

Oh, the miserable *itch*

You should know that itching and scratching is more than just an annoyance—it's a sign that something's wrong.

Itchy skin makes your pet miserable—and your pet's relentless scratching, licking and chewing can drive you crazy, too. Your pet may have one itchy spot, or he may tickle all over.

Causes

When you see your pet buried nose-deep in fur, frantically nibbling his skin, what's the first thing you think of? Fleas, of course—and for a good reason. Many pets are allergic to flea saliva and develop severe itchy reactions to flea bites. Food or inhalant allergies also cause itchy skin.

Sarcoptic mange, a highly contagious skin condition of dogs, causes an intense itch accompanied by crusty lesions and hair loss. Pets who spend time outdoors are especially susceptible to ear mites, pesky parasites who take up residence in your pet's ears, causing a ferocious itch.

What you can do at home

First, examine areas with little hair—like the abdomen and groin—for fleet-footed fleas. You may also find black specks on his skin that look like pepper—this is actually flea feces. If you get a glimpse of one of these tenacious parasites, ask your veterinarian about treatments for your pet and your home. Your pet's doctor also will recommend a monthly flea preventive to keep those hungry bugs from dining on your pet.

If your dog or cat suffers from mildly itchy skin, a luke-warm bath and medicated anti-itch shampoo can ease your pet's discomfort. If your pet scratches at a small area, you can apply a soothing anti-itch lotion or spray.

When to call the veterinarian

In most cases, you'll need to take your pet to the veterinarian to diagnose and treat the cause of itching. Don't delay, because a fierce scratching can damage your pet's skin in no time. Often, scratching starts a vicious cycle: The pet scratches, irritating his sensitive skin. This leads to more scratching and infection with itchy and painful sores.

What your veterinarian will do

The veterinarian will ask about your pet's scratching and other symptoms and will perform a physical examination, focusing on the skin. After a flea check, the doctor may take skin scrapings to identify mange mites or an earwax sample to expose ear mites. If the veterinarian suspects ringworm, he or she also may perform a fungal culture.

Your pet may need additional skin tests to identify any allergies, depending on the severity of the condition. A pet could be reacting to something in the environment or to an ingredient in its food. If your veterinarian suspects your pet is allergic to an ingredient in its food, he or she will recommend an exclusion feeding trial: You simply switch your pet to a special hypoallergenic diet for several weeks to see if he stops scratching. Be sure to follow the feeding trial instructions to the letter.

The veterinarian will not only treat the cause of the itching, he or she may prescribe antihistamines or corticosteroids to control the scratching. Special shampoos and creme rinses also can help relieve your pet's itchiness. Once the itch is gone, your pet can focus on more important things—like spending time with you!

