



MY DOG IS ITCHY!

Dogs can itch for a number of reasons. Although it is reasonably easy in most cases to control the itch with cortisones, baths and antihistamines, it is vital the underlying cause is determined and addressed. This will make for an easier, cheaper, itch-free dog in the long term. Below are some of the main causes of itching in dogs.

Flea allergies

Some dogs can develop a hypersensitivity to fleas which means one flea bite will drive them crazy. Others may cope with large burdens of fleas. However large burdens can cause anaemia and eventually be life threatening, particularly in puppies and debilitated animals. It is also important to note fleas act as the intermediate host for tapeworm so any dog with fleas is likely to have tapeworms too.

Most flea infestations will be apparent around the tail base area although they can spread to the whole body or accumulate around their abdomen. Quite often you can see live fleas as well as their dirt (black flecks) and eggs (white flecks). Often secondary infections are present due to the self trauma caused by itching.

Prevention involves a monthly spot on product such as Advantage, Frontline or Revolution. Curing a flea infestation is a little more tricky and must be completed in a holistic fashion otherwise the fleas are likely to return. This involves the following steps:

- Treat the environment
 - Vacuum thoroughly including furniture and rugs that the animal might like to lie on.
 - Clean their bedding (and yours if they sleep on your bed) thoroughly with hot water and dry in the sun.
 - Flea bombs are available. This is to be done only when the animal is out of the house. More than one may be required for a large house.
- Kill and prevent the eggs and larvae
 - This is best done by applying a spot on product. We recommend this is done fortnightly for 6 weeks then monthly for long term prevention.
 - Products available include Frontline plus, Advantage, Revolution, Advocate or Advantix. Ask your vet for the product that is right for your animal.
- Kill the adult fleas
 - Capstar tablets are available which kill adult fleas on the animal. It can be given once a day for up to six days and will kill the fleas within the hour.
 - We also recommend the dog be bathed (any shampoo is fine) and then thoroughly dried and brushed to remove any dead fleas from their coat.
- Treat all animals in the household.

Food allergies

A food allergy is a condition in which the body's immune system reacts adversely to a food or an ingredient in a food. Any food or food ingredient can cause an allergy and typically allergies occur with the animal having been on the same diet for months to years NOT with a change of diet. Protein, usually from the meat source of the food is the most likely offender. Proteins commonly found in dog foods are derived from beef, chicken, lamb and horsemeat.

Dogs are not likely to be born with food allergies. More commonly, they develop allergies to food products they have eaten for a long time. Food allergies can cause extreme itching, ear infections, respiratory distress and digestive issues. To determine if the itching is caused by a food allergy, we must trial a hypoallergenic diet for 4-8 weeks. These days commercial hypoallergenic diets are available such as Eukanuba sensitive skin or Science Diet Z/d. However home cooked diets can be formulated also. It is extremely important the dog is fed NO other food sources including treats; table scraps or supplements as this defeats the purpose of the trial. If the trial is successful, we presume a food allergy is present and gradually start re-introducing protein sources to determine what the dog is allergic to.

Atopy

Atopy includes any airborne allergens such as dust mites or pollens and is quite often seasonal. Diagnosis is based on either a blood test (performed by your vet) or intradermal skin testing (performed by a veterinary dermatologist). Treatment involves stopping exposure to the allergen or a series of desensitisation injections (50-60% of dogs improve). There a new anti-itch drug called Apoquel that works well in atopic dogs. Please discuss this with your vet.

Contact allergy

Contact allergies involve anything that may brush up against the dog causing an allergic reaction. Most commonly this involves plants such as Wandering Jew or grasses. The distribution (or affected area) tends to be their belly and legs as these are the areas usually exposed. Usually avoidance of the cause solves the itching however sometimes the cause cannot be determined or avoided. In these cases cortisone (preferably topical) and antihistamines are used to control the itching.

Other ideas to ease the itch

Lice, mites, flies and other insects have also been known to cause extreme itching so these should all be ruled out as causes of itchiness. For all causes, an anti-pruritic shampoo such as Malaseb may help alleviate itchiness. Make sure it is applied liberally and left on for 10mins. This should be done maximum every 2 weeks.

Antihistamines can also be used and have very few side effects. Human brands can be used, be sure to check with your vet what the correct dose is. There may also be a secondary infection present which requires additional medication.

Omega fatty acids and other supplements (Evening Primrose Oil, borage oil, blackcurrant oil, flax seed oil, fish oil) can help to create a good coat and other oils such as sunflower oil can increase the barrier function of the skin.

Immunosuppressive drugs are also available for severe cases.

Written by P Honson 2017