

THE ITCHY DOG

One of the most common yet frustrating conditions is the itchy dog.

Itchiness can be caused by a wide range of things, including parasites, bacteria, fungi, yeasts, allergy / hypersensitivity, dietary and neurological (nervous / habitual).

Itchiness from a combination of these things can be (and usually is) cumulative. This means that a mild grass allergy can be made intolerable by an odd flea bite, or any combination of the above.

Dogs will exhibit an itch to most allergens, no matter by what route they are exposed. Contact allergy and flea allergy are quite obvious, but dietary allergies and inhaled allergies (atopy) also show up mainly in the skin.

There is no wonder anti – itch medication. Cortisone will stop the itch but has profound side effects and actually makes infections worse. It should be used only when the itch has been proven to be of a non infectious cause and it is impractical or impossible to find and exclude the cause.

Treating the itchy dog

The single most important thing in treating any condition is in identifying the cause. This is the same for itchiness. As there are so many possible causes, we start this by excluding the most common (by a huge margin) cause – the common flea.

Fleas are often underrated as a cause or major contributor to an overall itch problem. A dog allergic to flea saliva may have a severe itch for over a week from a single bite. The owner will not notice that rate of flea burden. It is important therefore that a total flea protection be offered to the dog. There are only a few products that offer this degree of protection, and all of them are sold only through veterinarians. There is not one collar, wash, rinse, powder or shampoo that is effective for more than a day or two, and many don't work at all. Our product of choice is Frontline®. With severe burdens it will take any product used a few weeks to kill off the fleas that hatch out from eggs lying about in the environment.

A close examination of the skin should be made to ensure there are no signs of fungal, bacterial or yeast infection. These should be attacked using the appropriate medications.

Certain types of skin condition will respond to the addition of certain essential fatty acids and zinc to the diet.

Once a dog has shown it maintains its itch after infectious causes are cleared and in the face of potent flea control, we can start to look at allergies and hypersensitivities. There are three avenues here.

1. **Exclusion** – remove things from the diet, or environment and see if the itch subsides. This has the benefit of being cheap but is severely limited. Dietary allergies can take over a month to subside, and just one snack on a sausage for example can send you back to the start. It only works on things that you can exclude and doesn't work very well if there are multiple causes.
2. **Blood test** – Particular laboratories can test for up to about 100 allergies from a simple blood sample. This is an easy option to do, costs about \$250.00 but there is some debate about the relevance of blood reaction to skin itchiness. 100 allergens sounds like a lot but there are millions in the environment.
3. **Skin Scratch test** – done by a specialist referral clinic (Melbourne, monthly visits to Adelaide). Requires a visit to a specialist and will be expensive. The allergens tested will be quite appropriate to your situation and the reaction will likely be relevant to your dog's itch. Note that referral skin specialists will not accept a referral if “proper” flea control is not being practiced.

Once the allergens have been identified, there are once again three avenues to go down.

1. **Exclusion** – this means simply avoiding the cause – sounds simple, hard to do, especially if there are multiple causes. Inhaled plant pollens are almost impossible to avoid, but relocating the pet to family in the city may work as an example.

2. Hyposensitisation by vaccination can be performed once skin or blood testing has identified allergens. It is expensive and involves a course of needles. It can be very successful, but failures are not that uncommon. Even when successful, repeat courses may be needed in future years.
3. Live with it. This unfortunately ends up being the most common. Periodic courses of cortisone and strict flea control can often hold the itch to a tolerable level.

Breed Predilection.

All terriers, Heelers, German Shepherds and Labradors have a predilection for allergies. Note the emphasis on terriers. West Highland Whites are the worst of all, but the Australian, Cairn, Silky, Jack Russell and Miniature Fox terriers all rate highly on the allergy index.