

Why is My Dog So Itchy?



Pet Health Network®

Fleas and Flea Allergy Dermatitis

One common cause of itching in pets is a hypersensitivity to flea bites, also known as flea allergy dermatitis. It doesn't take many fleas to whip your dog into a scratching and grooming frenzy, but the condition isn't always easy to identify and is frequently mistaken for a rash. Often, you won't see any fleas because they spend most of their lives off of your pet.

Your veterinarian may want to use a flea comb to look for the little critters or their "dirt" (excrement). If there are any fleas, your veterinarian will put your dog on a flea preventative and perform further tests to rule out other causes of itch.

If your dog is diagnosed with flea allergy dermatitis, your veterinarian will dispense medication to control the itch and will recommend an aggressive flea control plan for your dog, his environment, and other pets in the house.

Prevention is simple: keep your dog from getting fleas! Talk to your veterinarian about the best flea prevention methods for your dog.

Signs and symptoms of flea allergy.

- Hair loss, especially along the back and hind end
- Chewing and biting at the tail, hind end, and hind legs
- Skin damage due to a lot of scratching and licking



What's eating your dog? It could be mites!

Fleas aren't the only critters that like to live on your dog. Mites can also be a pain, though they are a whole lot smaller. The two most common types of mites – sarcoptes and demodex – can cause secondary skin infections in addition to itching. And while sarcoptes mites tend to affect the ears, elbows, and chest of a dog, demodex mites are less particular and can appear anywhere on a dog's body.

Treatment for mites includes:

- Shampoos or special dips
- Topical preventives
- Sanitation, especially cleaning and vacuuming bedding
- Medications to control the itch and treat secondary skin infections



If your veterinarian suspects that your dog has mites, he or she will perform skin scrapings to look at under a microscope. However, sometimes this isn't enough – mites are so small, they can't always be detected, so your veterinarian may choose to treat your dog based on suspicion of mites. If the condition clears up after treatment, the diagnosis has been confirmed.

One thing to note: if your dog has highly-contagious sarcoptes mites, all dogs in the household need to be treated.

Bacterial and Fungal Infections

An itch has to be scratched, but all that increased scratching by your dog damages the skin, which can result in bacterial and fungal infections as secondary conditions to itching. Common signs of infection include inflamed, reddened skin, areas of hair loss, and ear infections. These infections also often cause your dog to have an unpleasant odor.

In order to diagnose a bacterial or fungal infection, your veterinarian will collect samples for culture or examination under a microscope.

Treatment for bacterial or fungal infections includes:

- Topical and/or oral medication to help heal your dog's skin barrier and reduce itchiness.



Food Allergies

Tiny organisms aren't the only thing that can give your dog allergies. Food can also cause problems, and food allergies often arise out of the blue. When a dog becomes sensitive to food – often a protein like chicken, beef, or lamb – that he used to easily tolerate, food allergies could be the culprit. This can happen at any time, even if a pet's diet remains unchanged.

It's not always easy to distinguish food allergies from a simple upset stomach or other allergic conditions, but if the symptoms persist, food allergies may be the cause.

Food allergies cause itching, stomach problems, and other symptoms including:

- Vomiting, diarrhea, and weight loss
- Skin and ear infections
- Lethargy or decreased activity

If food allergies are suspected, your veterinarian will perform a physical exam and ask for a detailed history of your dog's food intake. But the only way to diagnose a food allergy is through hypoallergenic diet trial to see if it alleviates your dog's symptoms. The diet shouldn't contain anything your dog has recently eaten and he won't be able to eat any treats or supplements unless approved by your veterinarian.

The only treatment for food allergy is avoidance. This may seem like common sense – don't feed your dog foods to which he is allergic. But it's not always easy to identify foods that are both nutritionally balanced and devoid of problem ingredients for your pet. Your veterinarian will help guide you and your dog for long-term diet management.

Atopic Dermatitis

Sometimes, the answer to your dog's itching problem is "none of the above." If your dog continues to itch for no apparent reason, there's a chance he has atopic dermatitis. Similar to "hay fever" in people, atopic dermatitis is caused by a reaction to environmental allergens such as pollen, mold spores, or plant fibers. If your pet is diagnosed with atopic dermatitis, allergy testing and allergen-specific immunotherapy may be the best option from your dog.

