

Dear Dr. Wise,

Question: Recently we adopted a twelve-week-old kitten. We named her Ebony. The poor little thing has been scratching ever since she arrived home. We have been using a flea product from our veterinarian, so she shouldn't have fleas. Also, her ears are very clean, so I don't think she has ear mites. The skin over the center of her back and belly is very flaky, like dandruff. She seems so uncomfortable. Seeing her scratch makes me feel bad for her. Is there any chance that the dog or my children can catch whatever Ebony has? Is there anything we can do for her?

Answer: A young kitten should not be scratching so much. There certainly are ways of finding out the cause of Ebony's itching and help her to feel better! There are several different things that could cause her to be scratching all the time. She may have another type of ectoparasite (parasite on her skin) other than fleas, dermatophytes, allergies etc.

I'm glad you are using a flea product from your veterinarian rather than an over-the-counter product. This should help us to eliminate fleas as a possible cause for Ebony's scratching. The description you have given of the dry scales and dandruff makes me suspicious that she may have Cheyletiella mites. Cheyletiella mites live on hair and fur. All stages (larvae, nymphs, and adults) are parasitic. Common symptoms include excessive scaling (dandruff) which gives the hair coat a powdery or flakey appearance, especially over the dorsal midline of the back. Cheyletiella are parasitic mites that infest and cause skin disease in several species including cats, dogs and rabbits. The mites can be transmitted to humans and cause an itchy rash, so they are a potential zoonosis problem.

There are 3 common species of Cheyletiella mite. Diagnosis can be difficult and it is made by taking skin scrapings, samples on sticky tape, combings and finding mites or their eggs under a microscope. Eggs can also be found in fecal samples.

A variety of antiparasitic preparations can be used to treat Cheyletiella mites. The most important thing is to have Ebony evaluated by your veterinarian and get a definitive diagnosis so she can be treated appropriately.

If you have a question, write Dr. Wise, Indiana Veterinary Medical Association, 201 S. Capitol Avenue, Suite 405, Indianapolis, IN, 46225 or www.invma.org.