

What's Causing Your Dog's Itchy Paws?

If your dog constantly licks his paws, chances are he's itchy and miserable. About half the time, you can easily relieve his suffering with this simple step. Know the conditions that can make your dog's paws itchy, and effective, nontoxic ways to provide soothing relief.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- A dog who constantly licks her paws is probably itchy and miserable — a common reason being environmental allergies
- Especially during the spring and summer months, your dog's paws are picking up allergens and chemicals in the environment nonstop
- Up to 50% of seasonal paw licking and chewing can be relieved by removing the irritants with a simple foot soak each time they come in from outdoors
- Two common other disorders that can make your dog's paws itchy are a yeast infection and mange, which may not occur on all 4 paws
- Most of the time you'll be able to tell if your dog has a yeast infection by the way he smells, because yeast has a very characteristic odor

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Like cats, dogs groom themselves, but they don't spend nearly as much time at it as kitties do. If it seems that every time you glance at your dog, he's licking his paws, it's important to figure out why, because something is probably making him itchy and uncomfortable.

There are a variety of reasons dogs lick and chew at their paws, but by far the most common is environmental allergies. If your dog is licking all four of his paws and in between his toes (or he's licking or chewing at his rear end or inner thighs), it's likely he's having an allergic reaction to something in the environment that's making him itchy.

The reason so many dogs lick their paws is because during the spring and summer months, those often sweaty little Swiffers are picking up allergens and chemicals in the environment, including ragweed, grasses, dust mites, pollens, molds, fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides, and more. When you consider how often most dogs go outside, it's clear that a wide range of potential irritants can build up fast on their feet.

Your dog's environmental allergic response is based on his immune system's over-reaction to normal substances found in nature. Seasonal allergies can range from mild to profound, and the earlier you identify and treat the body's over-reaction, the sooner your pet will have relief.

The good news is that about 50% of most dogs' seasonal foot licking and chewing can be alleviated by simply removing those irritants from their paws each time they come in from outdoors, or at least daily.

Simple, Effective, and Nontoxic Relief for Your Dog's Itchy Paws

The secret to success in removing allergens from your dog's feet is to soak or rinse them. Simply wiping them off with a damp cloth won't give her nearly the relief she'll feel with a foot soak. There are many ways to do foot soaks, so you may need to experiment to find the method that works best for you and your dog.

For example, if you have a large or medium-sized dog, you can use a bucket and soak one foot at a time. If your dog is small, you can use your kitchen or bathroom sink. What's important is to soak those paws at the end of any day during which your dog has been in contact with allergens, **lawn chemicals**, or anything in the environment with the potential to irritate his feet.

One 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. This will conserve both water and iodine.

Another approach is to use white vinegar diluted 50/50 with water. Some dog parents leave a pail of the solution on their deck, in the garage, or at the front or back door and make a fresh batch every few days. It's not recommended going more than 2 or 3 days using the same foot soak solution. There's no need to rinse your dog's feet after the soak. Just pat her paws dry and you're done.

To receive the full benefit of the foot soak, your dog needs to stand in the solution for 2 to 5 minutes. Keeping the paws submerged is key — they need to be in the solution long enough to thoroughly wash away any type of yeast that might be growing, as well as mild bacterial infections, allergens, and other contaminants.

You don't have to do anything during soaks except help your dog keep her paws in the footbath — the solution will do all the work. Pet her as she soaks, talk or sing or read to her, and praise her for being such a good dog. If she seems anxious, offer a few treats. Unfortunately, wiping paws alone doesn't remove the billions of allergens found in the nooks and crannies around your dog's nailbeds and in between her toes.

If she's truly fearful of the water, instead of putting him in a sink or tub, make a mini-soak in a small container and let her soak one foot at a time. This will take longer, obviously, but you may be able to graduate to all four paws in the water simultaneously after she gets comfortable with one foot at a time.

Some pets need additional immune support (in the form of an oral protocol or immune desensitization) during allergy season to help quell the inflammatory response from the inside out. And remember, if your dog is continuing to lick, bite, or chew at himself, he might be allergic to something else he's being exposed to — perhaps ingredients in his diet, or something in his indoor environment.

Ideally, you've coordinated a seasonal support protocol that's ready to go a few weeks before allergy season starts: this is the best way to avoid having to use steroids or other drugs with significant side effects.

Addressing symptoms, including foot licking, the minute they occur is the best way to avoid this year's environmental allergens from winning.

Other Conditions That Can Make Your Dog's Paw(s) Itchy

- **Yeast infection** — Dogs have a normal amount of healthy levels of yeast that occur naturally on the body, including on the paws. Healthy levels of flora are possible thanks to a balanced immune system. Dogs with an underactive immune system or who are immuno-suppressed can end up with a yeast infection, as can dogs with overactive immune systems that result in allergies.

Most of the time you'll be able to tell if your dog has a yeast infection by the way he smells, because yeast has a very characteristic odor. Some people think it smells like moldy bread; others liken the odor to cheese popcorn or corn chips. In fact, some people refer to a yeast infection of a dog's paws as 'Frito Feet.' It's a pungent, musty, unpleasant smell. Often one paw is much worse than the others (where as “allergy feet” are all represented equally).

Yeast overgrowth is tremendously itchy, so dogs with yeast infections do a lot of scratching. If it's a problem with her paws, your dog won't be able to leave them alone. The same goes for her ears. A lot of butt scooting can also be a clue.

Definitive diagnosis of a yeast infection can be made by your veterinarian and is accomplished either by cytology (looking at a skin swab under a microscope) or culturing (submitting a sterile swab of the skin to the lab where the cells are grown and identified on a petri dish).

- **Demodectic and sarcoptic 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.

Mites and yeast often infect one foot, but not all of your dog's paws (unlike allergies), so if your dog is focusing on one or two toes, be thinking there's more going on than just environmental allergies.

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 should be both mites and skin lesions for a diagnosis of demodectic mange.

Because this type of noncontagious 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.

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, around the eyes, 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 traumatize the skin, which can cause sores and secondary infections.

Dogs with sarcoptic mange need to 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.

Sources and References

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