

# Is Your Pet's Dinner the Reason They're Always Scratching?

If your pet is constantly itchy and miserable, the problem could be in their pet bowl. Discover how switching to a novel protein could be the gamechanger your pup needs.

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## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Many common pet discomforts like itching, licking, and skin flare-ups stem from food sensitivities, especially to proteins like beef, chicken, or lamb in standard dog diets
- Novel proteins offer powerful relief. Switching to a protein your dog hasn't eaten before, like duck, rabbit, or venison, can ease allergic reactions, reduce inflammation, and improve digestion and skin health
- A novel protein diet strengthens immunity, supports nutrient variety through unique amino acids, and offers more complete nutrition than repetitive, commercial protein sources
- Many novel proteins use fewer resources and have a smaller environmental footprint than traditional meat-based pet foods
- Transition with care, not haste. Gradual food changes, elimination trials, and smart protein rotation are key to avoiding digestive upset and identifying what truly helps your dog thrive

It's no secret that we love our pets like family. When they're uncomfortable, we feel it too — especially when they're constantly scratching, licking, or dealing with recurring skin problems. You may have tried special shampoos, allergy meds, or even flea treatments with little relief.

But what if the real issue lies not outside their body, but in their food bowl? More and more pet parents are discovering that food, especially the type of protein their dog eats daily, can trigger a range of skin and digestive problems. The good news is that switching to novel proteins can offer relief, restore comfort, and help your dog thrive again.

## What Is a Novel Protein?

To put it simply, a novel protein is simply a type of animal (or sometimes plant) protein that your dog hasn't eaten before. Traditional dog food commonly uses chicken, beef, or lamb, and that's where many problems begin. When dogs eat the same protein for long periods, their immune systems can start to recognize it as a threat, triggering food sensitivities. This can result in symptoms like:<sup>1,2</sup>

- Constant itching and scratching
- Red, irritated skin
- Hot spots and scabs
- Excessive licking, especially paws

- Ear infections
- Chronic loose stool or diarrhea
- Digestive upset such as nausea (or decreased appetite), stomach gurgling, gas, or vomiting
- Anal gland issues

Even if your dog has eaten the same food for years with no problem, sensitivities can develop over time at any age. That's why switching to a protein they've never had — like duck, rabbit, venison, fish, turkey or quail — can often make a world of difference.

## The Growing Problem of Food Sensitivities in Dogs

It's becoming more common for dogs of all breeds and sizes to develop allergies or sensitivities to food. These issues don't just show up in senior pets — many puppies and young adults are being affected too. And while almost any ingredient can cause a reaction, protein, especially chicken, is the most frequent culprit.

That's because most commercial dog food is made with the same few proteins — beef, chicken, and lamb. When your dog eats these repeatedly, their immune system may overreact. This can lead to inflammation, skin issues, and gastrointestinal problems that look a lot like other allergies. So, what can you do?

## Benefits of Switching to a Novel Protein Diet

Changing your dog's diet to include a novel protein can offer powerful health benefits. Here's what you can expect when you make the switch:

1. **Improved digestive health** — Novel proteins are less likely to cause digestive upset. Because your dog's system doesn't recognize the protein as a threat, it's easier to digest and less likely to cause bloating, gas, diarrhea and intestinal inflammation.
2. **Healthier skin and coat** — Proteins like fish, duck and venison are often rich in omega-3 fatty acids and conjugated linoleic acid (CLA), which help reduce inflammation and promote healthier skin. You may notice less scratching, a shinier coat, and fewer hot spots.
3. **Reduced allergic reactions** — Since your dog's immune system hasn't been exposed to the new protein before, it's less likely to trigger an allergic response. This means less itching, less paw licking, fewer vet visits, and a more comfortable pup.
4. **Healthier immune system** — When the body isn't constantly fighting off a food-based irritant, the overall level of inflammation decreases and it has more energy to maintain overall health. That means stronger immunity and better resistance to other illnesses.
5. **Nutritional variety** — Each protein contains a different mix of amino acids, the building blocks of a healthy body. By rotating through novel proteins, you help your dog get a complete range of nutrients for energy, brain function, and organ health.

## What Counts as a Novel Protein?

The list of novel proteins continues to grow. Some examples include:

- Rabbit
- Duck
- Quail
- Venison (deer)
- Bison
- Turkey
- Kangaroo
- Alligator
- Fish, like herring, sardines, and anchovies
- Alpaca

Remember, a novel protein is one your dog has never eaten. Even something common like turkey can be novel if your dog hasn't had it before. It's all about what's new to your dog.

## Novel Proteins Can Be Better for the Planet Too

There's another great reason to consider novel proteins — environmental sustainability. The production of beef and chicken uses vast amounts of water, land, and energy, contributing heavily to greenhouse gas emissions. In fact, pet food production alone creates more than 64 million tons of carbon dioxide every year.<sup>3</sup>

Novel proteins from less commonly used animals often require fewer resources to produce. Choosing them can help reduce your pet's environmental "paw print." For example, wild or small fish like sardines and anchovies are lower on the food chain and have less mercury and fewer toxins compared to swordfish, king mackerel and other large predatory fish.

## How to Start a Novel Protein Diet

If you're thinking about trying a novel protein, here's how to do it the smart way:<sup>4</sup>

1. **Choose a single novel protein** — Look for a dog food brand that contains just one protein your dog hasn't eaten before. Or if you're preparing fresh, homemade dog food, only use one novel protein at a time. Avoid foods that mix proteins together — this makes it hard to pinpoint which one might cause issues.

Read labels carefully. Sometimes, manufacturers include multiple protein sources even when only one is highlighted on the front of the package.

2. **Transition slowly** — Sudden changes in diet can upset your dog's stomach. Take seven to 10 days to gradually introduce the new food:

- **Days 1 and 2** — 25% new food, 75% old
- **Days 3 and 4** — 50% new, 50% old
- **Days 5 and 6** — 75% new, 25% old
- **Day 7 and beyond** — 100% new food

3. **Do a food elimination trial** — Feed your dog only the new protein and nothing else for at least six weeks. No table scraps, treats, and snacks. This is the best way to see if symptoms improve. Many pet parents see changes in just a few weeks — less itching, better digestion, and happier moods.
4. **Rotate other novel proteins over time** — Once your dog adjusts to one novel protein, you can introduce another down the line. This helps prevent new sensitivities from forming and keeps meals exciting and nutritious.

## What About Home Cooking?

If you're up for it, home-cooked meals using novel proteins can be an excellent way to control exactly what your dog is eating. However, the meals need to be balanced. A diet that's too low in omega-3s, vitamin E, or other essential vitamins and minerals can cause symptoms that mimic food sensitivities, like dry, itchy skin or poor coat condition. To home cook safely:<sup>5</sup>

- Use a complete recipe from a pet nutrition expert.
- Include protein, healthy fats, carbs, and fiber.
- Add appropriate supplements if needed.
- Consult your vet or a pet nutritionist to ensure the diet meets your dog's needs.

If home cooking feels overwhelming, there are also commercial brands that offer gently cooked or raw meals using novel proteins — without the fillers or byproducts found in kibble.

## When to See a Vet

If you suspect a food allergy but aren't sure where to start, talk to your vet. They may suggest a food sensitivity test using blood or hair samples. These tests can reveal reactions to proteins, grains, dairy, and even additives.

Testing isn't perfect, but it can give you a head start in narrowing down problem ingredients. It's especially helpful if your dog's symptoms are persistent, severe, or not improving after a food switch.

## Novel Proteins Versus Allergy Meds — Why Food Comes First

Many dogs with food sensitivities are given medications to control their symptoms. While these may offer short-term relief, they don't address the root of the issue, and long-term use can come with side effects.

Fixing your dog's diet is the most natural and lasting way to resolve food-related allergies. Once the offending ingredient is removed, the body can begin to heal from the inside out.<sup>6</sup>

## The Key Takeaway — Making Changes to Your Dog's Dinner Can Help Bring Them Lasting Relief

If your dog is always scratching, licking, or seems uncomfortable in their own skin, it might be time to take a closer look at what's in their bowl. Novel protein diets offer a simple, powerful way to ease symptoms, improve digestion, and support lifelong health.

They're not just for allergy-prone dogs — they're for any pup who deserves better nutrition, variety, and a more comfortable life.

So next time you hear that familiar thump-thump of your dog scratching in the middle of the night, ask yourself — Is their dinner part of the problem? It might be time to start a fresh chapter, one bite at a time.

Sources and References

<sup>1,4,5,6</sup> [Dr. Judy Morgan's Naturally Healthy Pets, Novel Proteins](#)

<sup>2,3</sup> [Earth Animal, September 11, 2024](#)

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