

## What Your Dog's Skin May Be Trying to Tell You

If your dog's skin could talk, you might get different messages, but one thing would be for sure with this common condition: Something's off balance in your dog's body. The good news is, it's usually easy to fix, and any dog could benefit from this recommendation, even if it isn't the primary cause.

**Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker**

### STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- A top cause of dry, flaky skin in dogs is not enough omega-3 fats, including docosahexaenoic acid (DHA) and eicosapentaneic acid (EPA)
- Adding wild-caught salmon and/or sardines to your pet's meals several times a week is one way to increase their intake of DHA and EPA, however many pets also benefit from omega-3 supplements, like krill oil
- Both too many or too few baths can contribute to flakes in your dog's coat
- Coconut oil is useful for relieving dry skin, both as a topical treatment and consumed orally
- Thyroid problems, including hypothyroidism in dogs and hyperthyroidism in kitties, are another potential cause of flaky skin

If your dog's coat is dry and flaky, it's a sign that something is off balance in her body. It could be simple dandruff brought on by cold weather or inappropriate bathing, or it could be something more serious, like an underlying medical condition. Either way, it's important to get to the bottom of your dog's dry skin.

Left unattended, dry skin can turn itchy, leading to excessive scratching and sores that are open to infection. You'll want to bacterial, fungal and parasitic infections, too, so a trip to your veterinarian may be warranted. However, in many cases you can resolve your dog's dry skin at home by making simple dietary and/or grooming changes.

### Increase Omega-3 Fats, Fresh Food if Your Dog's Skin Is Dry

A top cause of dry, flaky skin in dogs is not enough omega-3 fats, including docosahexaenoic acid (DHA) and eicosapentaneic acid (EPA). These beneficial fatty acids help to hydrate the skin and reduce inflammation and itchiness. However, because they are not required to be added to pet foods, most pets consume little to none in their diet, resulting in most unsupplemented animals being deficient.

All pets eating commercial pet food benefit from supplemental DHA and EPA, and if you feed a homemade diet, make sure you follow a recipe that shows the nutritional analysis (including the amount of DHA and EPA) so you know your pet is receiving optimal amounts.

Adding **wild-caught salmon** or sardines (packed in water) to your pet's meals several times a week is one way to increase their intake of DHA and EPA, however most pets also benefit from DHA and EPA supplements. Studies show feeding dogs a diet enriched with omega-3 fats helps improve skin health in dogs with **atopic dermatitis**, which can cause dry skin and itching.<sup>1,2</sup>

Recently I checked my own omega-3 index and was shocked that despite me taking 4 grams a day for years, I only scored a C+. You can measure your pet's omega-3 index as well (if you want to know just how deficient they are prior to supplementing); it's an easy, **at-home test**.

Keep in mind that the dietary ratio of omega-3 to omega-6 is also important. Most pet foods, whether commercial or homemade, are sky high in omega-6s and low in omega-3s (DHA and EPA), leading to an imbalance. A common confusion for pet parents is that pets do have a requirement for the plant-based omega-3s (alpha linolenic acid found in flax and chia) but they also have a DHA and EPA requirement that is NOT met through these sources, so both must be supplied in the diet.

Plant sources of omega-3s can't be efficiently converted to DHA and EPA by dogs and cats, so not supplying EPA and DHA in the diet on a regular basis can create an imbalance serious enough to cause skin problems, even for animals eating great quality foods deficient in marine oils.

In a comparison of three types of omega-3 fat supplements — fish oil, flaxseed and krill — **krill** came out on top in terms of increasing omega-3 levels the most.<sup>3</sup> Further, the more you can feed your pet fresh foods, the better, as this, too, will benefit skin health. One study compared feeding a fresh, raw diet to dry food for 30 days, revealing significant changes in skin microbiome.<sup>4</sup> If you opt to use supplements to boost levels, always choose sustainably sourced ocean products.

## Bathe Your Dog More — Or Less

Both too many or too few baths can contribute to flakes in your dog's coat. As a general rule of thumb, bathe your dog when they're stinky or dirty, not just "because." Often, flakes accumulate due to a lack of regular grooming and skin exfoliation, including brushing and bathing. If this is the case in your pup, regular baths may help.<sup>5</sup> Be sure to use a chemical-free, organic shampoo and conditioner designed specifically for pets — and rinse it thoroughly.

As a general rule, the more humid the climate, the more skin inflammation tends to occur, and the more often pets need to be bathed. If you've been giving your dog frequent baths, however, it's possible over-bathing is contributing to her dry skin. In this case, back off on bathing, giving baths only as needed.

Additionally, after bathing extra-dry dogs, apply a coconut oil treatment, which will help fortify the lipid barrier, sealing in moisture and improving skin flakiness. Applying coconut oil to your pet's skin, like a mask, and letting it soak in naturally, then bathing as normal, can dramatically improve extra-dry coats.

As an added bonus, **coconut oil** has antibacterial and antifungal properties,<sup>6</sup> and is beneficial when consumed as well. You can feed your pet one-quarter teaspoon of organic, cold-pressed, human-grade coconut oil for every 10 pounds of body weight once or twice daily to help improve her skin from the inside out.

Remember to brush your dog regularly as well, as this helps to get rid of dead skin and hair. This is important for all dogs, but especially dogs with double coats, because the thick long undercoat can collect and hide dead skin, leading to flaking.

## Rule Out Systemic Health and Environmental Problems

Skin is your dog's largest organ, just as it is in humans, and there are number of underlying health conditions that can affect it. Thyroid problems, including hypothyroidism in dogs and hyperthyroidism in kitties, are a common cause of flaky skin. Cushing's disease can also cause dryness in your dog's skin, especially if it's accompanied by hair loss.

Any changes in your dog's skin deserve the opinion of your integrative veterinarian. Testing, such as a skin scrape to look for parasites, yeast, bacteria and fungi may be necessary. In some cases, blood work or a skin biopsy can help get to the root of the problem.<sup>7</sup>

As for environment, sleeping near a heat vent can add to skin dryness, as can climates with low humidity, so adding a humidifier can be beneficial. But if animals are receiving enough omega-3 fats, even dry climates won't typically cause flaking.

In most cases, by changing your dog's diet to better quality food, adding more DHA and EPA to their diet, supplementing with coconut oil and adjusting your pup's bathing schedule as necessary, dry skin should resolve and your dog's coat should be healthy. If not, however, make an appointment to see your veterinarian to rule out a potential health problem.

## Sources and References

<sup>1</sup> [BMC Vet Res. 2021; 17: 354](#)

<sup>2</sup> [J Small Anim Pract. 2004 Jun;45\(6\):293-7. doi: 10.1111/j.1748-5827.2004.tb00238.x](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Vet Sci. 2023 Feb; 10\(2\): 162](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Animals July 2022 12\(15\):1881](#)

<sup>5,7</sup> [PetMD May 22, 2023](#)

<sup>6</sup> [Natural Medicine Journal May 7, 2014](#)

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