BULETIN VETERINER UDAYANA

pISSN 2085-2495
eISSN 2477-2712

Received: 19 January 2026; Accepted: 4 February 2026; Published: 6 February 2026

A CASE REPORT: SUSPECT PSYCHOGENIC ALOPECIA WITH SECONDARY DERMATITIS IN A PERSIAN CAT

Laporan Kasus: Suspek Alopecia Psikogenik Terkait Stres Lingkungan dengan Dermatitis Sekunder pada Kucing Persia

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How to cite: Lufiara AC, Jayanti PD, Arjentinia IPGY. 2026. A case report: Suspect psychogenic alopecia with secondary dermatitis in a Persian cat. *Bul. Vet. Udayana* 18(1): 218-229. DOI: https://doi.org/10.24843/bulvet.2026.v18.i01.p21

Abstract

Psychogenic alopecia is hair loss caused by behavioral disorders that lead cats to groom excessively, resulting in skin lesions. Compulsive grooming causes alopecia, erythema, and secondary skin lesions. This case report discusses a Persian cat with complaints of alopecia, redness, and crusting without any infectious agents being found. Physical examination revealed self-induced alopecia, with pre-existing conditions within normal limits and a body condition score (BCS) of 5/9. Overall, the cat exhibited a docile temperament and normal activity levels. Complete blood count results were within normal ranges. The cat showed significant improvement after antihistamine therapy, a special diet for skin and hair, and grooming with hypoallergenic shampoo in a low-stress environment. However, relapse occurred after returning home to an environment with a high cat population. The cat recovered again after the owner provided more attention by regularly interacting and playing with it. Based on the history, examination findings, and therapeutic response, the diagnosis was established as suspected psychogenic alopecia with secondary dermatitis triggered by environmental stress.

Keywords: Overgrooming, Psychogenic Alopecia, Stress-Induced Dermatitis.

Abstrak

Alopecia psikogenik adalah kerontokan rambut akibat adanya gangguan perilaku yang menyebabkan kucing melakukan *grooming* berlebihan hingga muncul lesi kulit. *Grooming* kompulsif menyebabkan alopecia, eritema, dan lesi sekunder pada kulit. Laporan kasus ini membahas seekor kucing Persia dengan keluhan alopecia, kemerahan, serta krusta tanpa ditemukan agen infeksius. Pemeriksaan fisik menunjukkan *alopecia self-induced*, status praesen menunjukkan hasil dalam batas normal, dengan body condition score (BCS) 5/9. Secara umum, kucing menunjukkan temperamen jinak dan aktivitas yang normal. Sedangkan

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pemeriksaan *Complete Blood Count* berada dalam rentang normal. Kucing menunjukkan perbaikan signifikan setelah terapi antihistamin, diet pakan khusus kulit dan rambut, serta *grooming* menggunakan sampo hipoalergenik ketika berada di lingkungan minim stres. Namun, kekambuhan terjadi setelah kembali ke rumah pemilik dengan populasi kucing yang tinggi. Kucing kembali pulih setelah setelah pemilik memberikan perhatian lebih dengan cara sering mengajak berinteraksi secara rutin dan bermain. Berdasarkan anamnesis, hasil pemeriksaan, dan respons terapi, diagnosis ditegakkan sebagai *suspect psychogenic alopecia with secondary dermatitis* yang dipicu stres lingkungan.

Keywords: Alopecia Psikogenik, *Overgrooming, Stress-Induced Dermatitis.*

INTRODUCTION

Dermatological problems are one of the most common health issues found in animals, including cats. The causes of dermatological problems are diverse, ranging from parasites, bacterial or fungal infections, hypersensitivity, to behavioural disorders (Miller *et al.*, 2013). One form of non-infectious dermatological disorder is psychogenic alopecia, a condition where cats engage in excessive grooming due to stress, anxiety, or an environment that does not meet their natural needs (Overall, 2013).

Cats are a species that is highly sensitive to environmental changes and social dynamics. Living in a multi-cat household can lead to competition for resources, territorial disputes, and conflicts between cats, triggering chronic stress (Ellis *et al.*, 2013). Chronic stress has been shown to directly influence repetitive grooming behaviour and the development of skin lesions (Ramos *et al.*, 2018; Buffington, 2017).

In addition to psychological stress, conditions such as non-infectious skin hypersensitivity (non-flea non-food hypersensitivity dermatitis/NFNFHD) can exacerbate pruritus and accelerate the onset of self-induced alopecia (Diesel, 2017). Therefore, a thorough evaluation is necessary to differentiate other causes. Secondary dermatitis is a skin inflammatory condition that arises as a result of repeated skin tissue damage, whether due to mechanical trauma, chronic irritation, or excessive grooming behaviour. Clinically, secondary dermatitis can be characterised by erythema, excoriation, crusting, alopecia, and superficial epidermal damage not caused by a specific primary agent (Susanto *et al.*, 2024). In cats with psychogenic alopecia, intense and repeated grooming can damage the skin barrier, triggering secondary inflammation and exacerbating pruritus. This condition then forms a recurring cycle between itching and grooming behaviour, which further aggravates skin lesions (Olivry *et al.*, 2018; Buffington, 2017; Ramos, 2018).

In veterinary clinical practice in Indonesia, dermatitis is one of the most common skin disorders found in cats. Studies in several animal clinics report that most cases of skin disorders in cats are related to dermatitis caused by ectoparasite infestation, fungal infection, or chronic irritation that causes alopecia and secondary lesions (Gunawan *et al.*, 2024; Susanto *et al.*, 2024). However, specific prevalence data on psychogenic alopecia in cats in Indonesia, including in the Bali region, remains very limited to date. International literature indicates that cases of purely psychogenic alopecia account for only a small proportion of all diagnostically examined cases of alopecia, after other medical causes have been eliminated (Waisglass *et al.*, 2006; Hall *et al.*, 2019). The limitations of local epidemiological data indicate a need for further research on the role of behavioural factors and environmental stress in the occurrence of psychogenic alopecia in domestic cats in Indonesia. This comprehensive diagnostic approach aims to present diagnostic and therapeutic approaches to alopecia cases as scientific literature and reference.

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RESEARCH METHODS

Signalment and Anamnesis

The animal in question is a neutered male Persian cat named Coco, aged 3 years, white and orange in colour. The animal weighs 3.9 kg. The owner complained that the cat had undergone behavioural changes, tending to isolate itself, followed by skin problems such as frequent scratching, multifocal alopecia, erythema, wounds on several parts of the body, and hair loss lasting for approximately one year. This was accompanied by an increase in the number of cats in the owner's house, but none of them experienced symptoms similar to those of the case cat. The case cat and all other cats were kept indoors in a space that was inadequate for nine cats, with minimal air circulation and relying on air conditioning daily. The case cat has been neutered but has never been vaccinated or dewormed. The case cat and all other cats are rarely bathed; the case cat was last bathed a year ago at a pet shop with antifungal shampoo and showed no improvement. The case cat has never been boarded anywhere. The case cat's diet consists of Maxi® dry food, and there is no history of diet changes.

Physical Examination

Based on the physical examination, there was symmetrical multifocal alopecia on the back, neck, legs, and tail, with crusting on the back and erythema. In psychogenic alopecia, which is a form of over-grooming due to behaviour (compulsive grooming), alopecia lesions are typically found in areas easily reached by the cat's tongue during grooming, such as the abdomen, medial thighs, and dorsolateral back, after other medical causes have been eliminated (Pekmezci *et al.*, 2009; Araujo & Meneguelli, 2024). Meanwhile, no abnormalities were found in other systems. The pre-examination status results were within normal limits. The cat had a body condition score (BCS) of 5/9. In general, the cat appeared to have a docile temperament and an active attitude.

The pruritus level was clinically assessed based on behavioural observations and lesion patterns, referring to the Feline Pruritus Visual Analogue Scale (VAS). The cat showed a pruritus score of 6, characterised by repetitive grooming behaviour without a pain response on palpation. The pattern of alopecia was mechanical in nature due to excessive grooming activity, not spontaneous hair loss, supporting the diagnosis of self-induced dermatosis (Waisglass *et al.*, 2006; Diesel, 2017).

Stress levels were assessed based on behavioural indicators using the Feline Stress Score (FSS). The cat showed a score of 4, characterised by excessive grooming and repetitive behaviour, although it remained cooperative during examination. Environmental stress is known to play an important role in triggering the activation of neuroendocrine responses that encourage compulsive grooming behaviour as an adaptive response to stress, which in chronic conditions can cause hair and skin damage, leading to alopecia and secondary dermatitis (Ellis *et al.*, 2013; Buffington, 2017). These findings, supported by clinical improvement following environmental modification to create a calmer environment, reinforce the diagnosis of psychogenic alopecia with secondary dermatitis in this cat case.

Ancillary Examination

Complete Blood Count (CBC) Test

A Complete Blood Count (CBC) test on the cat's blood sample was performed using a Rayto RT-7600 VET Auto Haematology Analyser (Rayto Life and Analytical Sciences Co., Ltd). The CBC examination did not show any significant changes such as leukocytosis, eosinophilia, or signs of systemic inflammation, thus ruling out the possibility of infectious diseases, systemic parasites, or internal organ disorders. The absence of other systemic symptoms, along with

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normal physical examination and CBC results, supports the notion that the abnormality is localised to the skin and related to behavioural factors (Miller *et al.*, 2013).

Dermatological Examination

The dermatological examination performed in this case included skin scraping, trichogram, Wood's lamp, acetate tape preparation, impression smear, and otic swab cytology. The skin scraping results did not show the presence of ectoparasites such as Demodex or Cheyletiella. The trichogram examination did not reveal any dermatophyte spores or ectoparasites; however, clean breaks were found that differed from the changes in alopecia caused by fungal infection or other conditions. This is usually found in cats with self-induced alopecia (Favrot *et al.*, 2015). The Wood's lamp examination gave a negative result for the green fluorescence characteristic of *Microsporum canis*. Acetate tape preparation and otic swab tests did not show the presence of bacteria or fungi. The impression smear showed numerous neutrophils, indicating a suppurative inflammatory process without evidence of microbial infection. Overall, the series of examinations did not identify any infectious agents or parasites, and the main findings were limited to neutrophilic inflammatory cells as a sign of secondary inflammation.

Diagnosis and Prognosis

Based on the results of the anamnesis, physical examination, and confirmed by supporting tests in the form of a Complete Blood Count (CBC) and dermatological examination, the cat was diagnosed with Psychogenic Alopecia with Secondary Dermatitis by eliminating primary factors. This diagnosis is supported by the presence of self-induced alopecia, broken hair found on trichogram examination, and erythema and crusting lesions indicating secondary skin inflammation due to repeated mechanical trauma. The absence of significant abnormalities in the CBC results reinforces that the inflammatory process is localized and not caused by systemic disorders. The prognosis in this case is favorable, depending on the success of environmental stress management and grooming behavior control, as secondary dermatitis is reversible if predisposing factors can be addressed.

Therapy

The therapy given to this cat includes a pharmacological approach, external skin care, nutritional modification, and environmental management. Systemically, the cat was given the antihistamine Cyproheptadine HCl 4 mg (Pronicyl®) at a dose of 2 mg/cat q12h for 3 days, but as the symptoms did not show significant improvement, administration was continued for 5 days. However, there were still no significant results, so the medication was discontinued.

In addition to oral therapy, topical therapy was administered in the form of grooming twice a week using Orgo® hypoallergenic shampoo. Although the exact composition varies between products, hypoallergenic shampoos generally contain non-irritating ingredients that soothe the skin and reduce inflammation through antioxidant mechanisms and improved skin barrier function. These ingredients help improve the skin barrier, reduce the risk of recurrent allergic reactions, and relieve pruritus, especially in cases of mild dermatitis due to irritation or hypersensitivity.

From a nutritional standpoint, the cats in this case were also given a special diet for hair and skin. The brand of food given was Kitchen Flavor®, which generally contains omega-3 (EPA/DHA) and omega-6, biotin, zinc, and vitamin E in its formulation for skin and hair. From an environmental management perspective, the cats undergoing therapy were placed in a low-stress, comfortable, and clean environment, as stress is one of the factors that can increase excessive grooming and worsen skin lesions (Griffin & DeBoer, 2017).

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RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

After therapy was administered to the cat, its condition continued to be monitored. The cat's skin condition showed positive results over the course of therapy. The cat's overgrooming behavior also decreased, which had a positive effect on the healing of its secondary dermatitis. The skin and hair of the case cat underwent significant changes after therapy was administered from May 1, 2025, to July 16, 2025, allowing the case cat to be returned to its owner. After a few days of being back at the owner's home, the case cat experienced a relapse, with overgrooming resuming and the secondary dermatitis reappearing. The author advised the owner to pay more attention to the cat and maintain its hygiene by continuing routine grooming. The owner reported that the cat had fully recovered by December 2025 after receiving more attention through regular interaction and play, without continuing routine grooming, a special diet for hair and skin, and a change of residence with only a small reduction in the number of pets.

Discussion

Psychogenic alopecia is hair loss caused by behavioral disorders that lead cats to groom excessively, resulting in skin lesions. This condition in cats is a form of self-induced dermatosis caused by excessive grooming due to stress, anxiety, or compulsive behavioral disorders. This condition often results in a clean alopecia pattern without severe inflammation and is characterized by hair breakage due to mechanical trauma from repeated licking (Waisglass *et al.*, 2006). Clinically, psychogenic alopecia often resembles other skin diseases such as allergic dermatitis, flea allergy dermatitis, or parasitic infestation, so diagnosis can only be established through a diagnosis by exclusion approach after all dermatological and systemic possibilities have been ruled out (Miller *et al.*, 2013; Diesel, 2017).

At the pathophysiological level, environmental stress plays a major role in triggering this disorder. Activation of the HPA axis (hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal axis) in chronic stress conditions increases the release of cortisol and stress neurotransmitters, which drive grooming behavior as a coping mechanism. When stress persists, this behavior can become compulsive, leading to persistent alopecia (Hess *et al.*, 2008; Landsberg *et al.*, 2013). Common stressors include environmental changes, high cat population density, competition for resources, and conflicts between cats. Multi-cat households are one of the most significant triggers because they increase the potential for social conflict and insecurity in cats (Ellis *et al.*, 2013).

In cats with psychogenic alopecia, trichogram examination generally shows hair with clean breaks at various lengths of the hair shaft, which occurs as a result of excessive grooming. This condition differs from dermatophytosis, where hair shafts undergo structural changes such as brittleness, deformity, and fungal arthrospores may be found on the hair surface. The distribution of lesions in psychogenic alopecia is also generally symmetrical (Miller *et al.*, 2013; Favrot *et al.*, 2015). Microscopic examination of hair shafts is an important method for distinguishing self-induced alopecia from non-traumatic alopecia, such as endocrine disorders (Miller *et al.*, 2013). After eliminating causes such as allergies, parasites, and secondary infections, excessive grooming behavior can be categorized as a primary problem resulting from stress or behavioral disorders.

The results of the Complete Blood Count (CBC) test on blood samples from the cat case conducted at the Veterinary Teaching Hospital, Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, Udayana University showed good results, tending to be normal, and the absence of infectious agents in the skin examination supported the diagnosis of psychogenic alopecia. A special diet for skin

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and hair helped improve the symptoms of secondary dermatitis in the cat, but this did not affect the recurrence that occurred when the cat was in the owner's environment, so food allergies were not considered dominant in this case (Foster & Foil, 2003).

Management of psychogenic alopecia focuses on stress reduction and environmental improvement, including providing hiding spaces, play routines, and reducing conflicts between cats. Pharmacological interventions such as sedative antihistamines or behavioral modification may also be used as adjunctive therapy if needed. Supportive skin care such as the use of hypoallergenic shampoo, a special diet for skin and hair, and monitoring grooming behavior also aid in the recovery process. The improvement in the condition of the cat in this case after being placed in a quieter environment supports the finding that environmental stress is the main cause of psychogenic alopecia (Buffington, 2017). Thus, a combination of medical, behavioral, and environmental modification approaches is key to successful therapy for this disorder.

Systemically, the cat was given the antihistamine Cyproheptadine HCl 4 mg (Pronicyl®) at a dose of 2 mg/cat q12h for 3 days, but because the symptoms did not show significant improvement, the administration was continued for 5 days. Cyproheptadine acts as an H1 receptor antagonist, inhibiting the release and action of histamine, reducing itching (pruritus), reducing inflammation, and decreasing excessive grooming behavior, which is a response to skin irritation (Miller *et al.*, 2023; Bloom, 2014).

In addition to oral therapy, topical therapy was administered in the form of grooming twice a week using hypoallergenic shampoo of the Orgo® brand. Although the exact composition varies between products, hypoallergenic shampoos generally contain non-irritating ingredients such as colloidal oatmeal, which soothes the skin and reduces inflammation through antioxidant mechanisms and enhanced skin barrier function; aloe vera, which has soothing, moisturizing, and epithelial regeneration-promoting properties; and essential fatty acids (omega-3/omega-6) or ceramides that help strengthen the skin's lipid layer, thereby reducing dryness, erythema, and sensitivity (Marsella, 2019; Olivry & Bizikova, 2018). These ingredients play a role in improving the skin barrier, reducing the risk of recurrent allergic reactions, and relieving pruritus, especially in cases of mild dermatitis due to irritation or hypersensitivity.

From a nutritional standpoint, cats with skin and coat issues are also given a special diet for hair and skin. The brand of food given is Kitchen Flavor®, which generally contains omega-3 (EPA/DHA) and omega-6, biotin, zinc, and vitamin E in its formulation for skin and hair. These components have been proven to support skin health through their roles as anti-inflammatory agents, antioxidants, and cofactors in keratin formation and epidermal barrier function (Watson, 2018; Fascetti & Delaney, 2022). Omega-3 reduces pruritus inflammation by inhibiting the arachidonic acid pathway, while zinc and biotin play a role in epidermal regeneration, improving coat quality, and reducing irritation susceptibility.

From an environmental management perspective, cats undergoing therapy are placed in a low-stress, comfortable, and clean environment, as stress is a factor that can increase excessive grooming and worsen skin lesions (Overall, 2013; Crowell-Davis & Barry, 2016). Monitoring of excessive grooming behavior is also conducted to ensure that overgrooming does not occur, which could lead to psychogenic alopecia or secondary irritation.

In addition to clinical evaluation and elimination of primary factors, assessing stress levels in cats through measurement of stress hormones, particularly cortisol, can be used to support diagnosis. Measurement of cortisol concentration in hair has been reported as a non-invasive indicator of chronic stress in cats (Lamon *et al.*, 2024). Furthermore, hair cortisol concentrations are known to be associated with behavioral indicators and environmental factors reflecting chronic stress (Derry *et al.*, 2021) and have been reported to be higher in cats with behavioral

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disorders (Wojtaś, 2023). However, in this case report, hair cortisol levels have not been examined, so the diagnosis cannot be definitively confirmed as stress-related psychogenic alopecia with secondary dermatitis, and it remains in the suspect category.

The diagnosis of Suspect Psychogenic Alopecia with Secondary Dermatitis in the case cat was established based on an exclusionary diagnostic approach, namely through the elimination of other primary factors that could cause similar dermatitis manifestations. Diagnostic efforts included changing the cat's diet to evaluate the possibility of food allergies, but the cat did not show a clinical response indicative of allergies, as evidenced by the absence of improvement directly related to the use of a special skin and hair diet. This diet was used as supportive therapy during the treatment process. In addition, complete blood count (CBC) and dermatological examination results did not reveal any infectious agents or other primary causes.

During the therapy period, the case cat was placed in an environment with intensive interaction and no other cats, where the cat received more attention and regular play activities, which was followed by clinical improvement. Conversely, after the cat returned to the owner's environment with a larger cat population and lower level of interaction, recurrence occurred again. The condition improved again after the owner increased the intensity of interaction and environmental stimulation. The pattern of improvement and relapse closely associated with changes in the environment and interaction levels indicates the role of stress as a contributing factor to the occurrence of dermatitis in the case cat, although objective confirmation through stress biomarker measurements has not been performed.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Conclusion

In this case, the cat showed multifocal alopecia and secondary dermatitis caused by psychogenic alopecia, characterized by overgrooming behavior. Significant clinical improvement occurred when the cat was placed in a low-stress environment, while recurrence reappeared after returning home to a high-cat population. Based on the elimination of primary factors and the pattern of therapeutic response, this case was concluded as Suspected Psychogenic Alopecia with Secondary Dermatitis triggered by environmental stress.

Suggestions

Suggestions include that the owner improve environmental management to reduce stress, including providing more attention, spending time playing and talking with the pet, providing a quieter space, and reducing potential conflicts between cats. Regular grooming with hypoallergenic shampoo and a special diet for skin and hair should be maintained to keep the skin healthy. Regular monitoring of grooming behavior is also needed to prevent recurrence, and routine check-ups are recommended for further evaluation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank all lecturers and staff at the Veterinary Internal Medicine Laboratory, Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, Udayana University, who were willing to assist the author in facilitating and guiding the completion of this case report.

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Tables

Table 1. Results of the Coco cat preesen status check

Parameter	Results	Normal Values*	Remarks
Heart Rate (x/min)	128	100 - 140	Normal
Pulse (x/min)	120	100 - 140	Normal
Capillary Refill Time (sec)	< 2	< 2	Normal
Respiratory rate (x/min)	30	20 - 30	Normal
Body Temperature (°C)	38.7	37.8 – 39.3	Normal

Description: *Source: California Veterinary Emergency Team (2024)

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Table 2. The results of the CBC examination of the Coco cat.

Parameter	Results	Units	Reference Value
WBC	6.42	10^9/L	5.50–19.50
Neu#	2.96	10^9/L	3.12–12.58
Lym#	2.19	10^9/L	0.73–7.86
Mon#	0.49	10^9/L	0.07–1.36
Eos#	0.76	10^9/L	0.06–1.93
Bas#	0.02	10^9/L	0.00–0.12
Neu%	0.460	–	0.380–0.800
Lym%	0.341	–	0.120–0.450
Mon%	0.077	–	0.010–0.080
Eos%	0.119 (H)	–	0.010–0.110
Bas%	0.003	–	0.000–0.012
NLR	1.35	–	–
PLR	62.10	–	–
RBC	10.60 (H)	10^12/L	4.60–10.20
HGB	12.8	g/dL	8.5–15.3
HCT	41.9	%	26.0–47.0
MCV	39.5	fL	38.0–54.0
MCH	12.1	pg	11.8–18.0
MCHC	306	g/L	290–360
RDW-CV	0.175	–	0.160–0.230
RDW-SD	23.9	fL	26.4–43.1
PLT	136	10^3/µL	100–518
MPV	11.8	fL	9.6–16.3
PDW-CV	0.155	–	0.133–0.185
PDW-SD	24.3 (H)	fL	12.0–17.5
PCT	1.60	mL/L	0.90–7.00
P-LCC	51	10^9/L	15–240
P-LCR	0.376	–	0.150–0.650

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February 2026
https://doi.org/10.24843/bulvet.2026.v18.i01.p21

Figures

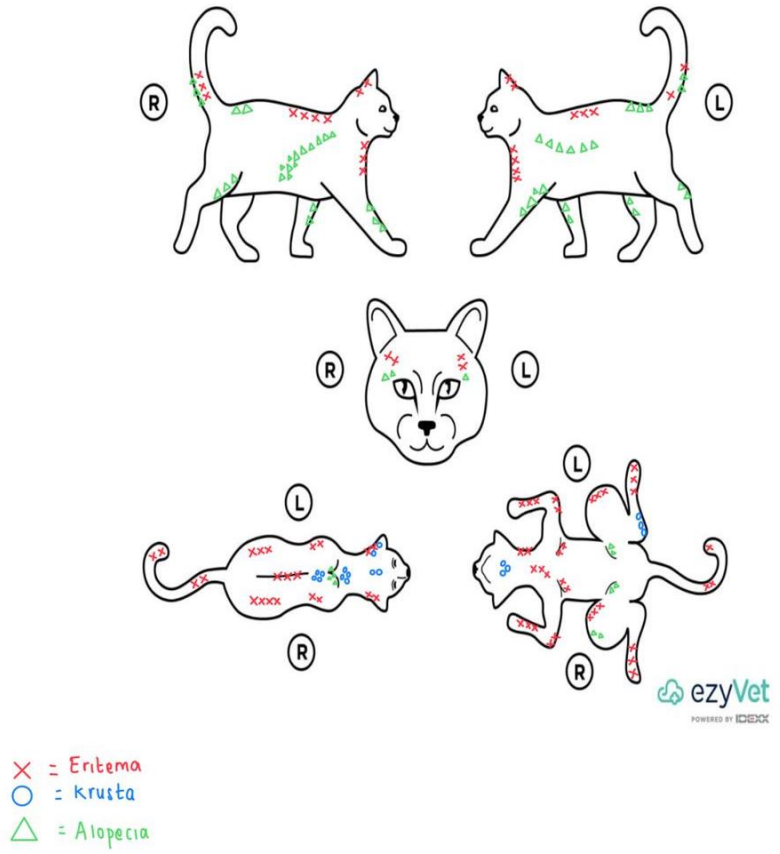

Figure 1. *Lesion Map* of Coco case cats showing multifocal erythema marked with an "X", multifocal crorusa marked with "O", and multifocal alopecia marked with triangle symbol (△).

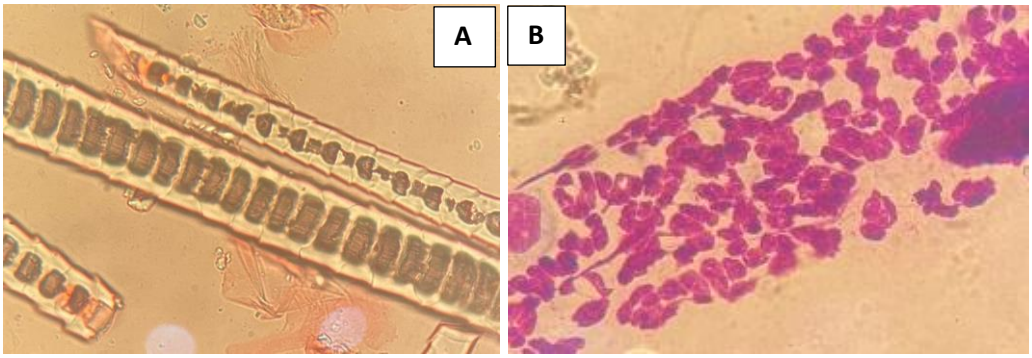

Figure 2. The results of the *case cat's trichogram* did not show the presence of dermatophyte spores, nor ectoparasites, but a clean fracture was found (A); *Impression smear* showed many neutrophils indicating an inflammatory process in the absence of microbial infection. The main findings were limited to neutrophil inflammatory cells as a sign of secondary *inflammation* (B).

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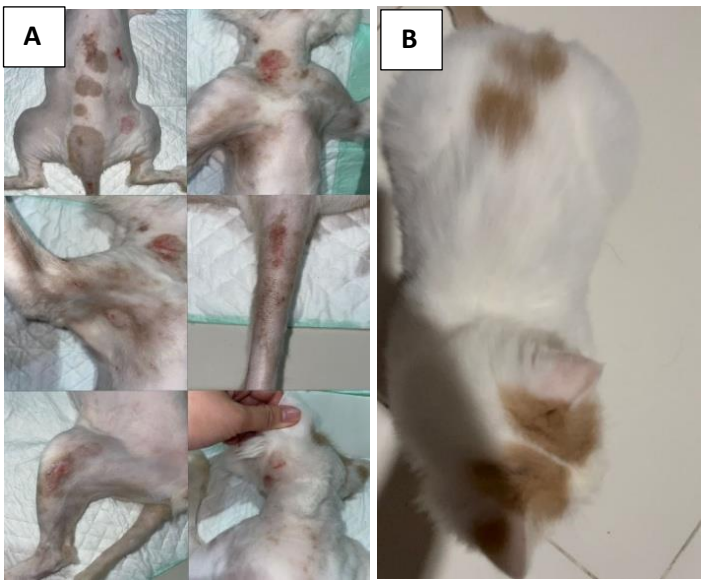

Figure 3. Coco case animals before shaving were shaved, there appeared to be several lesions on the body of case animals (A); case animals after therapy appeared to have significant improvement and hair had grown back (B).

Figure 4. The animal case Coco after recovering from a recurrence that occurred at the owner's place in the way the owner paid more attention and took time to play and interact.

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