

***Ask the Vet:* Strategies for Seasonal Pet Itchiness**

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Last weekend offered our family a chance to pull a million weeds. Our focus went to those areas that are more difficult to reach and those particular weeds were tall and full of flowers or seeds. As I crawled along, yanking, it seemed like my nose was wrestling with the devil. With sneezes and stuffiness and itchy eyes, I was pretty miserable in celebration of all the work accomplished.

Many of our patients have presented recently with similar seasonal misery, but much of their misery is associated with skin itchiness instead of sneezing and itchy eyes. From now until the consistent freezing temperatures come, signs of seasonal pollen sensitivity and allergy tend to progressively worsen. Weeds are growing larger and maturing with the weather being generally dryer. It is just that time of year.

This August-through-November season overlaps perfectly with the rise in the flea population. Flea bite allergy is doubtless the most common and most aggravating cause of skin itchiness for our pets.

Caring for a pet with skin itchiness begins with a detailed physical examination and a discussion about observations of the pet's activities at home. Flea bite allergy and pollen sensitivity are not the only causes of skin itchiness.

Some pets, unfortunately, are affected by several different causes of itchiness at the same time. When the patterns and signs are complicated by multiple causes in action at the same time, a strategy to stop the itchiness and to treat the clearly diagnosed causes first works best.

As each revealed cause is eliminated or controlled, underlying contributing causes can be diagnosed and treated during follow-up examinations. Generally, dogs and cats with skin disease undergoing treatment are examined at two-week intervals to evaluate the effectiveness of treatments and to make adjustments to treatments as needed.

Without thoughtful follow up, the progress made initially soon may be lost to the return of itchiness and scratch-induced trauma to the skin. Pets who do not respond as well as expected may not be taking effective medication for their particular situation. There are two common examples of this situation.

First, a well-recognized fact is that the common use of antihistamine medicines may appear to fail if the antihistamine chosen is not effective for that specific pet. Individuals respond better to different antihistamines. We must be open-minded to try a different antihistamine if the strategic need for allergy control is sound.

Secondly, if a pet has exposure to flea bites but this is not recognized at the time that a different cause (pollen sensitivity or fungal skin infection) is diagnosed, then the likelihood of any success at helping the pet is slim. Lack of safe and effective flea control for a flea-sensitive pet is simply a cardinal sin and a guarantee of failure.

In my practice, if a pet fails to respond to a prescribed therapy, I find that to be very useful diagnostic information for my job as a sleuth. This information helps us to zero in on the cause or the causes more accurately. Sometimes, failure to respond is the best help we can ask for, yet it is never our objective in the beginning.

An important message that may be very helpful for pollen-sensitive pets is understanding that pollen affects the skin by coming in contact with it. Paws, legs, necks and underbellies are most severely affected as these areas contact most of the pollen load. Frequent bathing using a moisturizing technique and wiping paws and the underside with a damp cloth when a pet returns to the house helps to reduce the pollen load in contact with the skin.

In addition, keeping the skin healthy to help maintain its normal barrier against pollen irritation also makes a huge difference. My "all season" and "long season" allergy patients generally require less intervention over time as the longer their skin is healthy, the healthier their skin remains. This is because normal skin has a better barrier to irritants compared to red or inflamed skin.

Three cheers to those pet owners who remember their pet's timing of seasonal itchiness and take action to prevent the skin irritation before it appears.

When you have observed the pattern repeatedly, the best course of action is to work closely with your veterinarian on a strategy to prevent the itchiness or catch it very quickly to minimize the skin trauma and risk of infection. Usually tackling the problem early and strategically results in the use of fewer medicines and medicines with less potential side effects.

Overall health and happiness are improved, and that is our goal. Hopefully next year, my own memory of my sneezing misery will help me keep my vow to mow and weed early and more frequently -- even in the areas that are hardest to reach.