

BEAUTY IS SOMETIMES JUST SKIN DEEP

We are all very familiar with that itchy, irritable dog that has been diagnosed as having allergies, but many of us are not aware of the method used by the veterinarians to come to this conclusion. Shockingly, a vast majority of dogs that are labeled as allergy sufferers, have had no set of diagnostics done as they are simply the victims of an educated guess. This guess is an evaluation that has been made by observing the skin, scratching, and any changes that may have occurred in correlation to the irritation. Due to the outward similarities between dry skin and allergies, this is just not always a justifiable observation. This often can be the beginning of a vicious cycle that involves numerous vet visits, unnecessary medication, and even a lifetime therapy.

There are systematic tests available to properly assess the diagnosis, however, these tests may or may not be effective, because the situations can vary. The tests most commonly conducted are for inhalant allergens. These evaluations are done by assessing the reaction of the skin or blood to specific allergens. There is far too much room for error in these tests as they do not check for everything and the cause of the reaction may be insignificant to the situation. For instance, the test could prove positive for an allergy to pine trees, however, there are no pine trees for hundreds of miles. Just as these skin tests can provide irrelevant results, blood testing for food allergies are also viewed as inconsistent by dermatologists and are not commonly relied on. Skin biopsies can be another option to determine the possibility of presence of allergies, however, these tests can depict dry skin and allergies as very similar in nature due to the process in which the biopsy sample is prepared for observation under the microscope. The sample is taken through a series of alcohol and formaldehyde-based fixatives that remove the sebum making it very difficult for accurate differentiation.

If a dog is diagnosed with allergies, the most common treatment is an anti-inflammatory (Apoquel, cortisone, or Atopica), antibiotics, Cytopoint injection, and chlorhexidine shampoo. None of these truly address dry skin if that is the root cause. Also, a consequence of this treatment course is that the anti-inflammatory could potentially suppress the immune system, which would set the dog up for a reoccurring or chronic infection. Antibiotics very commonly lead to yeast infections (as seen in humans). Chlorhexidine shampoos tend to be very harsh and strip the skin of the sebum layer, which in turn exacerbates the dry skin and irritation, defeating the purpose of the initial treatment. Ultimately, this leads to a second visit to the veterinarian. From my discussion with many groomers, I have been informed that that the vet typically increases the level of the anti-inflammatory medication, often even prescribing an alternate antibiotic, and recommends bathing more frequently with the chlorhexidine shampoo, all while dismissing the most common issues at this point, the secondary yeast infection and the dry skin. Of course, this sets the dog up for a lifetime of continuing therapy if the initial issue was dry skin or if it is dealing with a secondary yeast infection from antibiotics. It is very alarming and heartbreaking to observe so many dogs suffering and being prescribed drugs unnecessarily since the true issue was not resolved. We just cannot continue these "band aid" treatments without addressing the real issue or issues at hand.

What we do in the grooming world can either prevent or cause the common initial issue of dry skin. If we use harsh products (especially dish soap or degreasing products) we are stripping the sebum or natural oils from the coat. In addition, if we are not conditioning correctly, we are not adequately replacing the oils/sebum that we have removed. Not all oils or conditioners are created equally so understanding the product is very crucial to the success of the overall groom. A vast majority of oils and

conditioners applied will simply just sit on the surface of the skin and fail to hydrate or repair irritated, inflamed skin. Ideally, the conditioner should be one that hydrates the skin to soothe the inflammation. Our hands are the best test of these products. Using a high-quality product, that is moisturizing and healthy for the skin, should improve the hydration and smoothness of our hands as we use them. If our hands are dry and irritated by use of the products, so is the skin of the dogs and cats that were groomed recently. I often see threads on Facebook about groomers with dry or irritated hands/arms and the vast majority of the comments are to help the groomer. My question is, “what about the pet being subjected to the same source of irritation”. In fact, because our pets rely on hair as one of their main defense mechanisms to the environment their skin is by far more sensitive to drying and irritation than our thick-skinned human hands. These are not the results that we want for **EITHER** participant in this grooming endeavor!

As groomers, we hold a responsibility to not only make sure our “fur” clients look their best, but also, to make sure that they are healthy and feel their best. When we as humans feel our best without unnecessary pain, we tend to depict an outward, natural beauty and vigor. This notion is the same for animals, when they are free from pain and irritation, their beauty shines outward, thus the overall groom is an absolute success! We don’t want to simply mask issues, we want to solve them! This can only be done by addressing the true issue of the problem and by applying high quality products that leave a lasting impression on not only the animals, but also the groomer (hand and arms) and the client that can enjoy their pet to the fullest extent. Health is Beauty!!!!