

Itchy Skin? It's Time to Buck This Outdated Advice

Many pet parents and even some veterinarians still believe this outdated notion. If you do, you may be keeping your pet in misery if he has itchy, irritated skin. Here's the rule of thumb that will help keep your pet comfortable with a lower bacteria load on his skin.

Reviewed by [Dr. Becker](#)

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Regular bathing with a gentle, all-natural pet shampoo can prevent and soothe skin problems in pets
- Most healthy adult cats don't need baths, but kitties who can't properly groom themselves often do
- Steps for a successful pet bath include brushing the coat first, ensuring your pet feels safe in the tub or sink, keeping his eyes and ears protected from shampoo and water and performing a very thorough rinse
- Once your pet is mostly dry, you can move on to his ears to see if they need to be cleaned
- In addition to bathing, brushing your dog's or cat's teeth every day or several days a week is also a very important feature of good pet hygiene

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Pets can get red, itchy, smelly skin, which may or may not develop into a rash, or hot spots or worse. One often overlooked strategy for both preventing and soothing skin problems in dogs and cats is routine bathing (technical name: "irrigation therapy") and grooming.

Many pet parents (and some veterinarians) still believe the outdated notion that pets shouldn't be bathed too often because it will dry out their skin and coat. And it's true to some extent; too many baths and harsh shampoos can cause dry skin and disrupt a healthy dermatologic microbiome. But the truth is many pets have a very unhealthy collection of surface bacteria that can be greatly improved and/or balanced through routine and gentle disinfecting.

Pets with skin conditions (and there are millions) often need purifying baths several times a week to reduce the opportunistic, "bad" bacterial load on their skin and reduce irritation and inflammation (and the need for oral antibiotics or antifungal drugs). A good rule of thumb is to bathe your pet when he needs it, which is when he's stinky, dirty, greasy or itchy and irritated. If you have a pet that is none of these, congratulations, you can pass this article along to a friend that is not as fortunate!

Selecting the Right Shampoo for Your Pet

Use a gentle, all-natural shampoo specifically for pets. Human shampoo is pH-balanced for humans, not dogs and cats. And unfortunately, many popular shampoos for both humans and pets contain toxic ingredients, which can be absorbed through the skin into the bloodstream and tissues.

Oatmeal pet shampoos may be soothing to the skin, but many animals have grain allergies and are likely to have problems with oatmeal in shampoo. Grain-based shampoos may also feed yeast and bacterial conditions. Use oatmeal-based products only if your dog has poison ivy or profoundly dry skin due to lack of natural oil production.

Choose pet shampoos that are USDA-certified organic, contain no sulfates or harsh chemicals, and are specially formulated to soothe, condition and support your pet's healthy skin and coat. Look for products that contain soothing organic herbal extracts and rich moisturizers.

Why Would My Cat Need To Be Bathed? He Bathes Himself!

Most healthy adult cats that are not overweight or obese do a fine job keeping themselves clean, however, some kitties occasionally do need baths because they don't have the best hygiene despite their natural tendency to self-groom. These cats can wind up with greasy or sticky coats as a result.

And cats with weight problems can only groom areas they can reach. If you've ever watched an obese cat try to clean himself, you know the challenge it presents. The back half of the coat of overweight cats often becomes matted. The skin tends to flake and get infected. So kitties who don't or can't groom themselves efficiently need regular baths.

Five Pro Tips for Stress-Free Pet Bathing

1. **Brush your pet first** — Give your dog or cat thorough brushing right before bath time to remove dirt, debris, dead hair and mats from his coat. Brushing before a bath will make brushing after the bath much easier. If your pet enjoys being brushed, this is also a good way to help relax and soothe him before a bath.
2. **Help your pet feel safe in the tub or sink** — Make sure to get bath supplies ready beforehand, including towels and washcloths, a pouring container for water if necessary, shampoo and conditioner, etc. Leaving a wet pet standing alone in a tub or sink while you dash off to get the shampoo you forgot is inviting disaster.

Ensure the water temperature is comfortable, not too hot or cold. Most tub and sink floors feel slippery under pets' paws, so put a towel down (or a nonstick mat) so your dog or cat feels more secure during her bath. It can also save you from having to support a larger dog who keeps losing his footing.

If your pet seems anxious or fearful in the bath, try to enlist a helper to hold her steady and help her feel safe. Your helper can soothe your pet and offer her the occasional treat for being a good girl during her bath. The goal is to create a positive experience so she won't develop an extreme dislike or fear of being bathed.

3. **Keep the ears and eyes protected** — Put a cotton ball just inside each of your pet's ears to prevent water from getting in them. Pets don't enjoy having water sprayed or poured on their heads, and it's really not the safest or best way to get the face and ears clean anyway.

Another reason not to pour water over your dog's or kitty's head is because she can develop secondary ear infections from moisture getting into the ear canal. If lathering the head, hold your pet's chin up and rinse toward the back of the neck, not down over the face.

4. **Rinse very thoroughly** — It's extremely important to rinse all the soap and residue off your pet, which can take some time with a long or dense coat. Wetting your pet first before applying shampoo can be very beneficial.

With double-coated breeds, diluting shampoo 50/50 with water before you apply it helps ensure it will rinse out easily. Shampoo that dries on the coat or skin can be irritating, and it will also get dirty and matted in a hurry. Once she's rinsed, use a soft washcloth to clean her face and around her eyes while she's still in the tub. Gently wipe away any gunk that may have collected in her facial folds (if she has them) and under her eyes.

Next you can sort of wring or pat water out of the coat, and then grab a towel and gently rub her down a bit before lifting her or having her step out of the tub. The second she's out of the tub and free of your grasp, she'll start her very efficient "self-drying shake," so be prepared (and put her on a nonskid mat)!

5. **Drying your pet** — Short-haired dogs and cats often just need a bit of toweling and a few shakes to get dry. Pets with longer or dense coats, however, generally need either lots of toweling and/or blow drying (on low heat). Most pets aren't crazy about the blow dryer, so if yours isn't, towel him dry, making sure to keep him warm, especially in the colder months.

Cleaning Your Pet's Ears

Another very important feature of good pet hygiene, especially if your furry family member is a dog, is keeping her ears clean. After you've bathed and dried her, it's time to remove the cotton from her ears and check them for dirt and gunk, which is typically much more of a problem for dogs than kitties.

If you need to clean her ears, you can either put the ear cleaner directly down into the ear (as long as the directions say it's safe and you know your pet's eardrum is intact), or you can apply it to cotton balls and then swab out the wax and debris.

If you pour or squirt the solution directly into the ear, before your dog can shake her head you'll want to massage it in so it thoroughly coats the inside of the ear. Use as many cotton balls as it takes to get to a clean cotton ball from each ear. The outside, floppy part of your dog's ear is called the pinna. Once you've swabbed the inside of the ears, use a clean cotton ball to swab and disinfect the pinna of each ear.

Brushing Your Pet's Teeth

Just as your own daily hygiene routine includes brushing and flossing (regardless of how amazing your diet is), so should your pet's. Brushing your dog's or cat's teeth takes only a few minutes and has the potential to drastically improve her overall health. If you start when your pet is young, a daily brushing will be just another part of her day.

If you didn't start young, or you've adopted an older pet, proceed slowly. Pick a time of day when the brushing will take place (such as right before bed) and stick with it. This will help establish a routine. Incorporate face massage (and mouth desensitization) into regular massage/petting time. This will put your pet into a relaxed state of mind and he'll be less suspicious you're up to something when you put your fingers in her mouth.

After she's comfortable having her head, ears and chin touched, move on to the muzzle and lips. Many pets really enjoy having their gums lightly massaged when they're relaxing. The key is not to force it, move at a pace that keeps your pet feeling comfortable and relaxed.

When you've mastered the gum massage, it's an easy transition to move on to the teeth. Dipping your finger in bone broth is a trick that will make your pet much more receptive to having your fingers in her mouth. You can also dip a soft cloth or piece of gauze into the broth and use it to gently rub her teeth and massage her gums.

Once your dog or cat is accepting of your fingers in her mouth, switch to an enzymatic tooth solution designed for pets. Enzymatic gels help to break down the plaque and tartar that accumulates on the surface of teeth. Put a dab on your finger and very briefly massage it into your pet's back molars. Once your pet is relaxed with fingers and gauze you can move along to an actual toothbrush or finger brush for pets.

Regular brushing can help to keep your pet's teeth clean and minimize dental issues, along with keeping the need for professional dental cleaning (under anesthesia) to a minimum.

Sources and References

[Texas A&M University January 20, 2017](#)
