

SKIN DEEP

Does Fido have an itch? Scratch the surface and you may find a way to treat it.

BY LUCY POSTINS

Chronic itchy skin, hot spots, dandruff and a smelly, oily coat plague many unfortunate dogs across the United States. Itchiness on the outside is often a sign of a problem that is more than skin deep.

In the summer, fleas or environmental/contact allergies may be the culprit. Many pets are sensitive to certain types of grass and weeds, and traveling to new areas can also play havoc on a sensitive pup when he comes into contact with new environmental allergens, such as pollens, to which he hasn't previously been exposed. Other possible irritants in the home include detergents used to wash blankets and bedding, household cleaners or sprays used in the yard.

and metabolic problems. Many prescription creams and lotions can be overly drying to the skin or ears and may exacerbate the problem in the long term.

A more integrative plan looks at what is causing the problem and helps the body to heal itself by boosting the immune system and, as far as possible, reducing exposure to the substances that are causing the problem. And this tactic helps provide natural relief with supplements that don't have too many adverse side effects.

One common cause that's often overlooked is diet. Food sensitivities are abundant in almost every breed, possibly due to genetics or the fact that many animals are fed the same food for months or even years on end, with no variety

MANY PETS ARE ESPECIALLY SENSITIVE TO GLUTEN, WHICH CAN CAUSE AN INFLAMMATORY RESPONSE.

Any time a non-seasonal bout of itching crops up, it's worthwhile to look back at what might have been different for your pup in recent days or weeks. Did you switch to a new fabric softener or get your carpets cleaned? Did you visit a new place and let your pup romp in a field where the flowers were blooming?

The most common, conventional approach to treating itchy skin and chronic ear infections is to medicate with antibiotics, steroid injections and sometimes harsh, topical products. Though effective for treating the symptom of itchiness itself, some steroids like cortisone can actually weaken the immune system, liver and kidneys, which in turn can make Fido more vulnerable to infection

in ingredients or alternative sources of nutrition, such as fresh, real food to supply a broader array of amino acids and other important nutritional compounds.

One of the most common causes of food sensitivity in pets is grain. Many pets are especially sensitive to gluten, which can cause an inflammatory response that manifests itself as itchy skin or red and inflamed feet, gastrointestinal upset or persistent ear infections.

If it's not possible to feed a completely no-grain diet, then one with only organic, whole-grains would be the next best choice. Grain fractions (gluten, husks, hulls, etc.) can be more problematic than the whole grain. Another factor is that organic food, by definition, cannot be genetically modified. One school of thought is that genetically modified grains are more likely to cause an adverse reaction in a sensitive pet; studies show that when butterflies and other species come in contact with pollen from genetically modified crops, they suffer a number of health problems and genetic mutations eventually occur. It's possible that a similar thing happens when other species consume genetically modified grains—especially species whose systems aren't designed to cope with a grain overload in the first place.

Some pets are sensitive to ingredients other than grain, such as certain meats, vegetables or herbs. These sensitivities are generally less common, and in fact a pet

ON THE WHOLE

Foods, supplements and natural topical products all form part of an over-arching "holistic" plan to combat itchy skin and ear infections. Always consult a veterinarian to provide guidance on the plan that's right for your individual pup. To find a holistic vet who's open to the idea of using a natural diet and other more moderate approaches that reduce dependency on long-term steroids and other medications, visit the American Holistic Veterinary Medical Association at www.ahvma.org.

CALENDULA IS THE NATURAL HERB OF CHOICE THAT WORKS WONDERS.


that seems to be allergic to a certain meat, such as chicken, because she gets itchy every time she eats her chicken-flavored kibble, may actually be just fine when eating real, home-prepared raw or lightly cooked chicken. The problem is high-heat processing, which alters the amino acid structure, making the protein problematic in its processed form.

A natural, minimally processed diet that's also free of chemical preservatives and fillers can help to combat itchy skin from the inside out. Pet guardians are usually delighted with the results, and under veterinary supervision they may even be able to start reducing the long-term steroids and antibiotics they've had to administer to their pets. Many cats and dogs show a noticeable improvement in just a few days after starting a no-grain diet.

A natural diet can enhance and support a healthy immune system in its own right. Supplementation with antioxidants can also help a pup get out of her weakened, vulnerable state. Adding antioxidants to the diet a few weeks ahead of a planned trip may give the system the boost it needs to bolster its natural defenses against environmental pollutants, which can trigger an itch. Some antioxidants such as vitamin C have natural anti-inflammatory properties, too.

For a natural treatment that works wonders from the outside in, calendula is the herb of choice. A tea made by steeping calendula flowers in hot water and then applying to problem areas after it has cooled can soothe and promote healing at amazing speed. Many gels, sprays and lotions available at quality health stores are also excellent and do a great job.

Natural, chemical-free oatmeal shampoos are also super-soothing to the skin and help to reduce redness (be sure to rinse thoroughly). A natural oatmeal bath can also be very helpful. Simply add a few large handfuls of rolled oats to some hot water and pour over your pup once cooled, or place the oats in some muslin cloth and immerse in the bath water itself to create a milky soak for your pup.

The homeopathic remedy sulfur in the 30c potency is indicated for eczema-like rashes and other skin complaints. Or, for more complex problems, a consultation with a homeopathic vet can help pinpoint the constitutional remedy that's right for your individual pup. 

Lucy Postins is a companion animal nutritionist and founder of The Honest Kitchen in San Diego, CA. More nutritional resources are available at (866) 437-9729 or www.thehonestkitchen.com



A healthy diet, an oatmeal bath and other alternative remedies can help reduce itchiness.

TAKE NOTE

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