



In the first part of this two part series we looked at the complexity of itching and scratching in pets and the fact that although the symptoms eventually manifest in the same way i.e. itching and scratching, there could be many different causes for it. Itching or pruritis, as vets call it, can be described as the sensation that elicits the desire to scratch. The skin, being the biggest organ in the body and acting as a sort of outer nervous system, provides feedback to the brain of things like temperature, touch, pain and itching through a network of nerve endings.

So what then are the most common causes of scratching and how can it be treated? Probably the most common answer most vets will give you is that it is fleas. These tough little parasites have survived for centuries and are still plaguing our domestic animals today. Fleas feed on blood and biting and latching onto an animal often causes the itching we so often see in animals with fleas. It is like experiencing tiny pinches all over the body which, understandably, become very irritating the more fleas there are on an animal. Fleas only live between two months and a year but their eggs can survive for more than a year in the environment and one flea can produce up to 600 eggs. Needless to say, a few fleas can quickly lead to a flea epidemic. It is therefore particularly important to use effective and long lasting anti-flea remedies as soon as possible after you spot a flea on your pet. Since more than three quarters of a flea's life is spent somewhere other than on the animal, it is not adequate to treat only the animal, but also important to treat the environment. Thorough vacuuming, washing linens in hot water, and treating all animals in the same household at the same time even though on my not see any fleas on any of your other animals are essential and if possible, should be done on a regular basis.

With cats that groom themselves, one has to be especially careful because anything you use on a cat's skin will also be taken in by the cat itself and if it is some kind of terrible poison that not only kills the fleas, but everything else around it as well, it may not be safe for your cat. Due to flea eggs surviving so long, one should also try to use something which will clean the environment in which the animal lives of fleas. Some clever products have been devised for animals over the years, some which harden the flea egg shell so it cannot hatch, others that stay on the animal's skin for up to two months, turning the animal into a walking "exterminator", because as soon as a new flea hatches and jumps on the animal, they are exposed the product and dies. Products which are water resistant, staying on the animal's skin even though it gets wet, are very useful. Ultimately any product one uses needs to be safe for the animal itself and therefore the development of products which targets invertebrates like fleas and are safe for vertebrates like our pets, have gone a long way in fighting the war against fleas. It can also happen that an animal develops an allergy to flea saliva which then only takes one flea to bite an animal and cause a massive skin reaction completely out of proportion to the number of fleas found on the animal. The typical symptoms seen with flea allergy dermatitis are loss of hair on the back, close to the tail area in dogs, and in cats one can also find little scabs and skin flakes around the head and neck of the animal called millary dermatitis. (It looks and feels as if someone took bird seed and rubbed it into the hair around the head and neck of this cat.)

Other forms of skin allergies are very common in animals and the most common is inhalant allergy which is similar to hay fever in humans. This is called atopy. Dogs and cats rarely suffer with a running nose or blocked

sinuses so typical of hay fever in humans but dogs, more so than cats, suffer badly with a generalised itching and scratching because of allergy to pollen and other plant material. There is usually a seasonal prevalence of this condition and knowing that the season for it is coming up, one can prepare by taking some precautions to “soften the blow” of the condition. Unfortunately there is no cure for this condition and this is one of the most common conditions for which pet owners will seek second opinions because it will seem like the vet is simply not able to make a proper diagnosis and treat the animal effectively. The most effective way for treating this condition is to remove the animal from the environment causing the atopy, but unfortunately this is not an option for most people. The treatment of this condition can include amongst other things:

- keeping the animal inside,
- anti-histamines and cortisone,
- adding omega 3 fatty acid oils into the diet,
- changing to a prescription diet which naturally addresses the problem to some degree,
- topical lotions and using specially formulated medicated shampoos,
- having special desensitising vaccines made which is injected over a period of time to try and reduce the body’s over-reaction to the offending allergens, etc.

There is not a single recipe which works in every case of atopy and the vet has to consider the symptoms, the environment and circumstances of the pet and the owner, the response to treatment and the budget available for treatment, when making therapeutic decisions. Not an easy mix and often frustrating because the condition cannot be definitively treated but only effectively managed.

Other forms of allergy, which are less common, include food allergies and contact allergies and through a process of elimination the vet usually has to determine which the primary source of allergy is. An animal with a food allergy has to be fed an elimination diet (usually a diet which contains a novel protein like duck, and a novel source of carbohydrate like rice) for at least eight to twelve weeks. Needless to say the commitment of the owner, and the animal for that matter, needs to be immense, to make sure that no tit-bits or other food is fed in between.

Mites, which are tiny microscopic creatures, can also cause itching and scratching and some of the more common mite conditions like demodicosis, scabies and cheyletiellosis need to be considered as possible causes of skin problems when presenting an animal to the vet for itching and scratching.

Fungi like ringworm or Malassezia have the potential to cause itching and scratching (similar to athlete’s foot in humans) and the vet will look at these conditions as possible causes for itching when examining and doing a diagnostic workup on an itchy pet. Bacteria that live on the skin of animals as normal inhabitants of the skin also has the potential to “get out of hand” and start causing infections which may cause itching and scratching. Sometimes it can be very difficult to determine if bacteria was the primary cause of the itch or if the itch lead to an irritation of the skin which in turn lead to bacteria starting to overgrow and cause secondary infections.

Some other less common causes for itching and scratching include hormonal conditions, cancer (like Sertoli cell tumours), immune mediated disorders, genetic disorders and a poor diet.

When your dog or cat is itching and scratch, scratch, scratching, and it is driving you mad, make sure you get it to the vet as soon as you can for a thorough check up to find the cause as early as possible and start with treatment. Keep in mind that certain conditions are never going to be cured and will require lifelong management and dedicated treatment from your side.