

■ Vet's Corner

Dr. Brooke Clark received her B. S. in Biological Sciences at North Carolina State University and then graduated from North Carolina State University College of Veterinary Medicine in 2016. A native of the Thomasville/High Point area, Dr. Clark is excited to have started her veterinary career at Northwood Animal Hospital. She loves the daily challenges of veterinary medicine and enjoys providing exceptional care to her patients and their owners. Her veterinary interests include dermatology and dental care.



In her free time, Dr. Clark enjoys spending time with her family, traveling, and playing with her two year old Rough Collie, Harper.

What's the **ItCh?**

As the season begins to change in the coming months, many of our furry friends will present to their veterinary hospital with skin issues. Most common symptoms noted by owners may include itching, redness, swelling, and lesions noted on the skin. In addition, it is also important to note other abnormalities that may indicate your pet's discomfort. Commonly, animals can cause self-trauma in the form of scratches or wounds known as excoriations, due to persistent scratching and chewing at a specific location. Other findings may include the loss of hair, and thickening and discoloration of the skin from chronic inflammation. Let's briefly review the most common causes for itching, also known as pruritus, found with our pets

Parasitic Dermatitis

One of the most common causes of dermatitis in our cats and dogs can be due to parasites, such as mites. The scabies mite causes pruritus, inflammation, as well as hair loss. These symptoms can occur on the lower legs, on the lower chest, the belly, the ears, as well as the top of the head. Scabies is easily spread through direct contact with an infected animal. Even though the mite prefers to live on dogs, it is known to be contagious to humans as well. Diagnosis is based on symptoms as well as examining microscopic samples taken from the skin and hair follicles.

Another mite that can cause significant irritation of the ears, especially in cats, is the ear mite *Otodectes cynotis*. These mites cause severe head shaking and ear scratching. On examination, the ears are often noted to contain brown flaky debris, which is often used for microscopic examination to confirm the diagnosis. As with scabies, *Otodectes* is transmitted via direct contact with an infected animal.

Other additional parasites include *Demodex*, which can cause a mild pruritus, *Cheyletiella* known as "walking dandruff", and fleas, which are covered next in the atopic dermatitis section of this article.

Atopic Dermatitis

Atopic dermatitis is caused by hypersensitization to allergens that your pet is frequently exposed to. The top three sources for allergies in cats and dogs include flea allergies, environmental allergies, and food allergies. Symptoms associated with atopic dermatitis can include significant itching, redness, discoloration, and thickening of the skin. These symptoms are often localized at the ears, lower back, base of the tail, paws, and abdomen. Atopic dermatitis can occur seasonally or year-round. Determining the cause of the skin allergy can be challenging and often step-wise treatment is elected based on the response to therapy.

Flea allergies are frequently to blame for the noted symptoms. Even though fleas can be frustrating to eliminate, several efficient options are available to treat both your pet and his/her environment. Fortunately in most cases of straightforward flea allergy dermatitis, treatment and prevention for fleas can significantly improve your pet's skin without much complication.

A second allergen that causes atopic dermatitis is associated with exposure to certain dietary ingredients. Food allergies are generally related to the protein source in your pet's diet, such as the commonly used protein - chicken. If flea allergies have been eliminated as a cause for symptoms, a food trial may be offered to rule-out the chance that your dog has a food allergy. A food trial often involves a strict diet of only the new, or novel protein. Food trials can last for two-three months in length to monitor for improvements in your pet's itching and redness. If improvement is noted, then the same, or a very similar diet is normally recommended for long-term management.

Another significant cause for allergies is environmental allergens. Similar to humans, dogs and cats can become hypersensitive to pollens, grasses, and even house mites. Once a flea or food allergy has been eliminated as a possible cause for your pet's irritation, an environmental allergen is normally suspected. If the environmental allergy is seasonal, intermittent treatment with antihistamines, glucocorticosteroids, and medicated shampoos can be an effective treatment. However, if the allergen has a year round exposure, constant steroid treatment can have harmful side effects and as a result, long-term medications such as cyclosporine or oclacitinib may be warranted.

Infectious Dermatitis

Lastly, clinical symptoms of dermatitis can be commonly caused by infectious organisms such as bacteria or fungi. Often times these infections arise secondarily to a primary cause such as those listed earlier. If an infection is suspected, sampling the affected areas for testing may be indicated to prescribe the proper treatment.

In conclusion, several primary causes such as the ones reviewed can result with your pet demonstrating symptoms related to dermatitis. It is important to speak with your veterinarian about your pet's history and symptoms at his/her visit to help direct the correct diagnosis and treatment to ensure your pet's comfort and health.

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