

## ***Ask the Vet: Seasonal Itchiness May Have Multiple Causes***

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Some individuals simply outperform the rest. My client told me, "When my dog is itchy, she does not just scratch a little and go on with life. She puts her heart, soul and best effort into scratching, biting and chewing off all of her hair in the itchy area. Of course, this started Saturday evening, so she had all night and all Sunday to do her best work at removing her skin since we had to wait until Monday morning to see you."

My patient did look generally disheveled with some moist self-traumatized skin lesions and bare red skin areas surrounded by saliva wetted hair. This was quite a transformation from the glossy coated, healthy dog I had examined earlier in the year. No doubt, my client was correct in her assessment that some dogs simply are overachievers or, perhaps, more reactive than others. In less than 48 hours, her dog had created lesions that would take weeks to fully heal.

Late summer and early autumn serves as the most challenging season for very allergen sensitive dogs and cats. It is exactly the time when many people experience the most difficulty controlling their own pollen sensitivities.

Most of us can sympathize with one another across species. Not only are pollens circulating in our environment in large quantity, but we have a greater risk of encountering fleas and mites and fungi.

For people, this season's most common signs of allergen sensitivity include stuffy nose, sneezing and itchy eyes. Those symptoms occur occasionally among dogs and cats who much more commonly exhibit symptoms of itchy red paws, face, ears and belly.

The warm and humid air coupled with increased skin oil secretion from inflamed or traumatized skin predisposes normal bacterial and fungal inhabitants of skin surfaces to overpopulate and cause infection. These secondary infections are quite itchy and must be fully controlled. If left untreated, such infections can cause structural changes in the dermis that slow healing and make the skin more susceptible to allergen penetration and infections.

Skin parasites such as the infamous flea and, also, the demodex, cheyletiella, otodectes and scabies mites must be treated and prevented if present for any successful outcome of therapy. Some of the most fastidious and sensitive dogs and cats are masters at catching and removing fleas, leaving little evidence of their presence. Often a non-allergic housemate will harbor fleas while the sensitive, itchy pet suffers despite expertly catching any flea that it encounters. The bite of a flea can cause itchiness that lasts for weeks in an allergic pet.

Many pets with pollen allergies also have sensitivities to food ingredients. Unfortunately, many pet food manufacturers have used this information to fuel their marketing efforts. A recent study revealed that three out of four over-the-counter pet foods advertised as limited ingredient foods contained soy, poultry, and/or beef despite label claims to the contrary. Only diets recommended by your veterinarian and manufactured very specifically should be used for food sensitivity testing and therapy.

The onset of symptoms seen in dogs to environmental allergens like pollens, molds and dust mites often occurs between the ages of 1 to 3 years. Oral, injectable and topical medications are selected for use individually and in concert depending on the needs and severity of the patient. Proper bathing, along with sufficient lather contact time to keep the skin hydrated is most helpful for removing allergens from direct contact with the skin.

Some medicines are used to enhance the skin's barrier to allergens. Other medicines are used specifically for immediate effect or for long-term effect. A long-term use medication is not appropriate for a dog that is itchy for only several weeks each year.

Each medication used is part of an individual strategy and plays a specific role. You should understand the purpose of each medicine that your veterinarian prescribes for your pet. By understanding the strategy, you will have a better understanding of the expectations of therapy and what can be done when adjustments are needed to improve success.

The goal of achieving comfort and preventing infection for an allergic pet is highly dependent on excellent communication with your veterinarian.