

IS YOUR PET SCRATCHING MORE THAN USUAL?

Our pet dermatology expert, Dr John O'Flynn, guides us through some likely causes.



Hello, I'm Dr John O'Flynn and I am a Partner here at Blacks Vets in the heart of the Black Country. In this article, I'll be sharing some insights about pet skin health together with tips and advice that may help you identify the best course of action for your pet's problem.

I have been a practicing vet for 19 years and over the course of my career, developed a strong interest in pet dermatology. I have held a Certificate in Advanced Veterinary Practice (Dermatology) since 2014. This means I have additional expertise in treating pets with skin and ear complaints and regularly see unusual or difficult cases which have been referred from other practices.

As we move towards Spring and milder weather, we tend to see a rise in the number of pets suffering with persistent scratching. Whilst scratching is a normal aspect of pet behaviour that occurs all year round, if an itch isn't resolved by a short scratch, we know that there is

usually an underlying problem that needs to be treated. Here are some common causes of skin irritation:

Parasites

Warmer weather sees an increase in the number of parasites, though it is important to guard against infestation all year round. A common myth is that fleas, mange and ticks only really present themselves in the Summer, but our case load shows otherwise! Scratching is the most obvious symptom but it is also possible for a pet to have parasites and not scratch at all. For example, fleas in cats can be very difficult to detect because they groom themselves so well that it often takes a professional eye to diagnose the problem.

Once a particular parasite has been identified as the cause of itching, choosing the best treatment is essential. The range of products available is huge and many are the same drug under different brand names which can be confusing. Your vet can help

you choose the right product for their current infestation and to prevent other parasite issues that may pose a risk. Remember that your home may also need treating with a good anti-parasite spray in order to kill eggs and larvae.

If your pet lives exclusively indoors, they can still get parasites. Fleas can travel on shoes and clothing, so treatment with flea prevention medication is still important. If you already use parasite prevention treatment, it's worth considering a review of your usual product as some may not be as effective as they once were. If unsure, please always ask your vet for advice.

Infections

A skin infection is often a secondary cause of irritation but is frequently the first time an owner will notice a problem. If your pet is repeatedly developing skin infections, it is definitely worth seeing your vet to rule out an underlying cause that may be linked to either allergy or parasite infestation.



Allergies

Allergies are a really common cause of itchy skin in pets, with symptoms presenting in a broad range of ways. As well as repeated scratching your pet may also lick their paws or other areas of the skin until sore patches appear. They may roll around on the floor in an attempt to relieve the uncomfortable sensations or shake their heads if their ears have become irritated. Saliva staining, which is sometimes a rusty brown in color on the paws, can also be a sign that a pet is over-grooming due to irritation.

Allergens can be found both indoors and outdoors with the Spring and Summer months seeing an increase in pollen related allergies and insect bites. Pets can also become allergic to aspects of their environment such as dust mites. Allergies cannot be cured, but they can usually be managed very well. As a dermatologist, it is my job to develop treatment protocols for complex allergy related conditions. I find that the key to effectively diagnosing and treating allergies is taking a joined-up approach as changing a pet's food, medication or shampoo in isolation, rarely helps. Our ultimate aim is to help our clients learn to manage their pet's symptoms to give them the most comfortable life possible.

Top five tips for dealing with itchy skin

- ❖ Choose a parasite treatment that specifically deals with your pet's needs. Mange, fleas and ear mites are very common and your vet will have the best understanding of which product will deal most effectively with the issue.
- ❖ Save your money by not buying off-the-shelf ear wax treatments, which are usually ineffective. Excessive ear wax is often a symptom of an underlying condition which may need veterinary treatment.
- ❖ Look out for signs of repeated over-grooming and licking. This is unlikely to be simply a habit and is usually a sign that something is wrong.
- ❖ Keep a note of symptoms. When and how is your pet experiencing symptoms? What changes (if any) have



been made to their feeding routine and environment? What changes in behaviour have you noticed?

- ❖ If you suspect that your pet has a skin problem, please do talk to your vet. Consistent itching is painful and distressing to your pet and there is lots of help available to successfully diagnose and treat their condition.

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