

**DOG 12**

# Skin and ear care



**The charity dedicated to helping sick, injured and homeless pets since 1897.**



## **Skin and ear care**

**Regular grooming is essential for all dogs, even short-coated ones. Grooming for 15 to 30 minutes weekly helps reduce the amount of hair shed in the house. Long-haired breeds need grooming more frequently. Start when your dog is young so that your dog gets used to the idea as a puppy.**

Dogs with normal healthy coats only need bathing every few months. Use a good quality baby shampoo. Dry shampoos are only cosmetic – they are no substitute for a bath with shampoo.

- Brush your dog thoroughly beforehand. Clip off any matted hair first as this is harder to remove once the coat is wet. Be careful not to cut your dog's skin.
- Do not apply protective eye ointments – these may trap shampoo in the eye and make it difficult to rinse out
- Avoid getting water in your dog's ears – place some cotton wool in each ear if necessary
- Wet the coat first with warm water then apply shampoo along the neck and back – you can dilute one part shampoo to five parts water first for easier rinsing. Use more water to create a lather then work this gently into the coat with your fingers – or a rubber brush for long-haired breeds.
- Wash your dog's face carefully whilst avoiding getting shampoo in the eyes
- Only use medicated shampoos if they are prescribed by your vet
- Wear gloves and an apron to avoid contact with your own skin and read the instructions carefully – some dips for mange, for example, should not be rinsed off

- If you have to apply solutions to the dog's face, cut a bath sponge into small cubes and use these to carefully dab the solution on, avoiding contact with the eyes and lips. If the coat is greasy or dirty, ask your vet to recommend a shampoo to use first. Work the shampoo well into the coat so that it reaches the skin, and leave it on for the length of time stated on the label – usually between five and ten minutes.
- Rinsing must be thorough, getting right down to the skin, as any remaining shampoo can cause irritation. If you bathe your pet frequently, consider using a coat conditioner – discuss the choice with your vet.
- Towel-dry your dog and keep the animal warm until their coat is properly dry. Brush medium- and long-haired animals gently while damp. Hairdryers can dry out or irritate an animal's skin – their use is probably best avoided.



## **My dog keeps getting sore, itchy patches. The vet says it is fleas – but I have never seen a flea on him!**

You will not see fleas on your pet unless they have very many. Fleas only spend about ten per cent of their time actually on an animal. Their eggs tend to build up in cracks and crevices, such as down the sides of armchairs. Eggs survive for at least six months and, in warmer months, fleas can even lay eggs outdoors. They are the most common cause of skin problems, but are often hard to find. The only way to be certain your pet does not have them is by using regular good quality flea control.

The flea's lifestyle makes prevention difficult. You must treat your dog, house and other areas, such as your car and garage, usually with an aerosol spray. You can also get treatments for your dog, which will stop fleas from developing. Even so, it can take a long time to get rid of a flea infestation, and regular treatment is essential for all dogs, cats and rabbits in the household. Ask your vet for a good quality product, and follow the instructions carefully.

Flea combs, powders, shampoos and collars are not effective for flea control as none of them provides a suitable long-term solution. Herbal products are also ineffective and some (eg tea tree oil) can be toxic.

## **My dog is 18 months old and the vet says he may have a food allergy – but he is always fed the same food**

In normal circumstances, our immune system acts to protect us from attack by "foreign" substances, such as bacteria and viruses, thus preventing disease. However, in allergic individuals, the immune system over-reacts to essentially harmless substances, such as pollens, house dust or food proteins. People wheeze or sneeze, but dogs tend to get an itchy skin – some of these dogs will have food allergies. The only way to diagnose this is by trial feeding a low allergy diet and seeing if the condition improves.

Some animals and people are born with the tendency to develop allergies, but they do not usually show symptoms from birth. Signs often do not come on until six months of age, or even later in life – because a long period of contact with the allergen is needed.

## **So should I buy another brand of food?**

Unfortunately it is not so simple. Most common brands of pet food – even many of those described as low allergy or hypoallergenic – contain multiple ingredients. What is needed is a simple diet, preferably of ingredients the dog



has not had before, as you are aiming to avoid the foods which produce the allergy. Your vet can recommend special commercial foods or advise on a home-cooked diet. Special hydrolysed protein diets are also available from the vet, which can be useful in diagnosis and treatment of food allergy.

## **The low allergy diet didn't work – what about an allergy test?**

Allergies can be caused by things other than flea bites or food. House dust mites, pollens and moulds are also common causes. Some dogs have multiple allergies – a condition known as atopy.

Allergy tests can be helpful, but they do not always give the complete picture. They are not always needed to confirm diagnosis, as vets can do this by excluding other causes of itchiness

and looking at the pattern of the itch. For example, some allergies are seasonal – there is more pollen in the summer, whilst moulds are more common in damp weather. In addition, medication has to be stopped some time before testing and, in a severely itchy dog, this may not be practical.

Allergy testing is needed if you wish to try injections for desensitisation. These help some dogs, but have to be given lifelong thereafter.



## Can anything be done to stop the itch?

For most allergic animals, a single course of tablets will not produce a cure – a lifelong treatment plan is required. Sometimes, simple therapies, such as regular bathing with a medicated shampoo can help.

Good quality flea control is always essential, because itches can “add up”. A dog with an allergy to moulds will itch much more if there are also fleas present.

Your vet may be able to suggest ways of reducing exposure to common allergens, such as avoiding dog-walking on grass.

Several drugs may be used in the treatment of your pet. Scratching and licking causes skin damage, which leads to infection with bacteria or yeast. This in turn increases the itch. Treating the infection often helps. Antihistamines work for some dogs, but steroids or other immunosuppressants are necessary for others. There are concerns about side effects and your vet will tailor treatment to minimise these. Newer drugs are becoming available

to suppress the immune response and your vet may suggest these if appropriate. Remember to always follow your vet’s instructions carefully.

## I have just noticed a sore patch on my dog. What should I do?

Contact your vet as soon as possible. Meanwhile, prevent scratching or licking the sore patch, as this makes it bigger and sorer – use an Elizabethan collar and/or put socks on your dog’s feet. You can also use a T-shirt to cover sores on the animal’s body. Bathe the area with cool salt water (a teaspoon of salt to a pint of water) or apply ice. Witch hazel or camomile lotion may soothe. Flea bites are a common cause; try to buy flea treatment from your vet as these are the most effective.

## There’s a funny thing on my dog’s side. Is it a tick?

Ticks are white to grey in colour, egg-shaped and around five millimetres long. They are picked up in grassland areas, and fall off eventually. As they occasionally transmit diseases, removing them is advisable. Their mouthparts will be firmly embedded, so it is important these are removed at the same time. It is usually best to see your vet. As a preventive treatment, you can get treatments from your vet which repel ticks and kill them when they attach.

## My dog is shaking his head a lot!

This may be a sign of ear problems. If it starts suddenly there may be a foreign body – such as a grass seed – in your pet’s ear. See your vet as soon as possible.

Infection with tiny ear mites can also produce irritation and wax. If this is diagnosed by your vet, special treatment will be given. All dogs and cats in your household need treatment, usually for three to four weeks.

Sometimes ear disease is straightforward and easily treated (eg when caused by a foreign body) but many ear problems are recurrent. The ear canal may be very narrow or have lots of hairs inside so that wax gets trapped. Skin lines the ears, so skin problems such as allergies affect ears too. The result is excess wax production, inflammation, infection and pain. Lifelong attention is often needed.

Ear cleaning is vital. For sore ears this may have to be done under anaesthetic. If you are advised to do this at home, use only a product supplied by your vet.

- The ear canal is cone shaped and runs from the visible opening down the side of the head, before turning inwards to the eardrum
- Lift the earflap to straighten the canal, put a few drops of ear cleaner down the opening and gently massage down, holding the flap to prevent immediate head shaking



- Wipe away any overflow with cotton wool, but do not use a cotton bud inside the ear
- Clean the earflap too
- The dog is likely to head-shake vigorously afterwards! Praise the animal or give a treat. Always contact your vet if your dog’s ear is very red or painful afterwards.

## My dog has a big swelling on his ear

Vigorous head shaking can break a blood vessel in the earflap, which bleeds and forms a blood blister (haematoma).

If left, this can form a “cauliflower ear” which interferes with ventilation of the ear canal. See your vet, who may advise an operation to drain it.

# Happy, healthy pets

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Blue Cross head office  
Shilton Road, Burford, Oxon OX18 4PF

Telephone: 0300 777 1897

Fax: 0300 777 1601

Email: [info@bluecross.org.uk](mailto:info@bluecross.org.uk)

[www.bluecross.org.uk](http://www.bluecross.org.uk)



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