

Ask the Vet



Douglas R. Nabel, DVM

"A native of Connecticut, I've wanted to be a veterinarian since I was a child. I graduated from Ohio Wesleyan University with a BA and received my Doctor of Veterinary Medicine from The Ohio State University in 1991. Wanting to escape the snow and cold winters sparked the move to North Carolina 20 years ago. I started working at Thomasville Veterinary Hospital then became co-owner of James Landing Veterinary Hospital in 1998."

Itchy Pets - Diagnosing and Treating

Q *My mature dog bites and licks his side, even though he is on medication for fleas and ticks. What is going on?*

A Some animals lick and chew themselves, this can be a sign of compulsive behavior, but many times it is a sign of itching caused by allergies. If he/she is on medication for fleas, ticks and mites your dog could be suffering from allergies.

Q *What are the signs of itching and allergies of the skin?*

A The most common signs of itching in pets are: licking, biting, scratching, rubbing, twitching the skin and agitation. Some pets may seem agitated, stop suddenly while walking to turn around, scratch, or whine as they are scratching. Scratching can lead to skin damage, bleeding, hair loss, scabs, causing secondary skin infections with bacteria or fungal organisms.

Q *How is the cause of itching diagnosed?*

A Your veterinarian will probably do a complete check up, that may include: checking for parasites, culture testing to identify bacterial or fungal organisms, allergy testing and blood work to look for underlying medical issues that could affect the skin.

Q *What can I, or my veterinarian do as far as treatment?*

A Several approaches may be employed, because there may be multiple contributing factors. For example, if a pet has an underlying allergy that is complicated by a flea infestation in addition to a bacterial or fungal infection, all of these may need to be addressed. Treatment can require a long-term commitment. Pets respond differently to medications, your veterinarian may need to revise the treatment plan as therapy is progressing. Good communication with your veterinarian, especially if a treatment doesn't seem to be helping, or if your pet seems to be responding negatively to that treatment is essential.

Q *What types of products/treatments are available?*

A 1. **Topical products**- These may be recommended if your pet has mild or localized itching, or as supportive therapy for more generalized conditions. Moisturizers, ointments and lotions may need to be applied frequently (sometimes several times daily) to help ease itching.
2. **Shampoos** - Medicated shampoos can be very helpful and may last for a few days. Some shampoos can be used along with a leave-on conditioner to extend the effects.

3. **Medications** - For many pets, corticosteroids (steroids) provide the best relief from itching. These products come with several options, such as liquids, pills or injections. However, corticosteroids have some side effects and not every pet is a candidate for this treatment. Antihistamines are another possible treatment. As usual, please talk this over with your veterinarian when choosing a treatment would be best for your pet.

4. **Supplements** - Supplements such as fatty acids and other nutritional supplements can help some pets with skin itching. Fish oils, vegetable oils and other combinations may be recommended, and effectiveness can vary. Ask your veterinarian if a nutritional supplement can help your pet.

Sometimes a combination of several treatments work best. As always, confer with you veterinarian to come up with the best way to handle your pet's itching problems. For further information, go to www.healthypet.com.

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