

Itching Doesn't Always Mean Fleas!

Dogs and cats itch and scratch at times, pulling out their hair and causing skin irritations and scabs. When this happens, pet owners often ask their veterinarian for a different flea preventative. The pet owner is assuming that his pet has fleas since it is scratching, but there are many other factors that can cause a pet to itch and get skin infections. The first thing I ask in these situations is if the pet owner has seen fleas or flea dirt on his pet. I then examine the pet and also look for signs of fleas. If no evidence of fleas is found and the owners have been using a safe and effective flea prevention, I then start ruling in or ruling out other causes of itchy skin.

Advertising by the pet food industry leads many owners to think that their pet has a food allergy that is causing skin disease. With revenues of more than \$6 billion a year in the United States, the pet food industry wants to increase their profits even more by getting you, the consumer, to buy more expensive food. The truth is that a small percentage of dogs and cats do have food allergies, but it is likely no larger a percentage of the population than it is for people. We all know a few people that cannot eat peanuts, shell fish or gluten, but as a percentage of everyone you know, it likely is a small number. The same is true of our pets. To control a food allergy, the pet must eat a very strict hypo-allergenic diet for up to nine months to rule in or rule out that the problem is, indeed, a food allergy. In the meantime, if it is not a food allergy, the itching and skin problems continue to affect the pet and frustrate the pet owner.

Many people (up to more than 50 percent of the population) have some kind of allergy to pollen or other environmental allergy. Think of how many people sneeze and have runny noses during what is known as "hay fever" season. The same is true for pets. This is why it is often a good idea to ask your veterinarian to address that possibility before going to the trouble of changing your pet's diet. It is a matter of playing the percentages. It gets complicated if your pet has both an allergy to pollens and also is allergic to something in his or her food. That is why it is important to consult your veterinarian for an examination and discussion of your pet's symptoms. There are many ways to try and control allergies and itchy skin. There is even the option of allergy testing to try and cure the allergies, but it requires a veterinarian to prescribe and monitor the response to treatment, whether it be antihistamines, some form of cortisone, essential fatty acid supplements or a different diet.

One thing to note is that essential fatty acid supplements or "fish oils" as they are more commonly known, can be beneficial to your pet's health in many ways. They are indeed good for the skin, because they decrease the reaction to an allergy and give a healthier, shinier hair coat with less dandruff and dry skin. They also have many heart-healthy benefits and fight diseases of aging, because they contain many antioxidants. However, supplements are not regulated by the FDA, and there are many products for sale that are not that helpful and really are just a waste of your money. Be sure to ask your veterinarian to recommend a supplement that is good for your pet. If you notice your pet itching a lot and that its hair coat is becoming flaky, dry and dull, then do not assume it is fleas. Instead, consult your veterinarian to see if an allergy treatment is needed.

