

Itchy Dog? You've Likely Missed This Culprit

Is the reason for your itchy pet hiding in plain sight? It may be if your pet is allergic to this common allergen. But the good news is, it's easy to help your dog feel comfortable again.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- If your dog is itchy, the culprit just might be his pet bed
- Many commercial pet beds are made with materials that can be allergenic; they also attract dust mites, to which many itchy dogs are allergic
- Dust mites feed on dead skin, bacteria, fungi and viruses, prefer the altered skin lipids of allergic pets, and trigger reactions through an allergenic protein in their feces
- If your dog has a confirmed dust mite allergy, there are many things you can do to eradicate the pests from your environment and alleviate your pet's symptoms
- One important step is to replace your dog's bed with a safe, nontoxic pet bed made of organic materials like silk, since dust mites can't survive in silk

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Like us, dogs can be allergic to all kinds of things in their environment, but one common item many people never even consider as a source of allergens is their pet's bed.

Often, it's the filling in the bed that causes problems. Filling materials are often synthetic or latex memory foam, both of which your dog can be allergic to. In addition, if he's been using the bed for a period, skin cells have accumulated under the fabric covering and on the surface of the foam, which attracts dust mites — especially if there's any moisture on the bed.

In addition to the filling, some outer fabrics are more allergenic than others. As Dr. Hyun-Min Kim, veterinary staff manager for the ASPCA Community Medicine Department tells PetMD:

"Manufacturing synthetic fabrics requires certain chemicals and processes. These chemicals, such as flame retardants, are known to be allergenic. Some fabrics also allow the accumulation of dust mites, mold, mildew and bacteria that can exacerbate skin sensitivities."¹

Dr. Kim recommends cover fabrics made of 100% cotton, hemp (a naturally grown crop that isn't sprayed with pesticides or other chemicals) or a tightly woven microfiber fabric, as these materials are less likely to trigger an allergic response.

Why Dust Mites Are Such a Problem for Dogs

According to board-certified veterinary dermatologist Dr. John Gordon, dust mites are the most common environmental allergen in skin-allergy tested dogs. "A veterinary university study that evaluated the presence of house dust mites in pet beds found a significant increase in the amount of house dust mite allergen collected in pet beds older than one year," he says.² And this was the case no matter the type of bed or how it was cleaned.

In the average home, dust mites are found in materials like carpeting, upholstered furniture, mattresses, bedding and cloth toys (including dog toys). They thrive in warm, moist air (the kind we and our pets exhale during sleep) and darkness — which is why they are often found in bedding, both yours and your pet's. Their bodies are translucent.

Dust mites survive on a diet of dead skin, bacteria, fungi and viruses in the environment. They prefer to feed on the skin of hypersensitive (allergic) individuals because the lipids in their skin are different from those of non-allergic people and pets. What makes them allergenic is a protein found in their feces.

Diagnosing and Treating Dust Mite Allergies

When you bring your itchy dog for a checkup, your veterinarian will look for a history that indicates his itchiness is non-seasonal, and is not related to either **food sensitivities** or skin parasites. Next, your pet should be skin- or serum-tested for sensitivity to dust mites.

If a pet receives a confirmed diagnosis of dust mite allergy, the recommendation is to first try to rid the home environment of mites. This can be challenging, because studies show the most effective method of treatment is to air out fabrics the pet is exposed to on either a hot, sunny or cold, dry day for 12 hours, then vacuuming. Other suggestions include:

- Switching to mattress covers made of micro-porous fabric ("dust mite covers")
- Covering your pet's bed in a sheet that repels dust mites and washing it weekly
- Washing bedding in hot water at least monthly, or in cold water and tea tree oil (10 drops per gallon)
- Removing carpets from bedrooms
- Vacuuming all carpets and upholstery often (at least weekly) using a vacuum with a HEPA filter
- Steam-cleaning mattresses, pet bedding and upholstered furniture

Many veterinarians recommend immunotherapy (allergy shots or under-the-tongue drops), which is a much safer option than immunosuppressant drugs such as cyclosporine or corticosteroids. The preference is to hold off on powerful drugs that shut down the immune system and instead address the animal's environment first, along with other safe, common-sense steps.

These include regular foot soaks and bathing to wash away allergens and soothe irritated skin; feeding a nutritionally balanced, species-appropriate, anti-inflammatory diet; providing fresh, good-quality drinking water; and avoiding over-vaccinating/over-medicating to ensure your pet's immune system remains strong and resilient.

You can also consider investing in an air purifier to control dust mites, and switching to nontoxic cleaning agents to lessen your pet's overall toxic load. Keep in mind it only takes a miniscule amount of dust mite allergen to create an allergic response in your dog, so the more effective your mite eradication efforts, the more comfortable your allergic

pet will be.

Replacing Your Dog's Bed

Since your dog's bed often triggers or exacerbates environmental allergies, especially to dust mites, another step you'll want to consider is replacing the bed he's currently using.

A prudent step is to choose safe, organic bedding for animal companions, which means avoiding flame-retardant chemicals and other toxins commonly found in commercial pet beds sold at most retail outlets, including pet stores. Pets that sleep in beds treated with flame retardants can experience significant exposure to these chemicals.

One particular type of flame retardant, polybrominated diphenyl ethers, or PBDEs, is a special problem. Studies have linked PBDEs with a number of health problems in both people and pets. Other flame-retardant chemicals include boric acid, which is a toxic respiratory irritant; antimony, a metal that is more toxic than mercury; and formaldehyde, a well-known hazardous substance.

If your pet's bedding isn't labeled organic and free of flame retardants, you can assume it has been treated with these chemicals. When shopping for a safe dog bed, look for one that hasn't been treated with chemicals, and is preferably made with organic materials that are naturally flame-resistant, for example, organic cotton or silk. Silk is a great material as well because dust mites can't survive in silk.

It's also important to choose a bed that's very comfortable and resilient enough to withstand rough treatment by your dog. Pet beds made with natural fibers are preferable to synthetic pet beds, which, as discussed earlier, can exacerbate skin allergies and cause overheating. Another important feature in a pet bed is a cover that can be easily removed for washing.

Sources and References

^{1, 2} [PetMD, September 4, 2018](#)
