says. "This can cause them to have skin and digestive problems."

Food allergies rank among the top four most common types of allergy in cats, that also include fleas, inhaled substances and contact. →

Chew On This

Mind + Body

Cats with food allergies may show any or all of these signs:

- ✓ Persistent scratching
- ✓ Skin lumps or lesions
- ✓ Bald spots
- ✓ Dull coat
- ✓ Vomiting
- ✓ Diarrhea



Susan adds, "Changing a cat's diet to a high-protein, hypoallergenic, high-moisture diet with the use of a few immune supplements can suppress the overactive immune system and reduce the inflammation and swelling."

Dr. Bartges encourages people to serve their cats diets that contain quality protein that he defines as containing one or two protein sources that "meets the essential amino acid requirements and has a high biological value in terms of digestion and absorption of the essential amino acids."

He adds, "I'm a believer of feeding a variety of diets — not only different flavors but foods made by different companies and a mix of dry and canned."

Quality cat diets should include what sounds like alphabet soup: EPA and DHA: eicosapentaenoic acid and docosahexaenoic acid. Both are

omega-3 fatty acids with anti-inflammatory properties that are found in salmon, mackerel, sardines and other seafood.

"The combination of EPA and DHA is good not only for skin and coat, but for other organs and joints," Dr. Bartges says.

Try supplements

In addition to meals, your cat can benefit by giving the right healthy treats and supplements. Dr. Hofve recommends supplements containing omega-3 fatty acids, found in fish oil, green mussel oil or cod liver oil. She is a fan of decaffeinated green tea extract as a healthy skin booster.

"Antioxidants are good for the skin because they are anti-inflammatory," Dr. Hofve adds. "Collagen is a nice supplement, and it is also anti-arthritis to help joints."

Vitamin supplements also play essential roles in keeping your cat's coat shiny and healthy. Vitamin A aids in repair and growth of skin. Vitamins C and E are antioxidants that maintain



healthy skin cells.

All of our experts emphasize the need to keep your cat well-hydrated to aid in a quality skin and coat.

"Cats are not always the best water drinkers, so it is important to try to feed them a high-moisture diet," Susan says. "Not getting enough water can lead to itchy, dry skin." 🐟



Arden Moore is a pet behavior consultant, author and master pet first-aid instructor who often teaches hands-on classes with her cool cat, Casey, and very tolerant dog, Kona. Each week, she hosts the *Oh Behave Show* on Pet Life Radio. Learn more at ardenmoore.com.

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