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THE ITCHY DOG STORY

Is your dog itchy? If so, he or she is not alone. Itchy skin is a common problem in dogs. Itchiness can be manifest as scratching using the nails, licking various areas of the body, rubbing the face on the ground, or many other behaviors that show us our pets are uncomfortable. Some itchy dogs have sores, scabs, rashes, or hair loss in areas they are scratching. Others have normal appearing skin though it feels itchy to the dog.

What causes the itch?

Unfortunately, this is not an easy question. Many varying conditions lead to itchy skin. Everything from excessively dry skin, bacterial infections, parasites, nutritional disorders, allergies, and many other conditions cause the end result of itching.

How can we diagnose the problem?

There is no easy answer to this question, but luckily using a logical step by step work up we can actually achieve a diagnosis.

What do we do first?

The first step will be to have your veterinarian get a good history of the problem from you. This will involve answering many questions which help guide us in the right direction. Then a complete physical examination will be done. From these first two steps a logical approach to the problem will be formulated. This approach will be different for each case, but may involve tests such as skin scrapings, fungal cultures, trial therapies with supplements, various drugs or foods, or even skin biopsies. These tests will be done in a step by step fashion as directed by the findings from the history and physical exam. It is very important that you follow the directions and plans set out by your vet since the response to various tests and trials is often what helps us achieve a diagnosis.

What about allergies?

Allergies are one of the most common causes of itchiness in dogs. Classically, an allergic dog will lick his/her paws or rub its face, and often may get secondary bacterial infections in its skin. Some allergic dogs though have recurrent ear infections, or persistent rashes on various parts of their bodies. The most common allergies in our region are food allergies (dogs can suddenly become allergic to a food they have been eating for years) and inhaled allergies (the type of allergies that cause hay fever in people).

What can be done for allergies?

If our step by step diagnostic routine leads to a diagnosis of allergies then we have several things available to help your pet. Food allergies can be controlled by not allowing your dog to eat the food it is allergic to; which usually involves feeding a home made diet, or some special hypoallergenic commercial food as directed by your veterinarian. Inhaled allergies can be lessened by various medications, or they can often be eliminated by doing skin tests to determine what the pet is allergic to, and then giving “allergy shots” to subdue the allergy.

What is the prognosis for an itchy dog?

Itchy skin can be a very frustrating problem for the owner, the pet, and the veterinarian; but in most cases with patience and a logical step by step approach we will achieve a diagnosis. Once we have a diagnosis we are actually quite successful at stopping your pet from itching.