

Five Clues to Your Dog's Itchy Skin and Stomach Issues

Itchiness and sensitive stomach issues can share a common cause - food. While the time of year your dog is itchy may be your biggest tip off, these five other clues could mean the issues may be food-related. How to identify problem foods and help your dog overcome food sensitivities.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- If your dog is itchy year-round vs. seasonally and also has chronic or intermittent digestive issues, there may be a food intolerance behind her "sensitive stomach"
- Food sensitivities in dogs may be the result of an abundance of foreign contaminants found in the vast majority of processed pet food on the market
- If you suspect your dog is sensitive to something in his diet, it's important to determine the specific food(s) he's reacting to
- Once the problem food(s) have been identified, a 2-to-3-month novel diet should be introduced; for most dogs and especially those with super-sensitive stomachs, it's best to avoid all processed pet food in favor of a homemade diet
- Because each case of food intolerance is unique, it can be extremely beneficial to work with an integrative or holistic veterinarian who can design a custom formulated healing protocol for your pet

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If your dog is itchy regardless of the season, he may have a "sensitive stomach," also known as food sensitivities or intolerances. Generally speaking, pets with **environmental allergies** tend to suffer in the spring and fall, but when a dog is itching and scratching year-round, the culprit is often something (or more than one thing) he's eating.

Because most allergies in dogs, no matter the cause, tend to manifest in itchy, inflamed skin, it can be difficult to know in the early stages whether an animal has an environmental (seasonal) allergy or food sensitivity.

Dogs with food intolerances typically suffer not only from itchy skin, but often skin and ear infections, and sometimes, vomiting and diarrhea. Unlike humans, who almost always have gastrointestinal (GI) symptoms with a food allergy, dogs are much more likely to develop skin problems first. There are certain clues that your pet's problem may be food-related, including:

- He has sores or skin damage around the neck area, especially under the collar, and his whole head is itchy
- He has received steroid therapy for allergies (which I do NOT recommend), but the treatment hasn't cured the symptoms
- He's under 6 months of age, or in some cases his allergies didn't appear until he was over 6 years of age

- He is a breed prone to food intolerances, including the Boxer, Cocker Spaniel, Springer Spaniel, Collie, Dalmatian, German Shepherd, Lhasa Apso, Miniature Schnauzer, Retriever, Shar Pei, Soft-Coated Wheaten Terrier, Dachshund, and West Highland White Terrier¹
- He's experiencing GI symptoms such as vomiting, diarrhea, and/or constipation

It's also important to note that sensitive stomachs in dogs can also be the result of inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) or a **leaky gut** (dysbiosis), and not necessarily an intolerance to a particular food or ingredient. If this is the case with your dog, until the underlying disease is identified and healed, it's unlikely that treating food sensitivities alone will be successful.

What Causes Food Sensitivities in Dogs?

When your dog has a food intolerance, her immune system perceives that something in her diet is attacking her body. To deal with the "threat," the immune system launches a counterattack just as it would against a real danger, for example, an infectious agent.

Certain substances in the diet are more likely to trigger the immune system than others, and unfortunately, the nutrient your **carnivorous pet** needs most — protein — is very often the culprit.

Although no research has been published on why carnivores develop sensitivities to their natural evolutionary diet, we suspect foreign contaminants may be the culprit. Growth hormones, antibiotics and chemical residues may actually be the triggers rather than the protein in the food.

If we had multiple generations of pets raised exclusively on organic, clean, fresh, species-specific diets, we could conduct studies to determine if they also develop sensitivities to meat proteins. If this population of animals did not develop intolerances to the proteins in their diet, our suspicions about foreign contaminants would be confirmed.

However, since 99.9% of pet foods are made with conventionally raised, factory-farmed meats (and only the leftover, rendered pieces and parts), blended with glyphosate-contaminated fillers known to disrupt the microbiome,² sensitivities will continue to be a problem for almost all susceptible pets.

And to compound the problem, often it isn't until the GI tract has been significantly compromised by the inflammation caused by a food intolerance that a dog begins to show symptoms of digestive disturbance.

Pets fed the same food day in and day out for a period of months or years can develop a sensitivity to not only the protein source, but also grains and vegetables.

If the food is made from inexpensive feed-grade raw materials (which describes the vast majority of pet food) and is highly processed (the vast majority of kibble has been **cooked 4 times** before reaching the bag), chances are the meat contains high levels of advanced glycation end products, which in addition to antibiotics and hormones can cause the immune system to overreact.

These dogs also often grow sensitive to reactive ingredients in the food, typically grains and other refined carbohydrates. Many grains have been genetically modified and sprayed with glyphosates, which can compromise your pet's gut barrier and contribute to leaky gut.

What to Do First for a Dog With a Sensitive Stomach

The first thing I recommend for animals over the age of 12 months who I suspect are dealing with a food sensitivity is a NutriScan saliva test. If the first thing your own veterinarian recommends is antibiotics and/or a highly processed prescription diet, I suggest you order a NutriScan test instead.

I also suggest finding an integrative or holistic veterinarian who will work with you to identify the root cause of your pet's condition and develop a customized healing protocol. The NutriScan panel tests for 24 purified food extracts that recognize 56 food ingredients:

- Beef (bison, buffalo)
- Chicken (chicken fat, necks, flavorings)
- Millet
- Soy (soy isoflavones)
- Pork (pork fat)
- Rabbit
- Venison (deer, elk, treats/chews)
- Barley (barley water)
- Rice
- Sweet potatoes (yams)
- Salmon (salmon oil)
- Quinoa
- Hen eggs (fertilized hen eggs)
- Wheat (wheat germ meal)
- Potatoes
- Oatmeal
- Lamb (lamb dairy, goat, goat dairy)
- Lentils (peas, pea fiber, pea protein)
- Corn (cornstarch, corn gluten meal)
- Turkey (turkey necks, turkey fat)
- Peanuts (peanut oil)
- Cow milk (cow dairy)
- Duck (duck fat)
- White-colored fish (white-colored fish oils, herring, sardines, tuna)

NutriScan test results can often identify the specific ingredient(s) in your pet's food that are causing a problem, which makes it much easier to customize a diet to resolve the issue.

Next Step: A Novel Diet

When an animal is having a reaction to something in her diet, her body needs a break from that food. After determining your dog's food sensitivities with a NutriScan test, my recommendation is to introduce a novel diet to promote healing. This means transitioning her to a different food she isn't sensitive containing ingredients her body isn't familiar with.

Unfortunately, many dog foods claiming to contain "novel proteins," don't. In addition, pet food mislabeling is a widespread problem, so if you're planning to go with a commercially available processed novel diet, be aware it will undoubtedly contain ingredients you're trying to avoid.

The safest approach, at least for the first few months, for your food sensitive dog is actually homecooked meals that allow you to control virtually everything that goes into your dog's mouth. Second best is a human grade commercially available fresh food containing an uncommon protein, produced by a company you trust.

It's very important that all reactive foods be avoided for at least several months. Oftentimes animals experience a reaction to both the primary protein and carbohydrate sources in their diet. In addition to avoiding all reactive foods, it's important to reduce or eliminate any "filler ingredients" (as well as synthetic nutrients) that can play a role in food sensitivities and inflammatory conditions.

I also believe pets with food intolerances do best on a very low-starch diet. Starch (aka soluble carbohydrates) are pro-inflammatory to the body and can exacerbate GI inflammation. Microbiome expert Dr. Holly Gantz has also seen beneficial changes in pets' microbiomes when excessive carbs are reduced.

Until new labeling standards are fully in effect, pet food manufacturers aren't required to list carbohydrate content on their labels, so you have to calculate it yourself. It's worth taking the time to do this before choosing a novel diet (less than 20% carb content is the goal).

Returning Your Dog to a Regular Diet

A dog with food sensitivities should remain on a novel diet for a minimum of 2 months and preferably 3, to allow the body time to clear out the allergenic substances and begin the detoxification process.

During this 3-month period I also typically address dysbiosis (leaky gut syndrome, which results from the inflammatory response in the GI tract) with the appropriate probiotics, **microbiome restorative therapy**, and nutraceuticals necessary to address the root cause of the problem. This is where partnering with a functional medicine veterinarian that has experience in healing dysbiosis is important.

Because each case of food intolerance is unique, again, I recommend a custom formulated protocol created by a professional that understands your pet's unique set of circumstances. Once a patient has completed 2 to 3 months on a novel diet, other foods are slowly reintroduced one at a time, and the animal's response is closely monitored.

Some pets show dramatic improvement on the new diet, and in those cases, I often don't rush the reintroduction of food that could be problematic.

When the animal is stable and doing well, I encourage pet parents to find at least 1 and preferably 2 other protein sources their pet tolerates well so that every 3 to 6 months, they can rotate proteins and hopefully avoid further intolerances.

In addition, I believe the "cleaner" the proteins, the less chance your pet will become sensitive to them over time. Clean animal proteins are nontoxic. For example, food animals raised on a natural diet (grass fed, not factory farmed), as well as hormone-free animals, are better food sources for sensitive pets.

Sources and References

[PetMD](#)

¹ [Modern Dog](#)

² [GMOScience, January 15, 2020](#)
