

# Is Your Pet Incessantly Itchy? Could Be One of These Two Things

Dogs aren't supposed to be so horribly itchy that they desperately claw and chew themselves raw, inflicting trauma and pain on themselves. One condition can also be passed on to you. Skip your vet's toxic solution and go for one of these seven far less toxic options.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Mange is a common reason for itchy, inflamed skin in dogs
- Demodectic mange is most often seen in puppies with immature immune systems, and is not contagious
- Sarcoptic mange is highly contagious and can be transferred from your dog to your cat, and even to human family members
- Conventional veterinary treatment of mange in dogs often involves potent pesticide dips and other chemical remedies, all of which have side effects
- Not every dog with mange needs a chemical dip, so it's important to consult with a holistic veterinarian to learn about less toxic options to relieve your pet's symptoms and eliminate the mites

***Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published September 28, 2016.***

Dogs can get itchy-scratchy for any number of reasons, but one of the most common is mange. If your furry pal is insanely itchy and his skin is inflamed, he might have one of two types of mange: demodectic or sarcoptic.

## Demodectic Mange

Demodectic mange is also called red mange, follicular mange and puppy mange, because it's most often seen in young dogs. It's caused by the mite species *Demodex canis*, which lives inside the hair follicles, and is usually the result of an underdeveloped or suppressed immune system.

Demodex mites can't survive off the host, so they move from dog to dog through direct contact. Typically, mites are transferred from a mother dog to her puppies shortly after birth. All dogs naturally carry around a small population of these microscopic mites that under normal circumstances cause no problems.

Every mother dog ends up transferring Demodex mites to her litter. Most puppies have no reaction to them, but puppies with inadequate immune systems can become overwhelmed by mites. These are the pups who develop demodectic mange.

There are three varieties of demodectic mange: localized, generalized and demodectic pododermatitis.

1. Localized demodectic mange affects just a few body parts, the most common being the face. The mange will appear as a small patch of lesions around the face.

This condition is most commonly seen in puppies, and most cases resolve on their own without any treatment as pups become immuno-competent.

2. Generalized demodectic mange involves larger areas of skin or even the entire body. This variation creates secondary bacterial infections that cause intense itching, a foul odor and can be very challenging to resolve.
3. Demodectic pododermatitis is confined to the foot and creates secondary bacterial infections between the toes and the pads of the feet. It is the toughest of the three to get rid of.

## Sarcoptic Mange

The *Sarcoptes scabiei* mite causes sarcoptic mange, also known as canine scabies. Female mites tunnel into a dog's skin, laying eggs as they go. This causes a significant inflammatory response.

Unlike the demodectic mite, sarcoptic mites can live several days off a host's body and up to three weeks in a moist, cool environment. In the average home, they have a two- to six-day life span off a host.

Sarcoptic mange is highly contagious and can infest not only dogs, but also other animals, including cats and people.

## Symptoms of Mange

Demodectic mange causes tremendous itching in dogs thanks to secondary bacterial and yeast infections that are almost always present along with the mites. You'll probably also notice some hair loss, bald spots, scabbing and sores on the skin.

Dogs with generalized demodectic mange can become quite ill with a fever, loss of appetite and lethargy. If this is the case with your dog, it's important to make an immediate appointment with your veterinarian.

The presence of demodectic mites (which can only be determined with a skin scraping or biopsy) doesn't confirm the diagnosis, because the mites live in all dogs. There must be both mites and skin lesions for a diagnosis of demodectic mange.

Because this type of mange points to a genetically predisposed weakened immune system, a confirmed diagnosis in an adult dog should always prompt testing for other conditions like Cushing's disease, hypothyroidism, heartworm disease, cancer or immune deficiency.

There's really no reason to isolate dogs with demodectic mange, because the condition is a result of a **weakened immune system**, and isn't contagious.

Symptoms of sarcoptic mange tend to vary from dog to dog, but the most common are intense itching and hair loss. *Sarcoptes scabiei* mites prefer areas of skin without hair, so the first place you might notice a problem on your dog could be elbows, armpits, ears, chest, belly or groin.

It's important to treat a sarcoptic mange infection promptly to prevent it from spreading to your pet's entire body. Often there will be red pustules and crusting of the skin. Because the mites are intensely itchy, your dog will scratch and may traumatize the skin, which can cause sores and secondary infections.

Dogs with sarcoptic mange must be isolated to avoid infecting other animals or people. Bedding should be thoroughly cleaned or replaced, and the dog's collar should also be disinfected.

In addition, because the mites that cause sarcoptic mange can survive off of a host in your home for several days, your floors, drapes and upholstered furniture need to be thoroughly cleaned. If you don't remove the mites from your living space, your dog can be re-infected along with everyone else in the family.

## Natural Treatments for Mange

Unfortunately, conventional treatment of both sarcoptic and demodectic mange often involves dipping your dog's entire body in a powerful chemical pesticide that kills off the mites.

These dips can cause harmful side effects such as restlessness, tremors, vomiting and diarrhea, loss of appetite and a decrease in body temperature. Other medications may be given as well, orally or by injection, via topical application or shampoo. All these treatments involve chemicals that can cause side effects.

It's best to consult an **integrative or holistic veterinarian** to explore all your options for eliminating the mites and relieving symptoms.

Your dog may or may not need to be dipped in strong chemicals or receive other potentially toxic therapies, depending on the severity of the infestation. Other, less caustic treatments can include:

- Lime sulfur dips, which are remarkably stinky, but all natural and very effective. This is an excellent, all natural-way to get rid of both types of mites without the use of chemicals
- Vitamins and other dietary supplements, including omega-3 fatty acids, coconut oil and probiotics, to help relieve itching, improve the condition of your dog's skin and support her immune function
- Disinfecting baths using tea tree or neem oil shampoo (it's important to avoid soaps and shampoos containing oatmeal)
- Topical remedies such as neem, cedar oil or lavender oil and other soothing and healing herb poultices for local lesions
- Internal herbal remedies to fight bacterial infection and strengthen the immune system, including echinacea, arabinogalactans, colostrum, beta glucans, olive leaf, neem, thymus extract, oregano, pau d'arco and garlic
- Homeopathics like sulphur, silicea and psorinum
- Acupuncture and Reiki massage can reduce your dog's anxiety and release beneficial feel-good hormones (e.g., endorphins and cortisol)

Treatment of mange should continue until three consecutive skin scrapings are negative. And because not all scrapings show positive for mites, all symptoms should be resolved, including infected skin and hair loss, before it's safe to conclude that your dog no longer has mange.

Once your dog has cleared the infection, it will be very important to strengthen and support her immune system so it can defend against parasitic infections in the future.

In addition, feed a balanced, species-appropriate and fresh diet (make sure to eliminate carbs in the diet that will feed opportunistic yeast and staph bacteria), and reduce the number of vaccines your pet is given to help boost her immune system naturally.

## **Sources and References**

[PetMD September 26, 2024](#)

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