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My Dog is Itchy and Miserable—What's wrong and what can I do?

There are hundreds of causes for itchiness in dogs. If your dog is scratching more often than they aren't, it is important to find out what is causing the problem. While there are many common causes of canine scratching, it can take quite a bit of detective work to figure out the particular problem(s) your dog is experiencing. While all itching looks similar, the different causes need different treatments to be effective.

The most important thing to remember about itchiness in pets is that there may be more than one cause present, and that treatment may need to be continued or modified to really identify and control the problem. Often there is an underlying disease that leads to a skin infection, which is also itchy. If only the infection is treated and the underlying disease is not diagnosed and treated, the problem will probably come back worse than before. So if your pet is mostly better, but not totally better, treatment is not done. Skin diseases in dogs rarely take just one visit.

If your pet is diagnosed with an infection, be sure to do the follow-ups your veterinarian recommends, to be sure the infection is completely gone and there is no evidence of any remaining skin disease. If your pet still has any itching after the infection is gone, or the skin hasn't looked totally normal, all over everywhere, for at least one week there is definitely something still wrong, and you need to continue working with a veterinarian to find out what it is and get it under control. Some skin diseases are so difficult to diagnose and/or manage that they require a veterinary dermatologist. Your veterinarian can refer your pet to a specialist if this is needed.

Here are several things you can do to help your dog while you try to figure out, with the help of your vet, what is causing the problem.

1. Regular, monthly, year-round flea control: Here in the southeastern United States, we have warm, humid weather, which means we have fleas. Year round. Even if you don't see them. Even on pets that "never go outside". Even on the cat that hides under the bed most of the time. Some pets are so allergic that one flea can make them miserable and lead to infections. So the very first thing is to make sure your itchy pet and ALL the other animals with fur that live in the same home or yard around the home as your itchy dog are all on regular, safe, veterinarian recommended flea preventative medication. If you have ferrets, rabbits, gerbils, guinea pigs or other exotic furred pets, check with their veterinarian for safe products. For dogs, Frontline Plus and Advantage are non-prescription preventions that when used regularly, every month year round will help prevent a flea infestation. Since it doesn't stay below freezing in the home for at least 8 days and nights in a row, the theory that pets don't need flea prevention during cold weather is wrong. The fleas are happy to live inside, where it's warm.

2. Bathe the dog once every 7 to 14 days in cool water: Warm or hot water will make the itch worse. Soak for 5 to 10 minutes. Colloidal oatmeal shampoos designed for dogs (not people!) will help soothe the skin a little bit. This will provide only a temporary relief lasting from a few hours to a few days. You can gently massage the lather into the skin to help moisturize the irritated areas. After the bath, *pat* the dog dry with a towel. *Do not rub* the skin, this will only increase the itching. Do not use a hair dryer on a heat setting. A cool (no heat) setting is fine, if your dog is used to it. Heat and rubbing the dog's skin will increase your dogs itch, making the bath ineffective.

3. Fatty Acid supplements: Supplements high in omega three fatty acids can be very effective in decreasing inflammation in your dog's skin. Your veterinarian has supplements designed especially for dogs and cats that can be given as pills or liquid added to the pet's food. If that is not possible, at least try Fish Oil capsules, 1000mg per 20-30 pounds of dog once a day. It usually takes about 6 to 8 weeks for the fatty acids to really take effect, and they work best if given continuously as a maintenance treatment. Of course, if your dog is allergic to fish, this is a problem, so check with your veterinarian before starting your pet on this type supplement.

4. Antihistamines: These can sometimes be effective with short term itches, like insect bites. You can use an over the counter antihistamine such as clemastine (Tavist), Chlorpheniramine (Chlor-Trimeton) or diphenhydramine (Benadryl). There is no "best" antihistamine, other than determining if one helps your particular dog. Be sure to consult your veterinarian first, as there are health conditions that can be worsened by some antihistamines. Your vet can provide you with a dose that is right for your dog, and whether or not antihistamines are a good thing to try for your dogs problem.