

UNDER THE WEATHER

The Itchy Pet

Sometimes I feel if I hear the words "My dog is itching," I will go mad. It's the one complaint every vet hears day in and out, all their working life. The reasons are many, and diagnosing the exact cause is a challenge at times. Which is why I take a deep breath before I enter the treatment room which has an itchy pet.

The first, and most common reason is ticks and fleas. Make sure your tick and flea control programme is regular. Spot-on drops, sprays, shampoos, collars, post bath dips – the options are many, and you can choose the treatment after discussing it with your vet. One word – be regular with the programme that you choose; use it like a preventive programme.

Another reason could be environmental allergies. Your pet could be sensitive to dust, dust mites, pollen, grass or molds. It is very hard to detect what exactly your pet is allergic to, and although there is a blood test to find out exactly what is the source of the allergy, it is very expensive, and includes about 80 allergens. Your pet could be allergic to something outside of these 80 allergens; or they may be something you can't avoid (like dust allergy, unless you live in a vacuum).

Mites are another cause of itching in dogs. Scabies mites (sarcoptes), Chyletiella mites and ear mites (otodectic) all cause itching in different parts of the body. These mites are microscopic, and not visible to the naked eye except Chyletiella, which look like flakes of dandruff moving around on the dog's skin (therefore called walking dandruff). Body dips of a solution called *Amitraz*, oral *Ivermectin* tabs (or weekly injections of the same), and tick/flea shampoos will be prescribed according to the type of skin mites present. Sometimes your vet may take a skin scraping to be examined under the microscope to help with diagnosis, but these mites are sneaky creatures, and may escape detection, so a negative test does not always rule out mites.

Skin infections sometimes cause a mild itching. These could be bacterial or fungal, and are detected on an impression smear (where a slide is pressed on the skin, stained and examined



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under the microscope). These infections are usually secondary to itching due to an allergy, and will not resolve till the allergy is addressed simultaneously.

Yeast infections can also cause greasy, odorous and itchy signs in affected dogs. The skin is stressed by the waste products of the organisms and responds by releasing histamine, which triggers further inflammation, itching and scratching and cell damage. If it is diagnosed, there's generally something else going on such as hypothyroidism, chronic administration of steroids or dietary deficiency of omega-3 fatty acids. These supplements will help in not just yeast infections, but in treatment of almost all skin and coat problems, and should be given for at least 4-6 months to have the desired effect.

Food allergies can also manifest as sensitive, itchy skin. A food allergy occurs when a dog's immune system mistakenly identifies a particular ingredient as harmful, and then creates defensive antibodies to fight the invading enemy (the food).

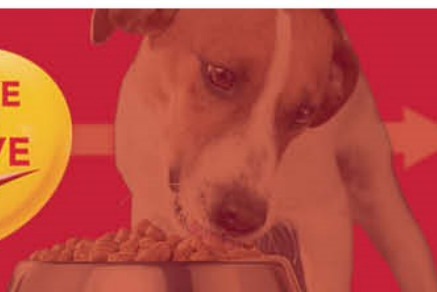
The symptoms of an allergy can include (but are not limited to) skin rash, hives, itching, paw biting, obsessive licking and sometimes nausea or vomiting. Hypoallergenic dog food recipes avoid the use of ingredients most likely to provoke allergic reaction. These are commercially available, alternatively you may try an elimination diet at home with the help of your vet.

Neurogenic dermatitis or Acral Lick dermatitis can also cause a severe lick/bite/itch cycle. Most cases have a suspected cause such as boredom, separation anxiety, frustration, confinement, or even a minor physical problem such as a tiny abrasion. The dog persists in traumatising the area, which is usually confined to an easily accessible forelimb, carpus (wrist) or ankle area, and never allows the skin to heal. This type of itching sometimes needs intra-lesional injections of steroids as well as behaviour modification drugs and therapy.

No matter what the cause, you will have to do a bit of teamwork with your vet to bring relief to your itchy pet. 



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