

PET DETECTIVE: DEALING WITH SKIN ISSUES

Facebook post: I have an itchy dog, what shampoo should I use? Within 2-3 hours there will be 150-250 responses, but how can you solve this case with only one clue? That is equivalent to solving a murder and all you know is that the front door was open. There is so much more information that is needed to offer a solution. A good detective would examine the crime scene, ask several questions, look at motives, research the relationships of the deceased, etc.

So, as a groomer pet detective, let us start breaking it down. I know the dog is itching, what could cause that? We tend to assume allergies and often suggest changing the food. Hold up!!! We are already jumping to conclusions. Food allergies are just one of many reasons that dogs itch and only make up about 12% of the dogs that have allergies. So, we need to add some **other possible** causes to our “rule out” list like inhalant allergies, contact allergies, fleas, mites, lice, bacteria, fungus, bug bites, dry skin, harsh grooming products, being groomed too short, products that are skin irritants (“hot” essential oils, fertilizers, some cleaning products) etc. With that long list you can see why we get so many different suggestions. These assumptions are based on everyone’s past experiences. Since all of these are possibilities, we need to start thinking about ways to rule things in or out.

Let us stick with the theory of food allergies for this purpose. What characteristics would be consistent with food allergies? Here are a few things to think about: how long has this been going on? Is it year-round? What is the pattern (where on the body) of the itching? Are the ears infected? Was there a food change that occurred within a couple of months prior to the “allergies” showing up? Remember oral supplements will also react the same as food, so do not leave that out of your questioning. Why these questions? Food is something that is given constantly, so typically it will not be a seasonal problem. Food allergies tend to show up around the head and face, underbelly, anal region, and feet. If it is whole body or only in a specific area of the body, you may not have a food allergy. If the dog was okay and then the owner had a diet (or supplement) change right before the itching started, then we need to put food allergy higher on our list. Another important thing to know is Apoquel/steroids, antihistamines, and Atopica (cyclosporine) have **variable to no benefits with food allergies**.

<u>SKIN ISSUES</u>	<u>ITCHY</u>	<u>TYPICAL LOCATION</u>	<u>RESPONSIVE TO APOQUEL OR STEROIDS</u>	<u>SEASONAL?</u>
FOOD ALLERGIES	X	HEAD, UNDERBELLY, ANAL REGION, PAWS	VARIABLE	NON SEASONAL
CONTACT ALLERGIES	X	AREA OF CONTACT	YES	BASED ON EXPOSURE
INHALANT ALLERGIES	X	WHOLE BODY	YES	SEASONAL
FLEA BITE ALLERGIES	X	FROM RIB CAGE BACK	YES	WORSE IN SUMMER MONTHS
MITES/LICE	X	WHOLE BODY OR AREA OF CONCENTRATION	MILDLY	BASED ON EXPOSURE
BACTERIAL INFECTION	X	WHOLE BODY OR AREA OF CONCENTRATION	MILDLY	NON SEASONAL
FUNGAL INFECTION	X	WHOLE BODY OR AREA OF CONCENTRATION	MILDLY	NON SEASONAL
DRY SKIN	X	WHOLE BODY	NO	NON SEASONAL
HARSH GROOMING PRODUCTS	X	WHOLE BODY	NO	NON SEASONAL
TRIMMED DOG TOO SHORT	X	AREAS OF FRICTION	NO	AFTER GROOM
SKIN IRRITANTS	X	AREA OF CONTACT	NO	BASED ON EXPOSURE
BUG BITES	X	AREA OF BITE OR FACE	YES	BASED ON EXPOSURE

It would be nice if this is all we had to worry about in order to proceed with a treatment plan, but it is not that easy! Many (if not most) dogs have a secondary bacterial or fungal infection by the time the owner seeks help. So, even if we get them on the right diet, the infection will perpetuate the itching (pruritis). In order to solve the food allergy, we have to address the secondary infection.

On that same Facebook feed, there will be multiple suggestions for a change of diet or switching to raw. What is the science that these suggestions are based on? Food allergies are typically driven by the proteins and carbohydrates in the diet. How can you make a diet change suggestion if you do not know what they are on to start with? If the dog is allergic to beef or chicken and you recommend raw that has

beef or chicken in it, you jumped from one allergenic diet to another. Raw is not the answer here, it is the protein source that needs to be changed. Most frequently, we need to go to a novel protein (one the dog has not been exposed to) or a hydrolyzed protein (modified protein so body doesn't recognize it as a protein).

As a grooming detective did anyone on Facebook ask if the coat was dry? **Is this the problem instead of food allergies?** If harsh products are used or no conditioning is being done, the problem (in this case food allergy) might be complicated or exacerbated by the fact that the sebum layer is depleted. When the skin is compromised because of the food allergy, it is important that we give the skin extra nutrients, minerals, and hydration that are lost with the condition.

Many of the suggestions on Facebook are different shampoos, conditioners, bathing systems, essential oils, etc. Of those listed which ones will "fix" a food allergy? The answer is none of them!!! If you fail to address the source of the problem, "products" will not "fix" the issue. This is a prime reason it is important to understand the science. As groomers, the most important job we do is restore the skin back to normal. The issue here is the body is fighting us. That is why it is important to be working hand in hand with a veterinarian. Hopefully, they will take care of the medical part so you as a groomer can do your part. To have complete success, it takes both sides. The veterinarian also needs to be a good detective, or they too will fall into the trap of false conclusions and treatments.

To be a thorough detective, we should always question ourselves when we see these posts or deal with problems in our own salons. Has the problem been defined where we can answer the question? What is the science or issue that needs to be addressed? Is this a problem best addressed from the veterinary side, the grooming side, or both? Do the suggestions follow the problem or are they just suggestions that do not apply to the problem at hand? To get our best results for the pets put under our care, whether a veterinarian or groomer, we need to critically evaluate what we do. The worst thing we can do is just throw drugs or products at a problem and hope for good results.