

My puppy is about 6 months old. He swims a lot and gets a bath once a week. His skin has gotten really dry lately. He is always scratching and he has white flakes in his skin. What's going on? What can I do about it?

Dry, itchy, flaky skin can be caused by many things. You first want to rule out that you are over bathing him and drying out the skin. Most dogs really should only need a bath once a month, at most. It is also important to use a shampoo that is formulated for dogs. Since the pH of dog skin differs from ours, human shampoos should never be used to bathe your dog. Sometimes swimming too often can also cause a dog's skin to become irritated. Rinse him off and clean out his ears when he finishes swimming.

The next thing to consider is skin parasites. Fleas typically cause dogs to scratch and bite at their hind legs and around the base of the tail. Even if you don't see fleas, some dogs are allergic to the bite that occurs right before a flea dies. Using a monthly flea product that repels fleas is very important. Other microscopic skin parasites include mites, such as Demodex, Sarcoptes, or Cheyletiella (also called walking dandruff). These are conditions that need to be diagnosed and treated by your veterinarian. They can be very itchy and cause secondary infections. Sarcoptic mange (scabies) and Cheyletiella can spread to people.

Food allergies can cause a puppy to become very itchy as well. While allergies to protein sources are most common, some dogs also develop allergies to wheat and corn. Working with your veterinarian to pick out a diet appropriate for your pet will be important in these cases. Some dogs develop seasonal allergies, but these are usually seen in dogs over a year of age.

Some puppies may scratch as the puppy coat sheds and a mature coat grows in. Fish oil supplements or a food that contains high quality Omega-3 fatty acids will help during this time. While fish oil supplements for dogs are similar to those available for people, the dosing is different. For this reason it is important to purchase a high quality fish oil supplement from your veterinarian and discuss how much to give. Fish oils come in liquids or gel caps that can be given with a meal. Fish oil supplements are also beneficial for joint health and kidney function.

To help get your puppy's itching under control, schedule an appointment with your veterinarian to have the skin examined, the necessary diagnostic tests done and treatment started.

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