

ALLERGIC SKIN DISEASES

Allergies in dogs are common. Signs such as itchy skin, nasal and eye discharges and sneezing, and/or digestive upsets and/or skin lesions may indicate an allergy is present. Many skin diseases seen in dogs are caused by an allergy.

CAUSES

An allergy is a hypersensitivity reaction to allergy-causing substances known as 'allergens' or 'antigens.' Dogs (like people) can develop allergies at any age, and the signs can appear quite suddenly. The most common allergy dogs develop is the flea saliva. The presence of a single flea on these allergic dogs causes intense itching. These allergies are seasonal in climate zones where fleas are eliminated by the cold in winter months -- and a year-round problem in warmer climates. Atopy (atopic dermatitis, allergic inhalant dermatitis) is a pruritic (itchy) skin disease dogs develop in response to inhaled particles such as house dust, moulds and pollens. This common form of allergy usually starts at a relatively young age. Rarely, dogs can be allergic to chemicals contained in soaps, waxes, carpets and flea collars. This type of hypersensitivity is known as a 'contact allergy.' Also, some dogs are allergic to insect bites and stings. Food allergies usually cause diarrhoea and/or skin lesions.

SIGNS

Itching is the primary sign of allergic skin diseases in dogs. The affected skin may appear normal, or red and moist in patches called 'hot spots.' Pus and dried crusts are apparent if a bacterial infection is also present. The dog tends to constantly scratch and lick affected areas. Initially, flea allergies are most evident over the dogs back and near the tail. A dog's face, feet, chest, and abdomen are more often affected by pollen and dust-type allergies. Contact allergies are seen mostly on the hairless areas of the abdomen and on the bottoms of the feet.

DIAGNOSIS

The dog's case history helps with the diagnosis. The intense itching and location of the lesions are also helpful in diagnosing the type of allergy present. Response to treatment (flea control) is often used as a method of diagnosis of flea allergy. Trials of special hypoallergenic diets are used to diagnose food allergy. Allergy testing is used to help choose immunotherapy. Blood tests are also available to diagnose allergies, but their use is more controversial..

TREATMENT

Allergies can be controlled in most cases, with few 'cured.' Antihistamines and corticosteroids may be used by your veterinarian to give your dog relief from the intense itching. In most cases this will stop the self-mutilation. The owner will be instructed to give corticosteroid tablets in decreasing dosages for a few months. Corticosteroids are potent drugs and should not be used carelessly or for long periods of time. The main objective in controlling flea allergies in dogs is to kill the fleas on the dog and in the dog's environment. Another approach to allergy control is hypo sensitization (immunotherapy). In this procedure, a correct diagnosis by intradermal or blood testing is necessary. The dog is

then given injections of small but increasing doses of the allergy-causing substance at varying intervals for up to 12 months. Lifelong response may take up to 12 months.

PARASITIC SKIN DISEASES

CAUSE

Fleas are the most common parasitic skin disease found in dogs. Mange is another type of skin disease which is caused by mites. There are two severe types of mange: **sarcoptic mange** and **demodectic mange**. Ear mites, lice, and ticks are other parasites that affect dogs. Their presence irritates the dog, leading to self-mutilation.

SIGNS

Sarcoptic mange causes intense itching, loss of hair and crusting of the skin. A dog's ears, front legs, chest and abdomen are most often affected by sarcoptic mange.

Demodectic mange can cause itching. The skin is reddened and scaly, and hair loss occurs in round patches resembling 'ringworm.' The face and front legs are most commonly affected, although some cases may be generalized. Generalized demodectic mange is often a sign of underlying internal disease or a hereditary problem.

Ear mites cause severe irritation in the ears. Often, an affected dog will scratch the hair off the back of its ears. Ticks, lice and fleas may transmit other diseases, in addition to causing irritation.

DIAGNOSIS

Mange is often suspected on the basis of the case history and the appearance and location of the lesions. A skin scraping test is always performed to aid in identifying parasites. Ear mites, which are barely visible to the naked eye, appear as small white objects. The black debris commonly seen in the ears of dogs with ear mites is a combination of dried blood, normal ear wax and discharges from inflammation. Lice, fleas and ticks can also be seen by close examination of the dog's skin.

TREATMENT

Mange is treated by clipping the affected areas and washing them with an antiseptic. Antimite dips are often necessary and may be used weekly or biweekly for several months. Shampoos can be used before each dip. The dog's eyes should be protected with mineral oil or eye ointment and the ears plugged with cotton before dipping. Most cases of mange respond well to this treatment. Antibiotics can be administered in cases of mange where infection may be present.

Ear mites can be readily treated Initially; your veterinarian may recommend a thorough cleaning of the dog's ears while the animal is sedated. This treatment can be followed up with home treatments using special solutions or ointments to kill the mites and prevent infections in addition, insecticidal dips, sprays, powders or shampoos are often used.

Lice, ticks and fleas must be killed on the dog and in the dog's environment with insecticides. Dips, shampoos, flea collars, sprays, powders, foams and foggers containing insecticides are available from your veterinarian to help control these parasites.

HORMONAL SKIN DISEASES

Skin diseases caused by hormonal abnormalities in dogs are difficult to diagnose. The thyroid gland, adrenal glands, pituitary gland, testicles and ovaries all produce hormones. If excessive ('hyper') or deficient ('hypo'), these hormones produce changes in the skin and hair coat. Most hormonal problems that affect the skin produce hair loss that is evenly distributed on each side of the dog's body. The skin may be thicker or thinner than normal, and there may be changes in the colour of the skin or hair coat. These diseases usually are not itchy.

When any of the hormone-producing glands malfunction, they affect other body functions besides the skin. Hormonal skin diseases in dogs can be much more serious than a 'skin problem.'

Some causes of hormonal skin disease, such as hypothyroidism and adrenal gland problems, can be diagnosed by special blood tests and effectively treated. Others may be more difficult to diagnose and treat. Skin changes related to the sex hormones can be successfully treated with surgical neutering, if this has not been performed previously. Skin medications for dogs include cephalixin, clindamycin, clotrimazole, enrofloxacin otic, gentamicin sulfate, nystatin neomycin sulfate, and thiabendazole