

## Canine Seborrhea: Dealing With Doggy Odor

By Stephen M. Sheldon, DVM

Seborrhea is a very common skin disorder resulting in excessively greasy or dry skin. The result is a dry, flaky coat that usually has that terrible "doggy smell" we've all encountered at one time or another. It's a condition that affects people too; remember the Tegrin commercials: "...the heartbreak of eczema, seborrhea, and psoriasis!" Fortunately, it is not contagious from people to dogs (or visa versa).

There are two types of seborrhea: oily (oleosa) and dry (sicca). Most dogs suffer from a combination of the two forms. The skin is usually dry and scaly and the scales form clusters around the hair. The overactive sebaceous glands in the skin secrete a greasy, waxy substance that collects on the belly, under the armpits, and in the ears, elbows, and ankle area. However, any part of the coat can be involved. It's this fat-laden greasy accumulation that causes the distinctive "doggy odor." Secondary ear and skin infections are very common with seborrhea. Most dogs are also very itchy.

There are many causes of seborrhea including metabolic disorders (hypothyroidism, Cushings disease or hyperadrenocorticism, dietary deficiencies, malabsorption, maldigestion, pancreatic diseases), internal parasites, external parasites (fleas, ticks, lice), hypersensitivities (food allergy, inhaled allergies, flea allergies), ringworm infections, and some autoimmune diseases. Some dogs such as Cocker Spaniels, Springer Spaniels, West Highland Terriers, Dobermans, Golden Retrievers, Dachshunds, and Shar-Peis have seborrhea without an underlying cause. This is called idiopathic seborrhea and usually starts to rear its ugly head before 2 years of age; this form is not thought to be hereditary. Unfortunately, for Miniature Schnauzers, a specific form of idiopathic seborrhea called Schnauzer Comedo Syndrome is inherited.

If your veterinarian suspects seborrhea, he or she will run some tests to try to nail down an underlying cause. If I were you, I would be hoping at this time that they find one that is relatively harmless and easy to treat! Why? It is because primary idiopathic seborrhea is a very frustrating, difficult disease to treat. Some of the tests may be skin scrapings for mange, ringworm tests such as a Wood's Light exam and dermatophyte cultures, bacterial skin cultures, fecal exams for internal parasites. Certain blood tests to rule out digestive, hormonal, endocrine, and other systemic problems may all be recommended.

If an underlying cause can be found, you are well on your way to a cure. If not, and this is important to understand, our goals are to control the seborrhea. We can't cure it. Shampoos and coat conditioners are the mainstay of treatment. They contain various combinations of ingredients, the most common being benzoyl peroxide, salicylic acid, refined coal tar, sulfur, urea compounds, and various emollients to add moisture. Which combination of these will be decided by your veterinarian and it depends on what the major problems in the skin are. Most of these ingredients work to rid the skin of dying cells, reduce the rate at which these cells regenerate, cut down on grease production, and moisturize the skin. Shampoos and conditioners work wonders on the odor and also help

with the itching. Pay attention to the frequency of bathing recommended and leave the products on the coat as long as the label says to!

Nutritional support is also very important. A premium diet should be fed. This is one of my first recommendations for any skin condition. Some veterinary nutritionists say a premium diet is only needed for stressful conditions; I consider our tropical environment to be a stressful situation for any dog! In addition, fatty acid supplementation will help tremendously. Don't just go out and get "oils" from the pet store for your pet. I'm sorry to have to bash the over-the-counter market, but these oils may do more harm than good if your dog has seborrhea. If they don't have seborrhea or another inflammatory skin condition, fine, these OTC oils won't hurt at all; if they do, however, don't use them. They are not formulated with either the correct ingredients or correct ratios of oils to reduce the inflammatory reaction inciting the damage.

Lastly, there are some newer medicines being investigated at our universities. Most of these are synthetic vitamin A compounds like isotretinoin and tretinoin. Ask your veterinarian to research them for you and be prepared to spend some bucks on them. I've had limited success using them but my case numbers are small.

Good luck treating your dog with seborrhea and have some patience. Idiopathic seborrhea must usually be treated for life. The skin is also the slowest organ system to respond to treatment, so don't be surprised if it takes 3 to 4 months before the skin returns to normal.