



## Itchy Skin Conditions

An itchy animal will scratch or chew at themselves causing inflammation, which leads to a further itch which often progresses to infection and a vicious cycle is set up. Conventional medicine then makes use of antibiotics to control the infection and cortisone or antihistamines to suppress the itch as a means of breaking this cycle. The prevention of this scenario is our ultimate goal and to achieve this, we need to address the underlying issues. Animals have an itch threshold, basically a line drawn at a certain level which is different for each individual depending on their genetic make-up.

There are five main factors which play a role in causing animals to itch. These are diet, stress, fleas, environmental factors and irritation from waxy ears, sore teeth, full anal glands, etc. Other contributors can include hormone imbalances, mites, worms and infections. As a practical first line of defence we focus on managing the main contributing factors so that the itch threshold is not reached.

Nutrition plays a major part. Poor quality food, artificial preservatives, allergies to specific proteins and lack of essential fats, vitamins and minerals can all play a role in contributing to the itch. Generally we recommend a BARF (bones and raw food diet) diet together with the addition of optimal amounts of vitamins, anti-oxidants, minerals and omega 3 fatty acids (natural anti-inflammatories) found in high concentrations in flax oil and cold water fish. Sometimes it is necessary to design a special diet to address specific issues.

Stress weakens the immune system and lowers the body's itch threshold. In cats we commonly see itchy skin problems and establish in the history that there is a new tomcat in the area bullying the cat. Stress can also be due to other factors such as a much loved owner going away, a new baby in the house or even a fellow companion no longer being present. Rescue Remedy or Emergency Essence are wonderful remedies to help animals to cope with stress.

Fleas (and other parasites such as sarcoptic mange) can contribute greatly to an itch, either a few fleas or even the saliva from just one fleabite ("Freddie the flea" could be hiding somewhere in the house, jump onto your pet for a quick snack and then jump back off leaving many owners sure that fleas don't play a role) might cause an itch to last for a couple of weeks.

Environmental factors can be difficult to isolate or control for example wandering jew, a plant to which many dogs react with a violent itch. Also many dogs love playing in the sea but the salty water can cause them to be itchy, it is therefore a good idea to always hose them down with fresh water. Various shampoos can also create an itch. It is important to be aware of these factors that may play a role and limit exposure where possible.

There are many options available to help a chronically itchy animal, but for long-term success, much time, effort and patience are often necessary. A visit to your vet will help to eliminate other causes of irritation and help you to devise a good management strategy to keep your pet's tail wagging!