

# Itchiness

## (Pruritus)

### Basics

#### OVERVIEW

- “Pruritus” is the medical term for itching or itchiness; it is the itching sensation that provokes the desire to scratch, rub, chew or lick
- Pruritus is an indicator of inflamed skin
- The term is not a diagnosis but rather is a description of a clinical sign

#### SIGNALMENT/DESCRIPTION OF PET

##### Species

- Dogs
- Cats

#### SIGNS/OBSERVED CHANGES IN THE PET

- Scratching
- Licking
- Biting
- Rubbing
- Chewing
- Self-trauma
- Inflammation of the skin (known as “dermatitis”)
- Hair loss (known as “alopecia”); hair loss without inflammation may be the only sign in some cats
- Other signs determined by underlying cause

#### CAUSES

- Parasites—fleas; mites (canine scabies, *Demodex*, ear mites, feline scabies); lice; or migration of internal parasites
- Allergies—parasite allergy; atopy (disease in which the pet is sensitized [or “allergic”] to substances found in the environment that normally would not cause any health problems); food allergy; contact allergy; drug allergy; allergy to skin bacteria (known as “bacterial hypersensitivity”); allergy to *Malassezia* (a yeast found on the skin)
- Bacterial or fungal infections—*Staphylococcus* (a bacteria) and *Malassezia pachydermatis* (a yeast or fungus); dermatophyte (fungus living on the skin, hair, or nails)
- Miscellaneous—excessive scaling of the skin (known as “seborrhea”); calcium deposits in the skin (known as “calcinosis cutis”); skin tumors or cancer
- Immune-mediated skin diseases and hormonal skin diseases can be variably itchy
- Psychological skin diseases may be associated with itchiness



## RISK FACTORS

- Exposure to other animals with parasites

## Treatment

### HEALTH CARE

- More than one disease can contribute to itching
- The use of mechanical restraint (such as an Elizabethan collar) can be a helpful option, but is seldom feasible in long-term treatment
- Potential use of medications to treat secondary skin infections and to control inflammation and pruritis

### DIET

- Depends on underlying cause
- Usually no change in diet needed, unless suspect food allergy in which diet trials will be discussed

### SURGERY

- Skin biopsy may be necessary for diagnosis or to determine underlying cause

## Medications

- Medications presented in this section are intended to provide general information about possible treatment. The treatment for a particular condition may evolve as medical advances are made; therefore, the medications should not be considered as all inclusive

### MEDICATIONS APPLIED TO THE SKIN DIRECTLY (KNOWN AS “TOPICAL THERAPY”)

- Topical therapy can be helpful in mildly itchy pets, make sure to speak with your veterinarian prior to any use of topical therapy
- For localized areas of itchiness or skin inflammation, sprays, lotions and creams can be used
- If the itching involves many areas or widespread areas, shampoos are the preferred means of application
- Antibacterial shampoos help control bacterial infections that cause itching
- Antimicrobial shampoos help control bacterial infections that cause itching; however, some contain ingredients (such as benzoyl peroxide or iodine) that can increase itchiness through excessive drying
- Lime sulfur (which has a bad odor and can stain) can decrease itching, while also having anti-parasitic, antibacterial, and antifungal properties
- Topical steroid medications; Some topical steroid medications also contain ingredients (such as alcohol), which can aggravate already irritated skin

### MEDICATIONS ADMINISTERED BY MOUTH OR BY INJECTION (SYSTEMIC THERAPY)

- Steroids- oral medication to decrease inflammation and pruritis
- Cyclosporine – oral medication to decrease the immune response, inflammation and pruritis
- Apoquel – an oral medication that breaks the cycle of itch and inflammation (dogs only)
- Cytopoint- injectable therapy that decreases the transmission of the itch signal in the pet, leading to a decreased sensation of itch (dogs only)
- For pets affected with airborne allergies for more than a few months out of the year, “allergy shots” (known as “allergen specific immunotherapy”) are appropriate, frequently beneficial, and may lead to a cure (in some cases). Allergen specific immunotherapy is started only after appropriate allergy testing has been performed.
- Antihistamines (such as hydroxyzine, diphenhydramine, and chlorpheniramine) to prevent inflammation and itching. Antihistamines rarely provide 100% relief for pet but can be combined with other modes of therapy.
- Fatty acids are available in powders, liquids, and capsules; they help block pathways that lead to inflammation, but may require 6–8 weeks of use until maximum effect is observed; fatty acids work better as preventive medications, rather than stopping the inflammation once it has become a problem; they also help reduce dry or flaky skin, which can cause itching

## Follow-Up Care

## **PATIENT MONITORING**

- Patient monitoring is imperative; pets should be examined periodically to evaluate response to treatment
- Pets receiving long-term (chronic) medications should be evaluated every 3–12 months for potential side effects as well as occurrence of new contributing factors- this may include the need for periodic bloodwork or additional diagnostics

## **PREVENTIONS AND AVOIDANCE**

- Prevent infestation with parasites (such as fleas and mites)
- Avoid foods identified as causing food allergy for your pet

## **POSSIBLE COMPLICATIONS**

- Complications (such as increased thirst and increased urination) are common with steroid use
- Multiple tests (diagnostics) may be needed in order to determine specific cause of pruritis. This may lead to frustration for the owner

## **EXPECTED COURSE AND PROGNOSIS**

- Depend on underlying cause
- Many causes of itchiness in pets can be difficult to diagnose

## **Key Points**

- Many different unrelated/related diseases may contribute to itchiness (pruritus), and control of one disease does not mean that other causes cannot be contributing to itchiness or cannot occur later
- Multiple causes (such as flea allergy, inhalant allergy, and bacterial skin infection) commonly are present in a single patient
- Elimination of bacterial skin infection (pyoderma) and flea-associated disease may not be enough to significantly reduce itchiness
- Food-allergy and inhalant-allergic pets may do well during the winter season with a hypoallergenic diet, only to become itchy during the warmer months in association with inhalant allergies

# Notes

---

Enter notes here



*Blackwell's Five-Minute Veterinary Consult: Canine and Feline, Fifth Edition*, Larry P. Tilley and Francis W.K. Smith, Jr. © 2011 John Wiley & Sons, Inc.