

SKIN PROBLEMS IN DOGS: CAUSES AND TREATMENTS

It is very common, unfortunately, for dogs to have itchy skin. It is estimated that approximately 1 in 10 dogs suffers from skin problems. Scratching, rubbing, chewing, biting, and licking of the skin and fur will make your dog's life a misery. It can also cause serious health problems such as anaemia and infections.

There is no need to let your best friend suffer. Itching shouldn't be considered normal. It is a sign that there is an underlying problem that needs treatment. There are medications which your vet can prescribe which will suppress the itching but these have side effects and shouldn't be used long term. The best solution is to discover the cause of the problem and eliminate it.

If you cannot discover or eliminate the cause of the itching, talk to your vet about prescribing **Atopica** (cyclosporine) tablets. This is a new treatment which is highly effective and has fewer side effects than cortisone tablets.

With a little bit of detective work and help from your vet, itchiness can be successfully managed. You will then have a much healthier, happier, and relaxed companion.

Persistently itchy skin in dogs can be caused by one or more of a number of factors:

1. [Stress](#)
2. [Dirty or dry skin or matted fur](#)
3. [Contact with things in the environment](#)
4. [Airborne allergens](#)
5. [Fleas](#)
6. [Allergy to a particular food](#)
 - a. [Dog's Allergy Elimination Diet](#)

We will examine each of these possible causes and suggest treatments below.

Stress

Some dogs will scratch, lick or bite themselves when they are feeling frightened or anxious. Stress can be caused by many things such as inadequate exercise, being hungry, being bored, being left home alone a lot, being picked on by another dog, being harassed and teased by children, being hit or yelled at. It can also be a reaction to being in a new environment such as the pound, a kennel, a new foster home, or new forever home.

The treatment is to reduce the cause of the stress as much as possible.

Dirty or Dry Skin or Matted Fur

All dogs need regular baths, approximately once a month. If you let your dog swim in the ocean, pool, or creeks be sure to give him a bath, or at least rinse him off thoroughly, as soon as you get home.

Don't use people shampoo on dogs. Use only a good quality dog shampoo and conditioner. We recommend Aloveen oatmeal shampoo and conditioner for dogs. These can be purchased from your vet or good pet shops.

Don't let your dog's coat get matted as it will cause discomfort to the dog and encourage fleas. Non-shedding dogs, such as Maltese, poodles, Shih Tzus etc, need regular grooming (aka: clipping, haircuts), approximately once every two months. You can save money by learning how to do this yourself in a short, 2 day course at WEA. You may like to let your dogs coat grow a little bit longer during winter, but it will then need daily combing.

Dry skin can be improved by adding oily fish to your dog's diet. You can also add flaxseed oil from the supermarket, fish oil, or Dr Bruce's Omega Blend oil (from pet shops) to his food.

Skin damage such as red, raw skin caused by your dog's itching, rubbing or biting can be relieved with **Neocort cream** from your vet.

Contact with Things in the Environment

Dogs that are having a reaction to things in their environment may sometimes bite or lick their feet and legs in addition to general itchiness. They could be sensitive to plants such as grass, *wandering Jew* or other things outside. Look for *wandering Jew* in your garden and remove it. The problem could also be your garden fertilizers, insecticides or other chemicals.

Perhaps your floor cleaner, carpet cleaner, insect sprays or other household chemicals might be a problem. Switch to different products. Minimise the use of chemicals in your home and garden or keep your dogs away as much as possible when you are applying chemicals and then keep them away from areas where the chemicals have been used.

The flea treatment you've chosen might be the culprit. Try a different one. Comfortis monthly tablet is best.

Your dog might be reacting to wool or other fibres in his blankets or bedding. Try changing your dog's bedding to a different fibre.

The shampoo or conditioner you are using to wash your dog may be too strong for him, particularly if you are using flea shampoo, a shampoo for humans, or cheap dog shampoo. Switch to Aloveen oatmeal shampoo and conditioner for dogs.

Airborne Allergens

Small particles which your dog breathes such as pollens and dust could be causing an allergic reaction. Dogs that are allergic to these inhalants may rub their faces, muzzles and eyes, scratch their armpits and ears, bite their feet and legs, and may develop red and swollen patches on their skin. Talk to your vet about this since a prescription medication such as a cortisone or antihistamine may be the recommended treatment.

Fleas

Fleas and flea saliva allergy are the most common cause of dog's suffering from itching.

Flea allergic dogs will scratch and bite themselves, with most of the intense itching, rubbing and biting occurring near the base of the tail. If your dog is experiencing this kind of allergy, take him to the vet immediately for proper medication.

You need to use a **monthly flea treatment used year round**. The best, most effective treatment is **Comfortis tablets**. There are other products such as Advantix and Frontline Plus skin drops and Sentinel and Revolution tablets. They are all good but if you find they are not controlling the fleas on your pet then you should try Comfortis. Also, your dog may be allergic to the flea treatment you've been using. Try a different product. Comfortis monthly tablet is best. Always give Comfortis with a meal. The first time you give your dog Comfortis, break it in half and give half with breakfast and half with dinner.

The cheapest place to buy flea treatments is online at www.pricelesspets.com.au.

Regular grooming, brushing, and thoroughly bathing your dog are essential for the prevention of flea allergy. Fido Flea Shampoo is excellent but don't use it on dogs with sensitive skin, and remember it is no substitute for monthly flea treatment products. In between monthly treatments, if you still have a few fleas on the dog, spray the dog with Frontline Plus spray (if it is not too strong for him) or give a Capstar tablet.



You will also need to eliminate fleas from your home and garden. It is no use treating your dog if your carpet or lawn is full of fleas. Wash or replace all dog bedding. Spray all dog bedding, dog beds, kennels and environment with Frontline Plus spray or a similar product. Vacuum your carpets, rugs and furniture thoroughly every day for a week. Don't allow your dog under the house.

If problems persist you probably need to **get your home and garden treated by a professional pest controller**. If you do this once, and eliminate the fleas on your pet at the same time, you may not have to have this done again. It is well worth it.

Food

After you have controlled all the other likely causes of skin problems such as fleas, it is time to find out if food sensitivity is a factor. This requires a little bit of effort, but is well worth the trouble if it means your dog doesn't have to be on medication for the rest of his life.

If the diet below doesn't resolve the itching, ask your vet about the prescription medication **Atopica** (cyclosporine). It controls the itching without the serious long term side effects of the usual cortisone steroid treatments. We recommend you talk to your vet before starting this allergy elimination diet.

In order to find out which food is the problem you need to eliminate common problem foods your dog has been eating and replace them with an uncommon food for 3 weeks to see if the dog itches less. If the dog shows improvement after the 3 weeks, then you can start adding back other foods, one at a time. If any food you add back causes your dog to start itching again then you know this is the problem food which you need to eliminate permanently from your dog's diet.

If there is no improvement after 3 weeks, the allergen may be a grain such as rice or wheat. Continue with the Allergy Elimination Diet but eliminate grains for 3 weeks. If there is still no improvement, then food allergy may not be a major problem and you should visit your vet. (Note: the elimination diet is not for long term use).

The Allergy Elimination Diet is detailed on the following pages:

DOG'S ALLERGY ELIMINATION DIET

The basic facts are:

- The foods most likely to cause an allergic reaction are animal derived proteins (**meat**).
- The proteins most likely to cause an allergic reaction are beef, lamb, pork and chicken. Do not feed these during the 3 week elimination period.
- Feed only 1 animal protein source for 3 weeks.
- Choose something which your dog has very rarely or never eaten before, such as: fish, rabbit, kangaroo, or goat.
- Fish is easiest because you can vary the fish given (i.e.: tuna, salmon, roughie, etc) and you can use fresh, tinned or frozen.
- Other non animal protein sources such as beans are allowed.
- Fruits and vegetables are allowed.
- Starches are allowed but not too much as these are the second most likely allergen.

The First 3 weeks

✓ Allowed Foods

- Fish (This is the only animal derived protein allowed. Fresh, frozen or tinned) --or-- another meat such as kangaroo)
- Vegetables
- Fruit
- Starches: pasta, rice, potato, beans
- Small amounts of fish based dry dog food: Eukanuba Sensitive Skin or Eukanuba Wild Salmon

✗ Not Allowed Foods

- All protein from animal sources:
 - Meats (chicken, beef, lamb, pork)
 - Dairy products (cheese, milk, yoghurt)
 - Eggs
 - Meat based dog treats (i.e.: liver treats)
- Table scraps
- Tinned dog food and other commercially prepared dog food such as dog roll
- Dry dog food biscuits other than fish based (as above)
- Nuts

Hints

Go to the grocery store and stock up on the following:

- Tinned fish such as tuna, mackerel, salmon, and sardines. All in oil or water, not brine which is salt water. Buy the supermarket brands to save money.
- 6 fresh fish fillets such as orange roughie or hake. No shellfish or prawns.
- 3 potatoes
- Bread crumbs
- Bag of small pasta such as elbow macaroni or soup mix (little alphabet letters)
- Bag of frozen mixed vegetables (carrot, peas, etc but no onion) or fresh veg
- Apples, bananas or other fruit your dog likes (no grapes or stone fruit)

Make a batch of Homemade Fish Cakes and a batch of Homemade Pasta and Vegetables to store in your freezer and fridge for quick meals for your dog. **A typical meal** might consist of fish cakes or tinned fish, pasta or rice, vegetables, and maybe chopped fruit.

Recipe: Fish Cakes

Ingredients

6 fresh fish fillets such as orange roughie or hake
2 or 3 potatoes
Bread crumbs
Salt and pepper and herbs such as parsley

Method

Peel then cube the potatoes. Boil or microwave them until soft.
Put one fish fillet and a large scoop of cooked potato (approximately 2 parts fish to 1 part potato) in a food processor or blender and blend until smooth. Mash it all up by hand if you don't have a food processor or blender. Add a bit of salt and pepper and parsley. Form into patties with a light dusting of bread crumbs. Repeat with the remaining fish and potatoes. For large dogs, make larger quantities.
Place patties on a baking sheet. Bake on 180 degrees for about 15 minutes.
Remove from oven. Cool. Store in plastic containers in the fridge or freezer.
Serve with Homemade Pasta and Vegetables, below.

Recipe: Pasta and Vegetables

Ingredients

1 cup of small pasta such as elbow macaroni or soup mix. **Soyaroni** is ideal as it contains protein
1 cup of frozen or fresh mixed vegetables (carrot, peas, etc but no onion)

Method

Boil a large pot of water. Add an equal amount of pasta and vegetables. Return to boil and simmer until pasta and vegetables are soft. Drain. Store in plastic containers in the fridge or freezer. For large dogs, boil up larger quantities.