

Does your dog itch and scratch a lot? Does it cause problems? This leaflet will help break down some of the most common causes of itchy skin in dogs.

**First!** Eliminate fleas as a cause. Fleas are STILL the number one cause of itching dogs (+ cats!) by a long way. Use a prescription strength product combined with house treatment for at least 3 consecutive months. Supermarket brands are often not fully effective and some can even cause skin problems! Our separate flea leaflet gives in depth information on how to get rid of fleas.



**Second.** Fleas been eliminated as a cause? Now we need to see the pet! A full clinical exam and history is necessary to try and find the cause of the itch. Don't bath the dog the night before or it will wash away clues! An exam like this may reveal a specific cause (such as mange, ringworm, skin infection etc) or clues to a specific cause that need more testing e.g. skin biopsies. Sometimes itching can be related to poor skin condition.

Once these have been eliminated then a skin allergy is left as the most likely cause and this falls into one of three categories:

- **ATOPY**—An allergy to airborne substances such as dusts and pollens, especially in Labs/Westies/GSDs/Retrievers. This usually appears by 3 years old
- **FOOD**—An allergy to one of the proteins (e.g. beef or chicken) in the diet, usually by 3 years old.
- **CONTACT**—An allergy or irritation usually caused by exposure to household chemicals or irritating substances. This can start at any age.

Full investigation can take several months and a lot of commitment. In some cases the root cause is never found and we can only control the symptoms.

## Pet Healthcare Leaflet 3: Skin allergies in the dog

### Contact Dermatitis

Contact irritation is rare but can be the easiest to deal with, as long as the cause can be found! Common problems include building/decorating dust (concrete/plaster), febreze or similar products and detergents used on the floor. Avoid harsh products like strong bleach or products that can leave a fine powder like flash/cif. Some dogs can be sensitive to certain washing powders or shampoos and in this case, using an extra rinse can be helpful. These are the most common contact allergens (textile and chemical) but look around the house, unusual cases have involved cut grass and MDF dust!



### Food Allergy

Food allergies in dogs very often produce itchy skin problems. The allergy is usually to a specific protein in the food, commonly gluten, beef or dairy. Ensure all milk/dairy products are stopped. If this type of allergy is suspected, it is important to try a special exclusion diet (such as Hill's Z/D) for 6-12 weeks for diagnosis. Treatment is often based on avoiding the offending protein, sometimes by trying foods based on 'unusual' proteins such as pork, salmon or potato.

### Atopic Dermatitis (Atopy)

Atopic dermatitis is an allergic reaction to air based allergens which can include pollens, moulds and dust/storage mites. Often these dogs will start with 'seasonal' itchiness but this does not exclude fleas. **Atopy can be controlled but not cured.** A diagnosis of Atopy is difficult as it is usually reached by excluding other causes, hence the importance of food trials etc. Blood tests can help to identify the cause of the allergic reaction and in some cases (usually younger dogs), immunotherapy injections can reduce the allergic response. If these are not successful, lifelong control medication can often be needed.



# Treatment and Control

## Atopic Dermatitis Treatment

If treatment with immunotherapy is not appropriate or unsuccessful, dogs suffering from Atopy can require lifelong therapy.

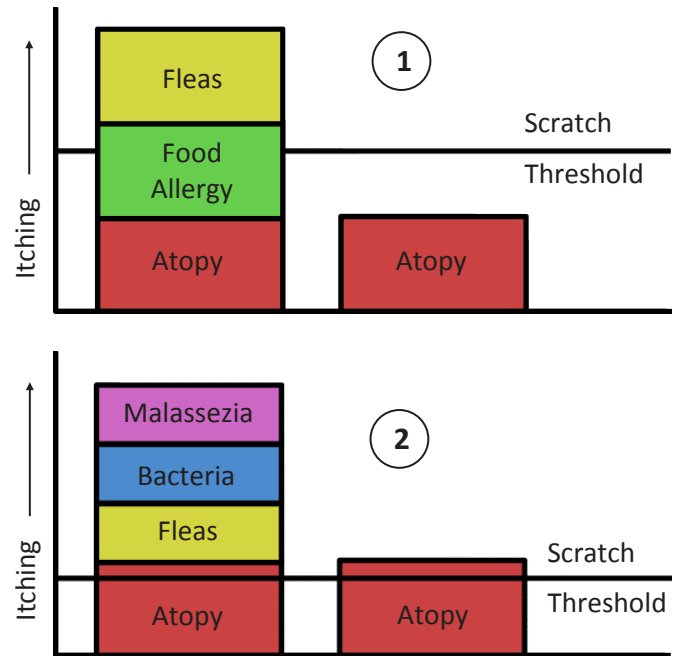
- Shampoos to reduce irritation, control bacteria and yeast infections. This may require more frequent flea treatment.
- Antibiotics (sometimes long term) if secondary bacterial infection is present.
- Antihistamines to help control itching.
- Food supplements/essential fatty acids to help improve general skin quality
- Immunomodulators (Cyclosporin or Kinase Inhibitors) for long term control in severe cases.
- Steroids may be used for short periods of time to control flareups. Long term, high dosage use can cause significant health problems and any long term use should be discussed with the vet to ensure the dose is kept to the minimum required.

As many cases of atopic dermatitis are related to house dust mites, ongoing control can include regular steam cleaning, hoovering, damp dusting. Avoid letting the dog in bedrooms, airing cupboards etc, regularly wash dog bedding on a hot wash. Treating with environmental sprays can also help keep dust and storage mite numbers down.

Outdoor pollen related allergies can be reduced by trying to reduce exposure, keeping dog in during high pollen count times (dawn and dusk) and rinsing the dog after spending time our near vegetation.

Storage mites are another common problem and live mainly in dry dog food. Keep food in airtight containers, don't buy in bulk and thoroughly disinfect containers regularly. Freezing dry food for 24 hours can also reduce storage mites

Many cases of Atopy require lifelong treatment and avoidance of allergens. If you suspect your dog has underlying allergy problems please discuss their case with one of our experienced veterinary team to find the best solution for you and your pet.



In many cases of allergic skin disease there is more than one 'trigger' to scratching. Each may be small but have a cumulative effect.

In example ① each trigger is small compared to the scratch threshold so treating of fleas and food allergy will be sufficient to control the itch, without needing drugs for Atopy. Allergen avoidance would still be appropriate.

In example ② even if fleas and secondary yeast (malassezia) and bacterial infection are dealt with, the Atopy on its own is above the threshold of scratching so will need to be treated. However, treatment of the other problems will **reduce** the itching, lessen the need for drugs like steroids and make the residual itching easier to control.

Keeping the dog cool and minimising stress helps raise the scratch threshold as well, helping to reduce itching.

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