

If Your Pet Keeps Itching, This May Be the Real Problem

Is your pet constantly scratching and developing skin infections? They could be experiencing allergies. Prevent and treat them with these tips.

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Pet allergies are common, often appearing between 4 months and 3 years of age. They are triggered by fleas, food ingredients, or environmental allergens like pollen, dust, and mold
- Allergies weaken the skin's protective barrier, leading to scratching, inflammation, and secondary bacterial or yeast infections known as allergic dermatitis
- Signs of infection include red skin, hot spots, hair loss, foul odor, oozing sores, and chronic ear infections that keep recurring despite treatment
- Cats hide allergy symptoms through excessive grooming, so watch for bald patches, scabs around the neck, and thinning fur as subtle warning signs
- Early veterinary diagnosis and preventive care, including flea control, diet management, and regular checkups, can break the itch-infection cycle and improve your pet's comfort

Just like humans, your pet can also get allergies, which typically manifest as scratching and licking. Leaving allergies untreated can worsen the situation, as they can lead to painful skin and ear infections. The good news? Once you understand what is happening under your pet's fur, you can take steps to stop the cycle.

Allergies in Pets Are More Common Than You Think

Allergies are one of the most common medical problems in dogs and cats. They can show up at almost any age, though they often become noticeable as early as 6 months and often by 1 to 4 years of age.^{1,2,3} They tend to worsen as time goes on. There are various triggers, such as:^{4,5}

- **Fleas** — They are the most common cause of allergic reactions in dogs and cats. In pets with flea allergies, even one bite can trigger intense itching.
- **Food** — Certain proteins or ingredients in your pet's diet may cause reactions. These allergies can show up as skin issues, digestive upset, or both.
- **Environmental allergens** — Dust, pollen, mold, and other airborne irritants can cause skin signs and even respiratory signs like sneezing or coughing.

Because symptoms can overlap, your veterinarian may need to rule out several possibilities before identifying the real trigger. That said, finding out the cause will allow you to practice early management, which can reduce chronic infections, decrease reliance on medications, prevent long-term skin damage, and improve comfort and quality of life.

Some pets are simply more sensitive than others, and in certain breeds, allergies are even more common due to genetics. Examples include West Highland White Terriers, Bulldogs, Golden Retrievers, Labrador Retrievers, German Shepherds, and Boxers — these tend to be more prone to skin allergies possibly due to having more reactive immune systems or, in some of these breeds, thinner coats that offer less protection.

Interestingly, even your pet's anatomy matters. Pets with skin folds, dense or long coats, and certain ear shapes that can trap pollen, dust, and bacteria more easily, which increases irritation.⁶ But that does not mean other breeds are safe. In the end, any dog or cat can develop allergies, but if your pet belongs to a high-risk group, early attention is especially important.

How Allergies Turn Into Skin Infections

Allergies not only cause itching, they also cause inflammation, which means your pet's skin becomes irritated and swollen. When your dog or cat is exposed to an allergen like pollen or fleas, their immune system overreacts, weakening the skin's natural protective barrier.

Once that line of defense is damaged, the skin becomes vulnerable to bacteria, yeast, moisture buildup, and secondary infections. The result is a condition often called allergic dermatitis — basically, inflamed and irritated skin caused by allergies. Here is a breakdown of what typically happens:⁷

1. Allergies cause itching and inflammation.
2. Your pet scratches, chews, or licks the affected area.
3. The constant scratching causes breaks in the skin, and becomes damaged and moist.
4. Bacteria and yeast multiply.
5. An infection develops.
6. The infection causes even more itching.

Then, the cycle starts all over again. Without treatment, this can continue for months — even years. You may treat the infection with antibiotics or medicated shampoo, and things improve for a while. But if the underlying allergy is not addressed, the problem usually returns.

Signs Your Pet May Have a Skin Infection

Allergies alone can cause itching. But once infection sets in, symptoms often worsen. Watch out for:^{8,9}

- Red, inflamed skin
- Hot spots (raw, moist, irritated patches)
- Hair loss
- Scabs or crusting

- Thickened or darkened skin
- Greasy or oily coat
- A strong “yeasty” or foul odor
- Oozing sores
- Pain when touched

Many pet parents also do not realize that ears are simply an extension of the skin. When allergies affect the body, they often affect the ear canals too. Allergy-related inflammation inside the ears can lead to increased wax production, and warm, moist conditions that are ideal for bacteria and yeast growth.

This is why pets with allergies frequently develop headshaking, red or painful ears, and chronic ear infections. If your pet’s ear infections keep coming back, allergies may be the underlying cause.

Cats get skin infections from allergies, too. But the catch is that they are masters at hiding discomfort. Instead of obvious scratching, you may see excessive grooming, bald patches, scabs around the neck and back, and recurrent ear inflammation.¹⁰

Because cats groom constantly, you might not even notice there is a problem until hair loss or scabs appear. If your cat suddenly seems over-focused on grooming or has thinning fur, again, allergies could be behind it.

Treatment and Prevention of Pet Skin Allergies

Regular checkups are especially important if your pet belongs to a breed prone to skin allergies. Preventive care can¹¹ help catch flare-ups early, reduce the severity of outbreaks, and keep your pet comfortable year-round.

On your end, you can also help by keeping up with natural flea prevention strategies, feeding a whole food diet carefully (making sure to watch for food triggers¹²), and watching for early signs of scratching or ear irritation scheduling exams before problems escalate. Lastly, schedule a visit if your pet:^{13,14}

- Is constantly itching or licking
- Has repeated ear infections
- Develops frequent hot spots
- Has a strong skin odor
- Shows hair loss or red skin
- Improves temporarily but symptoms always return

If your pet is constantly itching or getting repeat infections, your veterinarian will usually perform a thorough exam, review your pet’s medical history, look at diet, environment, and flea prevention habits, and check ears and skin. In some cases, more advanced testing or referral to a veterinary dermatologist may be recommended, especially for complex or persistent cases.

The Bottom Line: Do Not Ignore the Itch

Allergies are one of the most common causes of chronic skin and ear infections in dogs and cats, and left untreated, they create a frustrating cycle that can last for months or years. But once you recognize the signs — and work with your veterinarian to control the underlying allergy — you can break that cycle.

When you take early action, you protect their skin, reduce infections, and give them the best comfort they deserve. And that means fewer sleepless nights for both of you.

Sources and References

¹ [Vet Med \(Auckl\). 2024 Feb 13;15:15–29](#)

² [Adv Small Anim Care. 2021 Sep 29;2:101–115](#)

³ [Can Vet J. 2018 Mar;59\(3\):311–313](#)

^{4,7,8,10,13} [Animal Clinic of Mandarin, January 28, 2026](#)

^{5,6,9,14} [Brewster Vet Hospital, Allergies and Skin Problems in Dogs and Cats](#)

¹¹ [Cedar Grove Animal Hospital, August 19, 2025](#)

¹² [Chi Dog, August 7, 2023](#)
