

I recently adopted a new cat from a shelter. I noticed that his whiskers are missing. I hope no one harmed him intentionally. Will they grow back? Will he have problems without whiskers?

Congratulations on your new addition. If his whiskers are missing, it is possible that they were cut, or burned. Hopefully this was an accidental incident. Whiskers are specialized, thicker hairs that have muscles and nerves surrounding the hair follicle. Unlike trimming a hair elsewhere on the body, there is pain sensation when whiskers are traumatized. They should grow back as long as the follicle wasn't damaged.

Cats have four rows of whiskers on each side of the face, with the exact pattern and number unique to each cat, similar to a person's individual fingerprint. There are also whiskers near the corner of the mouth and nose, on the chin, eyebrows and back side of the front legs. The muscles at the hair follicle allow the whisker to move in different directions. You can tell a little about a cat's mood by looking at the position of his whiskers. The whiskers will generally be in a relaxed position pointing out to the side if the cat is relaxed and happy, forward if he is on alert or inquisitive and backward and flat against his cheeks if nervous or upset.

A cat's sensitive whiskers serve a lot of functions. If a cat is navigating through a narrow space, the whiskers send a message to the brain as they bump up against something. The scientific name for whiskers is vibrissae, so you can tell by the name that they have something to do with sensing vibration. A whisker doesn't even have to touch an object as the cat navigates nearby, since they vibrate with changes in air movements reflected by objects or walls. This function helps them get around your house in the dark, and helps outdoor cats hunt at night. Some research shows that whiskers can help with detecting odors as they bring the scented current of air towards the nose. Whiskers are also helpful with a cat's equilibrium. If they are damaged or missing, they can cause the cat to be disoriented or off balance. You may notice your new cat have trouble walking straight or jumping up onto an object until the whiskers regrow.

Francine K. Rattner, V.M.D.

South Arundel Veterinary Hospital