

NATURAL REMEDIES FOR ITCHY PETS

Gentle Ways to Calm Allergies

by Sandra Murphy

Rather than routinely giving drugs to dogs and cats to relieve dry, itchy, skin or food allergies, consider more gentle natural alternatives. As with people, knowing what an animal is allergic to is key to finding the right remedy and preventing future outbreaks.

With dogs, about 20 percent of itching and scratching can be attributed to food ingredients. Symptoms can show up as early as 5 months or as late as 12 years old, often combined with inhalant or contact allergies. Chronic ear infections are often traced to food allergies.

"If a pet is suffering mightily, see your veterinarian for shots or pills for immediate relief. Then ask the vet to allergy test for the specific problem," advises Veterinarian Laurie Dohmen, owner of Purple Moon Herbs and Studies, in Hartly, Delaware. "This isn't something you can do yourself. I've seen pet owners use what worked for a friend's dog and make their own pets sicker, despite research and good intentions. What works for one pet won't necessarily work for another."

While food elimination testing works, it's a long process that must be done with precision. "If your pet

even just nibbles the eliminated food, you have to start all over again," says Dohmen. Whether commercially prepared or home cooked, the number of ingredients can substantially

extend a test period. Each item must be completely avoided for about six weeks for an accurate assessment.

Environmental allergies, which encompass everything unrelated to food, range from common grasses to inhaled pollutants. New carpets or rugs, cleaning supplies, a neighbor's pesticides, dust and pollen are among the culprits that can cause an allergic reaction. Common symptoms are itchy ears or skin, ear infections, sneezing, runny eyes, scratching, vomiting or diarrhea.

Veterinarian Judy Morgan, owner of Naturally Healthy Pets, in Clayton, New Jersey, also uses herbs in her practice to alleviate food and environmental allergy symptoms. "They can be tinctures or poultices; one herb or a blended mixture. Some are applied externally, some internally." Giving the proper dosage for the size of the pet is vital.

She particularly likes calendula for hot spots, despite its



odor, because it's antifungal, antibacterial and antiviral, followed by witch hazel to dry them, and then coconut oil or aloe to soothe and soften affected skin—plus Echinacea to boost the immune system. She uses ginger or peppermint to counteract nausea.

"Many people think an allergic pet should be switched to a lamb and rice diet. In some cases, that makes dry, itchy, skin worse," she says. "That's why it's important to know what they are allergic to before trying out new foods or herbal remedies. Find a holistic vet to work with."

Morgan often prescribes a mixture of herbs for the best results. "I like licorice because it works like a steroid without the side effects. Probiotics help keep gut bacteria and the immune system healthy. Parsley works well for dry, itchy, skin caused by a blood deficiency, or imbalance.

"Parsley brings a protein, as well as several vitamins, to the party," notes Kimberly Gauthier, a dog nutrition blogger in Marysville, Washington. "It's a natural anti-inflammatory and also great if your dog's breath needs a freshness boost." She suggests rosemary and thyme as ingredients in an antibacterial, antifungal salve; she mixes these essential oils with extra virgin coconut oil and beeswax to create paw balm.

Morgan reminds us that essential oils can be harmful, even life-threatening, for cats. "If Kitty has itchy skin, lavender tea can be used as a rinse on cooperative cats," she suggests. "For a less cooperative feline, chamomile tea as a drink or as leaves mixed into the food soothes itches."

Dohmen cautions, "Herbs and other homeopathic remedies or flower essences are medicine and should be given as a prescription by a qualified veterinarian."

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