

The itchy dog

Having an itchy dog can be very frustrating for both your dog and yourself! Although it is a very common complaint, unfortunately there is not always a straight forward solution.

Why does my dog itch?

Good question! Dogs itching and scratching is a response to skin irritation. There are many things that irritate your dogs' skin. Some are easily identified and controlled, others are more difficult to pinpoint and manage. Below is a list of just some of the things that can cause skin irritation:

- Parasites – fleas, mange mites
- Pollens, grass or other irritants which cause contact or seasonal allergies
- Food allergies
- Dust mites or indoor allergies
- Bacterial, yeast or fungal infections – ringworm
- Autoimmune diseases – pemphigus, lupus
- Genetic mutations
- Behavioural

Anything that interrupts the skin's integrity can cause your dog to itch. Maintaining the protective barrier is key to helping your dog naturally repel irritants. Simple things like bathing your dog more than once every two weeks can interfere with the skin's natural oils and predispose them to skin disease.

There is quite often a cycle that leads to chronic scratching. For example; a dog itching from a seasonal allergy will often traumatise their skin therefore predisposing them to secondary bacterial infections which will cause more itching.

So what can we do about it?

Firstly we need to hear about the history of your dog's itch. For example; how long has it been going on? Is it worse at a particular time of year- e.g. is it worse in summer? Do you treat for parasites routinely? Has this problem occurred before? Where does your dog live – indoor or outdoor? How often do you bathe your dog?

Once the dog has been examined the vet will make an assessment and talk to you about the possible causes of the itch. They may need to do some diagnostic tests such as skin scrapes or a sticky tape test to help them rule out causes like mites and bacterial infections.



The best way to treat an itch is to identify the cause and stop it. Fleas, mites and infections are often easier to identify and treat whereas allergies caused by food, dust mites, grass or other irritants may be more tricky. Itching can also be caused by a combination of things. If the cause is unclear the vet will speak to you about your options. You may wish to further investigate possible causes or you may prefer to simply treat the symptoms.

More complex cases may need more in depth diagnostics. Where food allergies are suspected an elimination diet may be recommended. Animals may be allergic to different components of their diet; in many cases they are sensitive to the protein source, alternatively they may react to certain feed additives. Trialling your dog on a low allergen diet may help ease their itch and help discover what it is allergic to.

Identifying causative pollens or environmental allergens is very difficult and often requires specialist diagnostics. Your pet may respond to immunotherapy which involves repeated exposure to an identified allergen. This can be very costly and the effectiveness is variable.

If you would rather treat the symptoms instead of investigating the cause (e.g. due cost of investigation) please remember that treatments such as cortisone or Apoquel® are 'band-aid' therapies - they stop the itch either by suppressing the immune system and reducing inflammation and irritation or by interfering with your dog's feedback system (which tells them to itch when irritated). Your dog may need seasonal therapy with such medications or may require ongoing treatment depending on their response.

We hope this helps you understand the basics of why dogs itch and what treatments are available.

For more information speak with your vet or visit the following website:
<http://www.leospetcare.com/8-week-plan-itchy-dog-skin/>