

Dear Dr. Wise,

Question: My pet scratches and itches all the time. Help! Should I be concerned?

Answer: It's a very frustrating and somewhat common situation. Pet owners by the millions flock to their veterinarians in the hope of relieving their pet's itchiness. For many people, the constant chewing, licking, and scratching can test their love for their pets.

Current estimates show that about 20 million pets suffer from some sort of skin condition and many of these are allergies. Allergies are an over-reaction of the body's immune system to a foreign substance, such as pollen or flea saliva. For people with allergies, we sneeze and sniffle as our bodies respond to histamine released by immune cells. These symptoms are due to the reaction of histamine with receptors in our nose and upper airways.

Our pets, however, react somewhat differently. Dogs and cats have many more histamine receptors in the skin and fewer in the nose. As histamine is released, the receptors cause an itchy feeling and the pet reacts by scratching at that site. Scratching can generate more histamine release, thereby causing more scratching. The constant assault on the skin by the pet's claws can actually damage the skin, leading to bacterial infections. Areas of hair loss and oozing sores known as "hot spots" are very common with allergies.

Fleas are often found to be the reason for a pet's itchiness. However, the pet who is truly allergic to fleas will often appear to have no fleas at all! Why? Because these pets are the ultimate flea catchers, doing everything in their power to bite or scratch the discomfort of the flea away. The flea's saliva sets off an allergic reaction leading to a flurry of chewing and digging at the skin.

Allergies to airborne substances, such as pollen and mold spores, are another reason for itchiness in pets. This is known as atopy and affects many pets from springtime straight through until fall. This condition can be inherited in certain breeds.

If your pet has signs of allergies year round and you see little or no improvement with certain medications, you may have a pet that has food allergies. Contrary to popular belief, food allergies take time to develop and are not due to recent diet changes. Most pets who develop food allergies have been eating the offending food with little problem for years. Common food allergens can include any major protein or carbohydrate source in the pet's food.

In some mild cases, the itchiness can be treated with anti-histamines or even steroids for a short period of time. However, pet owners need to be aware that allergies are not a condition that can be cured. The good news though, is that they can be well-managed with a team effort from the pet owner and the veterinary team.

Utilizing diagnostic tests such as blood testing and even skin allergy tests, veterinarians can often find ways to reduce the pet's discomfort level. In some cases, your family veterinarian may refer you and your pet to a veterinary dermatologist. This specialist has many more diagnostic and treatment resources available to bring relief to your pet. In all cases, you, the pet owner, are a vital part of the team. It will be up to you to make sure that all pets in the household are treated for fleas or that your pet stays on the recommended hypo-allergenic diet and doesn't sneak other treats!

Allergies are not only one of the most frequent reasons for a trip to the veterinarian, but are also a big reason for pet owners becoming frustrated with their pet. Working with your veterinary team to identify what is causing your pet's symptoms will help keep your four-legged family member right where he needs to be...with you!

If you have a question, write Dr. Wise, Indiana Veterinary Medical Association, 201 S. Capitol Avenue, Suite 405, Indianapolis, IN, 46225 or www.invma.org