

# 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 [*Sarcoptes*], *Demodex*, ear mites [*Otodectes*], feline scabies [*Notoedres*], “walking dandruff” [*Cheyletiella*], harvest mite or red bud [*Trombicula*]); lice; rhabditic dermatitis (*Pelodera strongyloides*); or migration of internal parasites
- Allergies—parasite allergy; atopy (disease in which the pet is sensitized [or “allergic”] to substances found in the environment [such as pollen] 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); rarely a dermatophyte (fungus living on the skin, hair, or nails); however, *Trichophyton* is a dermatophyte that tends to cause more itchy skin disease than the other dermatophytes
- 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
- Treat for secondary infections, which are common

### **DIET**

- Depends on underlying cause
- Usually no change in diet needed, unless suspect food allergy

### **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 is helpful in mildly itchy pets
- For localized areas of itchiness or skin inflammation, sprays, lotions and creams are most appropriate
- 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; however, some antibacterial shampoos (such as those containing benzoyl peroxide or iodine) can cause increased itching
- Colloidal oatmeal is common in all forms of topical therapy; its duration of effect usually is less than two days
- Topical antihistamines may be found alone or in combination with other ingredients; they may not have a beneficial effect
- Topical anesthetics may offer only a very short duration of effect
- 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 steroids probably are the most useful topical medications; hydrocortisone is the mildest and most common topical steroid; stronger steroids (such as betamethasone) may be more effective and are more expensive; a triamcinolone-containing prescription spray (Genesis® Topical Spray, Virbac) is effective in decreasing itchiness (pruritus)
- Some topical steroid medications also contain ingredients (such as alcohol), which can aggravate already irritated skin
- In some pets, the application of any substance, including water (especially warm water), can result in an increased level of itchiness; however, cool water often is soothing

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

- Steroids to decrease inflammation and itchiness of the skin
- Cyclosporine to decrease the immune response (atopica)
- Apoquel can effectively reduce itch with fewer side effects than steroids
- 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)

- Antihistamines (such as hydroxyzine, diphenhydramine, and chlorpheniramine) to prevent inflammation and itching
- 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
- Medications to relieve anxiety or depression (known as “psychogenic drugs”) can be helpful in controlling itchiness; include such drugs as amitriptyline, fluoxetine, and diazepam
- In rare cases, alternative medications to decrease the immune response (known as “immunosuppressive drugs,” such as azathioprine) may be utilized; however, they should be reserved for instances when all other treatments have failed

## 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

### PREVENTIONS AND AVOIDANCE

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

### POSSIBLE COMPLICATIONS

- Owner frustration is common
- Complications (such as increased thirst [known as “polydipsia”] and increased urination [known as “polyuria”]) are common with long-term (chronic) steroid use

### EXPECTED COURSE AND PROGNOSIS

- Depend on underlying cause
- Many causes of itchiness in pets are extremely frustrating to control

## Key Points

- **Many different unrelated 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 [known as “pyoderma”]) 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