



Feline Fanatic

RINGWORM

When you hear the term "ringworm," do you imagine microscopic worms dancing in a circle under the skin, creating the characteristic ring of redness and irritation? If so, you are not alone in this vision.

The name of this disease is often confusing since ringworm is not caused by worms and, in pets, often doesn't show up as a circular skin lesion. Ringworm can be a persistent skin infection, costly to treat, difficult to clear from your pet's living quarters and contagious to other pets and humans.



This patch is typical of the lesion seen in Ringworm. A diagnosis of this disease cannot be made based just on the appearance of this lesion because other skin conditions can show similar lesions.

- What is ringworm?

Ringworm, or dermatophytosis, is a fungal infection of the hair and skin. Many animals, including dogs and cats, can become infected with one of three different species of fungi when they are exposed to contaminated soil or when the fungus is spread from pet to pet, rodent to pet, pet to human, human to pet or from infected bedding and grooming items.

- What are the signs that my pet may have ringworm?

Early signs of ringworm include dry, flaky skin, broken or brittle hair, bald patches of skin where the hair seems to readily fall out and redness to the skin. The infection may or may not be itchy. Young pets, those going through a debilitating disease or those with immune system deficiencies or taking drugs that suppress the immune system are the most susceptible to this disease.

The vagueness of these symptoms makes dermatophytosis one of the most misdiagnosed skin diseases in pets. I can still remember the dermatologist at veterinary school saying, "If it looks like ringworm, it probably ain't." To make things even worse, many cats are what is termed "asymptomatic carriers" of the fungus, suggesting that these normal-appearing cats could be carrying the fungus and spreading it to other pets or us.

- If you can't tell by looking at it, how is this disease diagnosed?

Ringworm usually cannot be diagnosed by just looking at the skin and saying "Yep, it's ringworm." Some form of testing is required. One easy method of diagnosing ringworm takes advantage of the fact that 40 percent of one of the species of fungi will glow under UV light.

Using a Wood's lamp, your pet's doctor may see the fluorescence of the organism in the hair shaft. However, since this test may only be effective in a few cases, another test, a fungal culture or DTM, is often necessary. Using a special medium designed to grow fungi, the DTM is the gold standard for making a definitive diagnosis of ringworm. This test is painless and involves placing a few hairs or scales and crust on the test medium. The only drawback is that it may take up to 21 days for the fungus to grow enough to determine if it is a fungus that can cause ringworm.

- How can I treat it?

Treatment in pets is generally more involved and includes clipping of the hair, systemic therapy and environmental control of fungal contamination. Topical therapy, such as creams, lotions or sprays, are palliative at best and ineffective on their own. Many veterinary shampoos have anti-fungal properties and can be helpful if used two times a week. Lime sulfur dips, used once a week for eight weeks, can also be effective; however, the strong "rotten egg" odor limits its use to veterinary hospitals. The primary mode of treatment is the use of an anti-fungal product, such as itraconazole.

A ringworm vaccine is available but many dermatologists say that the vaccine may only reduce the size of the lesion and reduce the recurrence but does not cure the disease.

Treatment of the environment involves vacuuming carpets and furniture, washing or disposing of all of the pet's bedding and disposing of brushes, combs, or any grooming tool. Have questions? Consult your veterinarian.

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