

# Why Your Pet's 'Stinky Dog' Smell Won't Go Away

If your dog has a persistent unpleasant or strong smell, he may have an issue with his skin. More common in dogs with unbalanced immune systems, this opportunistic infection can grow uncontrollably. Know the signs of infection and the No. 1 treatment to control it.

**Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker**

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## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Many dogs suffer from yeast infections of the skin and ears; they're often caused by a type of yeast known as *Malassezia pachydermatis* (*M. pachydermatis*)
- It's normal for these organisms to inhabit your dog's skin, but when they begin to reproduce uncontrollably, infection develops
- If your dog is immunocompromised or on antibiotic therapy, she may be unable to control yeast overgrowth
- The most common spot for yeast infections is the ears; itching is a common yeast infection symptom, which can range from mild to severe
- The most important element to addressing a chronic yeast infection is diet; dogs with yeast need an "anti-yeast diet," which is also anti-inflammatory and species-specific
- You'll also need to disinfect that area of your dog's body where the yeast is present on a regular basis, via ear cleaning, bathing and/or foot soaks
- Many dogs with yeast infections improve solely from dietary changes and baths two to three times a week; it takes time and dedication but is effective and less toxic than using antifungal drugs

Your dog certainly has her own unique "doggy" smell, but it shouldn't be unpleasant or particularly strong. If your dog has a persistent "stinky dog" smell, it could be due to an overgrowth of yeast. Yeast is a spore-like type of fungi that reproduces via a process known as budding, in which portions of the organism's cell-body break off to form a whole new yeast organism.

Many dogs suffer from yeast infections of the skin and ears. They're often caused by a type of yeast known as *Malassezia pachydermatis* (*M. pachydermatis*). It's normal for these organisms to inhabit your dog's skin, but when they begin to reproduce uncontrollably, infection develops. Yeast are opportunistic, so if your dog's system is out of balance, yeast may take advantage, spreading to areas they don't normally inhabit, and in higher numbers.

## Immune System Imbalances Put Your Dog at Risk

If your dog is immunocompromised, she may be unable to control yeast overgrowth. This includes dogs with an immunoglobulin deficiency or Cushing's disease, and those taking prescription steroids (e.g., prednisone).

Antibiotic therapy also puts your dog at risk, as it reduces the level of beneficial bacteria that help maintain skin defenses. Other factors that predispose dogs to yeast infections are increased humidity, altered skin pH levels (which is why I don't recommend oatmeal shampoos) and drugs such as chemotherapeutic agents and prolonged corticosteroid therapy.<sup>1</sup>

In clinical practice, however, I see yeast infections most often in dogs with allergies. An allergy is an immune system overreaction, so veterinarians often prescribe drugs that suppress the immune system — such as prednisone — to treat them by basically muting, or turning off, the body's immune response. While this may dampen allergy symptoms, it also makes the body incapable of managing normal flora levels, which often leads to yeast overgrowth.

Secondary skin infections also often develop in pets with allergies, who are then treated with antibiotics, which can also lead to yeast overgrowth. The more antibiotics given, the worse the yeast infections tend to be. Allergic dogs can even develop allergies to their own yeast,<sup>2</sup> making the problem even worse.

Pets with an underactive immune system can be identified using blood tests to measure immunoglobulin levels (IgG, IgM, and IgA), which are generally low in immunodeficient dogs (and high in allergic dogs). These dogs often struggle with chronic yeast infections, as do pets that have overactive immune systems and allergies.

## Where Do Most Yeast Infections Develop?

Yeast infections can occur anywhere on your dog's body, including between the toes and in skin wrinkles. However, the most common spot for yeast infections is the ears. **Itching** is a common yeast infection symptom, which can range from mild to severe. Dogs with yeast infections between their toes likely won't leave their paws alone, while pawing at the ears signals yeast overgrowth in that area.

You may also notice your dog scooting her butt across the floor and generally trying to scratch and chew at any area of her body that's driving her crazy with itchiness. This, in turn, can lead to trauma, sores and pain. There's also a characteristic smell that goes along with yeast infections. Some people describe it as similar to corn chips, cheese popcorn or moldy bread; it's a generally musty, stinky and often overpowering smell. Other signs of yeast infection include:

- Skin irritation
- Hair loss
- Greasy fur
- Secondary bacterial infection
- Raised, scaly areas of skin
- Redness and inflammation, especially around the ears, toes and pads of their feet, facial folds, anus, under the armpits or neck and around the tail base
- Scaly or oily skin
- Dark, thick skin
- Smelly, yellow-green discharge from the ears
- Behavioral changes, including depression, anxiety, loss of appetite and aggression

## How to Diagnose a Yeast Infection

Definitive diagnosis of a yeast infection requires either cytology (looking at a skin swab under a microscope) or culturing (submitting a sterile swab of the skin to a lab where the cells are grown and identified on a petri dish). Most veterinarians prefer skin cytology to identify yeast overgrowth in dogs.

If there's an ear infection, either diagnosed or suspected, it's extremely important to know whether the eardrums are still intact before putting any liquids, gels, cleansers, or other medications down in the ears. If one or both eardrums have ruptured, putting products into the ear canals can damage the middle and inner ear.

Most dogs with a yeast infection have it in more than one spot. For example, they can have it on all four paws, both ears, or in some cases, over their entire body.

## No. 1 Treatment for Chronic Yeast Infection? Diet

If your dog has a chronic yeast infection, hands-down the most important element to addressing it is diet. Research published in The Canadian Veterinary Journal states, "Often, treatment of *Malassezia dermatitis* is accompanied by other recommendations such as a dietary elimination trial."<sup>3</sup> Removing reactive foods, including pro-inflammatory carbs, is an important first step.

The nutrition your dog receives either supports his immune system to keep yeast growth under control, or it does the opposite and exacerbates a yeast overgrowth situation. Dogs with yeast need an "anti-yeast diet," which is also anti-inflammatory and species-specific. I prefer to use a novel protein (a protein you haven't fed before), low/no starch diet for 3 months.

Yeast use sugar as a source of energy, and carbs break down into sugar. So the first thing dogs with yeast infections need to do is remove all sources of starch from their diet. Some of the most popular pet foods are the worst offenders, in terms of hidden sugar, so never assume because you're paying a lot for your pet food that it's healthier.

The only way to know just how much unnecessary starch (aka sugar) is in your dry food is to do the Carb Equation. Pets need zero in their diet, so the higher the amount, the worse the sugar-loving, opportunistic yeast can be. Not addressing diet is the biggest mistake I see pet parents make when it comes to losing the chronic yeast battle.

Correcting your dog's nutrition works to balance flora levels naturally, but I also recommend adding a few natural antifungal foods to the diet, for example, small amounts of fresh garlic,<sup>4</sup> thyme, parsley, and oregano to help reduce the level of yeast.<sup>5</sup> Adding fermented veggies to your dog's meals can also be very beneficial, along with raw, unfiltered apple cider vinegar and coconut oil, which contains caprylic acid that has anti-*Malassezia* properties.<sup>6</sup>

Research shows a fresh food diet helps diversify a dog's skin microbiome,<sup>7</sup> but your holistic veterinarian may also recommend certain supplements to help re-establish healthy flora. Spore-forming **probiotics** can be very beneficial, as well as the herbs pau d'arco or berberine (the active component in goldenseal, barberry and Oregon grape root).

The more potent undecylenic acid, which is an organic unsaturated fatty acid, can be beneficial in treating stubborn infections, because it helps break down the yeast's biofilm. Olive leaf extract contains oleuropein, a potent antifungal natural extract that can also help.<sup>8</sup>

## Chronic Yeast? Disinfect Your Dog's Skin

If you're looking to avoid expensive antifungal drugs, you'll have to disinfect your pet's skin yourself. Nothing is going to kill excessive yeast unless you begin a microbiome-balancing protocol, so you'll also need to disinfect the affected area(s) of your dog's body where the opportunistic yeast overgrowth is present on a regular basis.

If the infection is in the ears, dampen a cotton ball with a vet-prescribed (and possibly natural) antifungal solution (witch hazel can be used in a pinch), and use as many as necessary to remove debris, keeping the ears clean and dry every day. This can help to prevent the yeast infection from worsening or progressing into a mixed bacterial infection.

For yeast overgrowth on your dog's paws, use a foot soak to fully submerge the paws. My favorite solution for foot soaks is povidone iodine (brand name, Betadine), which is an organic iodine solution. It's safe, nontoxic, antifungal, antibacterial and anti-yeast, and you can buy it in the pharmacy section of almost any store. Add just enough water in your foot soak to cover your dog's feet, and enough iodine to turn the water to the color of iced tea.

For skin yeast infections in dogs, I recommend a natural antifungal shampoo, followed by a therapeutic rinse. I typically use an herbal or tea tree oil shampoo, as research shows it's helpful in reducing *Malassezia* on the body.<sup>9</sup> If your dog has yeast all over, a once a week bath, at a minimum, can do a great job at minimizing the need for oral drug therapy. I don't recommend using oatmeal-based shampoos for pets with allergies or yeast infections, as carbs feed yeast.

I've seen many dogs with yeast infections improve solely from dietary changes and medicated baths two to three times a week. This takes time and dedication but is effective and less toxic than using antifungal drugs.

Using a natural, antifungal rinse after bathing can extend the number of days in between therapeutic baths. Add one cup of vinegar or one cup of lemon juice or 10 drops of peppermint oil with 10 drops of lavender oil to a gallon of water. If your dog has a dark coat, stick with vinegar or essential oils, since lemon juice can lighten fur.

Pour the antifungal rinse over your dog after a bath, avoiding her head/eyes, and rub the solution into her skin, focusing on the areas where yeast grows, such as under her armpits and between the toes. Don't rinse off the solution; simply towel dry.

You can also keep the solution in a spray bottle and mist the yeasty areas of your dog throughout the day. Adding a dropper full of colloidal silver, which studies show has **considerable antifungal activity**, to the spray bottle is recommend for additional antimicrobial action.

If your dog has had antibiotics, which can obliterate a healthy gut and skin microbiome and predispose the body to yeast overgrowth, here's a DIY microbiome-restoring rinse you can try.

Remember that these natural treatments aren't a quick fix. It will take some time to see improvement. If you change your dog's diet to be more biologically appropriate, begin a natural antifungal protocol and are diligent with topical disinfection but aren't seeing any improvement, consider testing your dog's immunoglobulin levels via bloodwork.

Immune deficiencies are a common reason some dogs have trouble overcoming yeast infections. Dogs with low levels of IgA can benefit greatly from immunoglobulin supplementation. Either way, continuing with a low-starch, anti-inflammatory fresh food diet year-round will boost your dog's overall health and minimize the likelihood of chronic yeast infection.

## Sources and References

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