Dear Alice,

I have obtained ringworm from my kitten! What is the best treatment for me to get rid of it and stop the itching?

Answer

Dear Reader,

It's definitely time to ditch that itch! Unlike what the name implies, ringworm is a skin infection caused by fungus (not worms). It's contagious and is transmitted by direct skin-to-skin contact with infected people and pets, or by contact with personal items used by infected people, such as combs, brushes, hats, bed sheets, floors, and bathtubs. Ringworm can infect different parts of your body and the infection may look like a ring or circle on the skin. Treating ringworm depends on the location of the affected skin and the severity of the infection.

Anyone is susceptible to the infection, but certain factors make some more likely than others to contract ringworm. People may be at higher risk if they:

- Live in a tropical area.
- Spend time in hot, humid weather.
- Sweat heavily.
- Wrestle, play football, or participate in another contact sport.
- Live in close contact with others, such as in military housing.
- Share towels, clothes, razors, and other things without disinfecting (razors) or washing (clothes and towels) them.
- Are obese.
- Have diabetes.
- Wear clothing that chafes your skin.
- Use a locker room or pool and don’t wash and dry your feet well before putting on shoes and socks.

*List from the American Academy of Dermatology.*
In addition, it's critical to remember that those living with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) aren't more likely to contract ringworm than those who are HIV negative, but treatment for those who are HIV positive can be more complicated.

Symptoms of the fungal infection can differ depending on the location of the affected skin. The skin of the feet, scalp, beard, and groin are all commonly affected areas. All of them usually involve itching (which may be extreme in some cases). Other symptoms may include:

- Patches of skin that are itchy, scaly, dry, or moist and sometimes may ooze. The patches may appear flat and clear at the center with a raised red border and clearly defined edges. If on the scalp, hair will become brittle and may break off in the infected area.
- Nails that may change in color, thickness, and strength.
- Feet that may be dry, scaly, and skin may crack, particularly between the toes.

Typically, the first defense in ringworm treatment is over-the-counter (OTC) antifungal or drying powders, lotions, or creams that you can do on your own. In conjunction with the OTC medication, it's recommended to avoid wearing clothes that irritate skin, keep skin dry and clean, and wash sheets and clothes every day while infected. If the infection is severe, doesn't respond to the medication, recurs, or if the scalp or beard are affected, it's recommended to see a health care provider. After an examination, they may prescribe an antifungal treatment, which differs depending on where the ringworm is presented on the body. In some cases, especially for ringworm on the nails and hands, the treatment may take a little while to clear the infection, so it's critical to stick with the treatment plan a provider recommends and follow up as necessary.

In addition, it's not too early to think about preventing future infections. Keeping hands and feet dry, regularly shampooing hair, not sharing personal items (such as clothing, towels, hairbrushes, and other toiletries), and getting a pair of shower shoes (e.g., sandals or flip flops) to wear in the shower are all recommended prevention strategies. And, if you find that the kitten has bald patches (which may indicate an infection), it's best to keep your petting hands to yourself while you seek treatment for this possible feline infection.

Here's to resuming critter cuddles soon,

Alice!

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