

Dear Dr. Wise: Every summer Grendl, our German shepherd, goes crazy scratching. She has been at it again until her back legs and stomach are red, raw and infected. We checked her for fleas and found none. Is there anything we can do to give her some relief?

Answer: Grendl has a lot of company in her misery, judging from the number of itching dogs I see in my office this time of year. Like most of them, she probably is suffering from seasonal allergies.

Pollen and other allergens attack the skin cells of dogs causing a pain stimulus which the dog interprets as an itch. The same culprits can affect people's upper respiratory system producing sniffles and sneezes.

The key to relief is finding which allergens are causing Grendl's problem. The diagnosis can be complicated because different allergies can have similar symptoms and because more than one allergy may be involved.

Your veterinarian can pinpoint the source of Grendl's problem. I also will give you some general guidelines about a few common types of allergies.

A contact allergy causes the skin to become irritated whenever it touches an allergen. Grass, for example, would produce red, irritated paws, abdomen and chest.

An inhalant allergy can cause redness in several different areas but often on the abdomen and the inside of the back legs. The location of Grendl's irritation indicates that this could be the cause of her problem.

Many dogs show an allergies reaction to fleas – actually to the saliva which the flea injects under the skin. In these cases, the skin becomes red and itchy over most of the body, particularly on the top of the back and near the base of the tail.

The most effective treatment is removing the source of the allergy. This is the easiest when fleas are involved, but tough with airborne allergens.

Your veterinarian will be the best guide to treatment of Grendl. These treatment options include immediate relief by pharmaceutical medications. In addition, for long term treatment, there are options available for diagnosing the specific allergen at fault and the treatment to desensitize Grendl to these. Any and all of these treatments require long term management and therapy for Grendl to have the best outcome possible.

If you have any question about your pet, write to Dr. Wise, Indiana Veterinary Medical Association, 201 S. Capitol Ave. Ste. 405, Indianapolis, IN 46225, or www.invma.org.