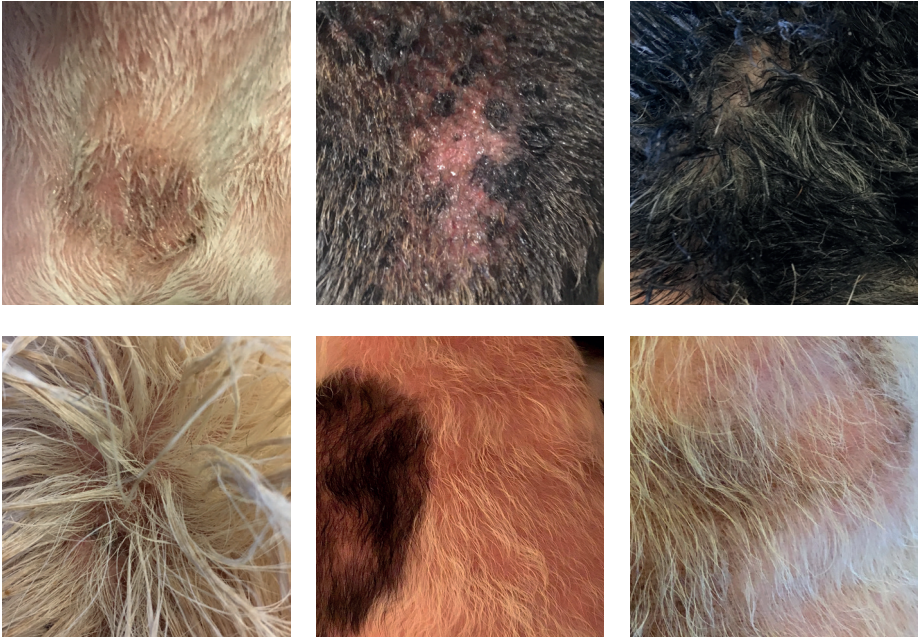


The Itchy Dog

By Dr David Hughes MRCVS

This article was inspired by veterinary dermatologist, Dr Rosario Cerundolo's talk 'Common Skin Problems in the Dog' given at the 2018 Kennel Club Breed Health Symposium.



As Dr Cerundolo pointed out, skin disease is one of the most common, if not the most common reason why dog owners seek veterinary advice. Of all of the skin complaints, the number one issue reported by owners is pruritus (a fancy word to describe itching). I can also echo this statement as the most common reason Wire Fox Terrier (WFT) owners contact me regarding health issues is to discuss chronic itching and ear disease (remember the ears are a continuation of the skin). This is also true for the other breeds I have active involvement with (Welsh Terriers and Airedale Terriers).

During his talk, Dr Cerundolo drew our attention to the fact that actually, very little information on skin disease was in the public domain from many animal organisations. This includes The Kennel Club (as pointed out by a very tongue-in-cheek statement and online search by Dr Cerundolo during this KC talk) and the British Veterinary Association. We have to ask ourselves, why is so little information out there on skin disease? Maybe it is so common in dogs that we come to think of it as normal.

Over the past few years, Van den Ende-Gupta Syndrome (VDEGS), a genetic disease causing a whole host of developmental issues in WFTs, has been a hot topic of conversation among breeders. I will take this opportunity now to point out that there is a new genetic test available for this condition and urge anyone breeding WFTs to strongly consider making use of this test. However, my point is, why are we not giving the same level of attention to itchy dogs? After all, you are far more likely to have an itchy dog than a VDEGS sufferer!

For many WFT owners (and all other breeds for that matter), managing skin problems is an ongoing challenge. I think we often tend to think that a bit of itchy skin is a bit of an inconvenience, however this disease can become so severe that euthanasia becomes a serious consideration. If that isn't reason enough for this condition to warrant significant attention, then I don't know what does!

Although skin disease includes a whole range of issues, for the remainder of this article I will focus on the itchy dog. I realise for some, an article on itchy dogs isn't the most exciting read, however I feel it is extremely important to get some information out there that is hopefully of use and interest to owners. I also hope to inspire a bit of discussion around skin disease and urge the more experienced breeders and owners to help pass on some of their knowledge and management strategies to others struggling with itchy dogs.

WHY IS MY DOG SO ITCHY?

Unfortunately, the list of things that can contribute to itching would be a never-ending list and there can be multiple contributing factors. However, there are broad categories to consider. The categories below are some of the main areas to consider with itchy dogs, but they are by no means an exhaustive list.

Parasites are a significant cause of pruritus, with the fleas being the number one perpetrator. Other parasites such as mites, lice and ticks can also cause itching.

Food intolerance is another area to consider with skin disease. When listening to conversations between pet owners on food intolerance, the focus is often around gluten. This is perhaps unsurprising as pet food companies often promote their food as 'hypoallergenic gluten-free'. In some cases, there may well be a gluten intolerance, however in recent years the thinking has changed somewhat, and it is now believed that the more common food source responsible is protein, largely derived from the meat content (e.g. chicken, beef, fish etc.).

Atopic dermatitis is the second most common allergic skin disease in dogs (behind flea allergic dermatitis). Simply put, atopic dermatitis is an allergic skin disease to anything that isn't caused by fleas or food. Both a genetic susceptibility and environmental factors contribute to the disease. Dogs may have a genetic predisposition to having an inferior skin barrier and an inappropriate immune response. Allergens in the environment can trigger and exacerbate the skin disease, a few examples include, pollens, dust mites, harvest mites, washing powders/detergents, mould spores. During Dr Cerundolo's talk, he informed us that other pets can contribute to the disease. Dogs with atopic dermatitis may be allergic to dandruff from other pets or the feathers from birds (with one of his own cases resolving when the dog owner relocated her chickens). These allergens can trigger itching by direct contact with the skin or via the respiratory system (when breathing in).

The last category to consider is microbes (bacteria, fungi, yeasts etc.). It is important to note that normal animals should have a microbial population on their skin contributing to the normal 'skin flora'. The normal microbes contribute to protection from harmful organisms by outcompeting them for resources on the skin. An invading pathogen might be the primary cause of disease but in many cases, the pathogens are a secondary cause that exacerbates the underlying problem making the dog itchier and sorer. As an example, inflamed skin caused by atopic dermatitis can change the skin conditions and provide the perfect opportunity for an invading pathogen to infect the skin. Another common cause for an infection is a wound, changing the normal structure and integrity of the skin allowing a suitable environment for harmful microorganisms to set up camp! Also, remember some skin diseases, such as the fungal disease ringworm, can pass from your dog to you (and vice-versa) so remember strict hygiene!

DIAGNOSIS

As I hope I have made clear above, a whole range of things can contribute to making a dog itchy. Therefore, its diagnosis is not straightforward. Unfortunately, there is no one test that will always give us the answer, and frustratingly it's often the case that a specific cause isn't found.

Sometimes the diagnosis can be very straightforward. For example, if you see a flea you know your dog has fleas. Your vet might take a sample and look down the microscope, if mites or lice are seen, hey bingo you know the dog has mites or lice! However, it is important to note that just because you don't find a particular parasite it doesn't mean it isn't there. As a result, it is a good idea to treat for skin parasites regardless of findings.

The gold standard method of diagnosing a food intolerance is a food exclusion diet. This usually involves switching to a food with a unique protein source not eaten by the dog before. It is often the case that dogs have been fed multiple protein sources through their lives (e.g. chicken, fish, beef, lamb) which can make finding a novel protein source challenging. However, sources such as venison, shark or vegetarian diets are available and can be fed if other protein sources have already been used. Hydrolysed diets are also available, these consist of proteins broken down into smaller pieces and are much less likely to cause allergic reactions. An exclusion diet is usually fed for a prolonged period (usually around 8 weeks). It is very important, and I cannot stress enough for this test to be reliable you **MUST ONLY** feed the chosen food. That means all other sources of food should be stopped, including scraps, tip bits, chew bones, cheese to disguise medications etc. This test often fails because owners find it very challenging to limit their dog to just the chosen diet. However, if other sneaky treats are given, how can you know if this is causing your dog to itch or some other issue? If the dog's symptoms resolve on an exclusion diet, and then symptoms reoccur when the old food is re-introduced, this gives confirmation of a food intolerance. However, practically most owners don't wish to reintroduce a food suspected of causing their dog disease, so this step is often missed (quite understandably).

Allergy testing for is available and may be recommended by your vet. However, as stressed by Dr Cerundolo in his talk, the blood tests available are very unreliable (both for environmental and food allergens). This is a statement I have heard time and time again from specialist

veterinary dermatologists. With unpredictable results, blood tests are often not very clinically helpful. The blood test for allergies should not be confused with the allergy testing directly on the skin (intradermal tests), which is much more reliable and can be very helpful.

I speak with lots of owners who are very frustrated that their own veterinary surgeon hasn't found a cause for their dog's itching, despite multiple trips to the vets. It may also be confusing why the vet is suggesting a different treatment or management strategy every week. However, this is much more of a reflection of the complexity of skin disease than a failing on the vets' part. Structured and methodical treatments and changes often help path the way to a final diagnosis. The bottom line is to work with your vet and try to follow their advice so together you can get a diagnosis for your dog and treat appropriately.

TREATMENT & MANAGEMENT

Continuing with the theme of this article, in many cases, there is no simple solution or magic bullet! As already mentioned above, tackling and managing itchy dogs needs to be a collaborative effort between owner and vets. My aim here isn't to give the solution for every case but draw attention to some key areas.

Parasite control plays an important part in treating and managing skin diseases. There are a whole range of products for treating parasites with varying success rates. It's important to realise the products on the shelf in pet stores are not the same as licensed veterinary products. I know people often turn to pet shop products as they tend to be cheaper to purchase than veterinary products. However, as one of the senior lecturers used to say throughout my veterinary training, 'the cheapest treatment is the one that works first time!' It's all well and good using cheaper products but if they don't work it's going to cost more in the long run as you will then have to pay for a vet product later and your dog may end up suffering even longer than necessary with its itchy skin. The other aspect of purchasing pet shop products is that you don't get the professional advice from experienced veterinary professionals to give the most appropriate, targeted treatment.

Fleas can live for prolonged periods in the environment. Therefore, if fleas are found or suspected, it is very important to also treat the environment the dog lives in to prevent re-infestation (e.g. with household flea sprays). Also, remember to treat all other pets in the household.

With chronic skin cases it is often a case of trying to work out what is causing the problem and trying to avoid the triggers (much easier said than done I know!). But try to think strategically when the problem occurs. Is there a seasonal pattern to the problem making things like pollen and harvest mites a potential cause? Does it occur every time you wash the dog's bed making you think the washing powder might be to blame? Have you used shake and vac on the carpet and then the dog got itchy feet? Does the dog seem to get worse on certain foods? The list could go on forever, but in short, you need to try to think when the problem occurred, try to link it to things the dog might have come in contact with, and where possible remove the triggering cause. Sometimes a diary of flare-ups can be a useful tool in ongoing cases.

Bathing dogs can help to manage pruritus if done appropriately, but excessive bathing should be avoided to prevent ongoing disturbance to the normal skin flora unless directed to do so

by your vet. For a WFT with healthy skin, I would not bath the body coat to prevent altering the correct wiry texture of the coat unless it was dirty (they do love rolling in fox poo!) but would bath and condition the furnishings (face hair, leg hair and underline). However, for itchy dogs, weekly or fortnightly bathing can help to manage the skin. Washing the coat can help to remove any potential allergens that may be on the skin and keep the skin clean to help reduce the likelihood of a secondary infection. Your vet may prescribe a veterinary shampoo for this which can be very successful in helping manage skin problems. In mild cases, I find dog tea tree shampoo can help too (human shampoo is not recommended). It's important to make sure that after applying shampoo to the coat it is rinsed out really thoroughly; if any shampoo is left in the coat this can itself aggravate the skin. I would also strongly recommend thoroughly drying the coat after to prevent a prolonged moist environment (which potentially could promote harmful bacterial growths on the skin).

When chronic cases cannot be managed with the above treatments and management changes, immunosuppressive drugs can be incorporated to help manage the severity of the problem. There are many drugs available and this is an area best discussed with your own vet to choose a product most suited to you and your pet's circumstances. It's important to point out that these drugs are not a cure and, in many cases, become a permanent ongoing treatment to manage the severity of your dog's skin disease.

SUMMARY

To summarise, I think it is fair to say that itchy skin is very common in all breeds, including WFTs, and there are a huge number of causes and contributing factors. Parasite treatment plays an important part in keeping our dogs healthy. Where triggers are suspected they should be avoided wherever possible. For ongoing cases, immunosuppressive drugs can be used to reduce the severity of skin disease. And as I final note, I really hope this article gets you all chatting about skin disease and passing on a few nuggets of wisdom in the successful management of itchy skin.

Dr David Hughes MRCVS