

Q. have a seven year old west highland terrier which has only recently started to scratch a lot, rubbing its back under the car and on the back of the sofa. I feel sore for it as it doesn't seem to get any peace. What should I do?

A. West Highland White Scottish Terriers (Westies) do have an inherited predisposition for very sensitive skin. This is well known of the breed however I do try to warn owners when they are presented as puppies that this can be a problem. Breakouts in skin disease can begin at any age, some will start very young and others can have perfect skin for years and then start scratching at 7-8 years old. It often begins with their paws which can be seen very clearly as the white hair starts to turn brown due to excessive licking. They will sit and lick and chew their feet for ages.

When any animal seems distressed with scratching it should be seen by a vet, to hopefully get an early diagnosis, but primarily to give some relief.

All skin examination in a vet will begin with the dreaded Flea check, for walkies or any evidence of them as this must be ruled out as the cause before going any further.

When we comb the hair we will easily pick up the sensitive parts as the skin starts to twitch or back leg starts to scratch. There can be redness or scabs under the hair, often there is a greasy feel to the skin and in very bad cases we get a very bad smell.

Primary Causes

- Parasites- Fleas, lice and sometime Ticks
- Allergy- Indoor allergens. e.g. dust mites
Outdoor allergens e.g. grasses, pollens or trees
Food allergy

Once the skin has reacted to one of these causes the dog will start to scratch and will traumatise the skin, it is then that a secondary bacterial or fungal infection comes along and makes the condition more serious.

Advise.

- Seek Veterinary advise when scratching occurs.
- Rule out parasites with preventative topical treatment.
- Keep coats well groomed, short in summer when hot weather as infection get worse under tick coats
- Comb and groom your own pets skin with pet combs and brushes, they usually enjoy it and you will pick up early signs of trouble

This is general advise for all pets, not just Westies. I see skin complaints in all breeds, which are often difficult to cure but can be managed well with a variety of treatments.