

What Is Really in Your Dog's Bathwater?

The quality of your water can have an immense impact on your pet's health, and making simple tweaks can spell the difference between constant itching and comfort.

Reviewed by Dr. Tracy Duffner

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Hard water is not just a household nuisance — it can strip your dog's natural oils leaving skin itchy, fur dull, and grooming products less effective than they should be
- Dogs' thinner, more sensitive skin absorbs minerals and chemicals more easily, making them vulnerable to irritation from hard water, chlorine, heavy metals, and even hidden microplastics in tap water
- Drinking hard water can increase the risk of urinary issues and bladder stones in dogs and cats, especially in breeds predisposed to urinary tract conditions
- Tap water may also carry chlorine, heavy metals, and microplastics, which contribute to dryness, irritation, allergic reactions, and long-term health concerns for sensitive pets
- Simple changes like installing a filter, using gentler shampoos, or rinsing with distilled water can significantly improve your dog's comfort, skin health, and overall well-being

When you turn on the tap to bathe your dog, you probably do not think twice about what is in the water. After all, it looks clean and clear. But what if the water running over your dog's skin and soaking into their coat was actually harming their health and comfort?

The truth is, the water in your home may be doing more than just rinsing off dirt. Hard water can quietly cause a range of issues for your dog. Even chemicals added to "clean" water, like chlorine, can irritate your pet's delicate system. Here is what is really in your dog's bathwater and how it affects their overall health.

Understanding Hard Water

Depending on where you live, your tap water might be considered "soft" or "hard." Hard water is water with a high concentration of dissolved minerals, especially calcium and magnesium. Dogster explains:

*"Water picks up these minerals as it moves through the soil and rock in an environment, and some parts of the country have much higher concentrations of minerals in the water than others. Scientists usually measure hardness in grains per gallon (gpg) or milligrams per liter (mg/L), and hard water is considered as such when it exceeds 7 gpg or 120 mg/L."*¹

So how do you know if you have hard water? Typically, these are the signs to look for:²

- There is a white, chalky buildup around your faucets
- You notice spots on your dishes after they dry
- Soap is difficult to lather up
- Washing makes your skin dry and itchy
- Your household appliances do not last as long as expected

You may think of hard water as simply a nuisance — it leaves spots on dishes and builds up scale in kettles and pipes. It also makes it harder to lather soap or shampoo, because the minerals in hard water bind to the surfactants (cleaning agents) in these products.³ However, hard water can promote skin inflammation^{4,5} and the effects are more significant for your pets, whose skin is much more sensitive than yours.

Why Are Dogs So Sensitive to Water Quality?

Your skin has multiple protective layers, but your dog's skin is much thinner and more absorbent; this makes it more vulnerable to irritation from minerals, chemicals, and contaminants in water. Hence, when you bathe your dog in hard water or chemically treated water, it can cause:⁶

- **Dryness and flaking** — The natural oils on their skin are stripped away, leaving skin itchy and uncomfortable.
- **Chronic itching and hot spots** — The constant scratching can lead to sores or secondary infections.
- **Dull or brittle fur** — There can be mineral deposits on the hair shaft, making it rough and less shiny; they can also be prone to shedding.
- **Allergic reactions** — Chlorine, heavy metals, and even microplastics in tap water can trigger sensitivity. The minerals in the water can also weaken the skin barrier and promote inflammation.

So if you have tried various "hypoallergenic" shampoos and conditioners, but nothing seems to help, the problem may be coming directly from your faucet — and it could be the missing piece you need to address.

Hard Water Is Even More Damaging When Ingested by Your Pets

Hard water in your home is not only a problem at bath time; if your dog drinks hard water regularly, they may face internal health issues as well.

Calcium and magnesium, as long as given to pets in moderation (such as from their diet), are good for your pet's health. According to Dogster, "Calcium is vital for strong bones and teeth, blood coagulation, and muscle function. Magnesium also helps with bone health and muscle function, energy production, and nutrient balance."⁷

But when your pet ingests too much of these nutrients, it can lead to health problems, such as:⁸

- **Urinary problems** — Hard water can trigger your pet to have difficulty urinating, frequent urination, or signs of discomfort while urinating.
- **Bladder stones** — The high mineral content of hard water can increase the risk of bladder stones, which form when minerals crystallize in urine. Bladder stones can be painful, dangerous, and sometimes even life-

threatening if they block outflow of the urinary tract.

Some dogs are more at risk than others, especially breeds already prone to urinary issues. Cats can suffer similar problems, often diagnosed as feline lower urinary tract disease (FLUTD) also known as Feline Idiopathic Cystitis (FIC). While not every pet that drinks hard water will develop stones, the risk is real enough to take seriously.⁹

- **Digestive concerns** — While most dogs can tolerate the minerals in hard water, some may experience stomach upset or digestive sensitivity over time. This is especially true for pets with pre-existing health conditions.

Other Hidden Chemicals in Tap Water

If you have hard water at home, the excess minerals are something you should be concerned about. However, this is not the only problem lurking in your water supply. Your tap water may also contain:¹⁰

- **Chlorine** — Public water supplies add this chemical for disinfection; however, this can be harsh on sensitive skin, stripping it of natural oils and causing dryness, irritation, and itching.
- **Heavy metals** — Trace amounts of lead, copper, or arsenic can irritate skin or contribute to long-term health problems such as organ dysfunction and cancer.
- **Microplastics** — Increasingly found in water supplies, these tiny particles may trigger inflammation or allergic reactions, hormonal imbalances, and contribute to reproductive problems and development of cancer.¹¹

How to Protect Your Pet from Contaminants in Your Water Supply

If you suspect your water might be contributing to your pet's health issues, consider having your home's water tested. The good news is you can take simple steps to protect your pet (and your whole family) from the downsides of hard water.

1. **Filter your water** — Installing a whole-house water softener can dramatically improve bath time and overall health. A high-quality water filter removes chlorine, heavy metals, and excess minerals, leaving water that is gentler for your dog's skin and coat, and safer to drink.
2. **Choose the right shampoo** — Even the best water cannot overcome harsh grooming products. Look for hypoallergenic shampoos made with gentle, natural, and biodegradable ingredients that match your dog's skin pH. Avoid products with sulfates, parabens, or synthetic fragrances that can worsen irritation.
3. **Consider rinsing with distilled or filtered water (only if needed)** — For dogs with severe sensitivities, a final rinse with distilled or filtered water during bathtime can make a noticeable difference.
4. **Monitor your pet's skin and urinary health** — Keep an eye out for urinary changes, like straining, accidents, or blood in the urine, and watch for new patches of dryness or hot spots on the skin. Early intervention can prevent small problems from becoming big ones.
5. **Talk to your veterinarian** — If your pet already struggles with bladder stones, urinary tract infections, or chronic skin issues, consult with your veterinarian. Water is an overlooked factor, but once you address water quality as a factor, you will need to identify other contributing factors.

Small Change, Big Difference

Water is one of the simplest, most basic parts of your dog's care routine, but it is also one of the most overlooked. While you focus on food, exercise, and grooming products, the water coming out of your faucet may be undermining your best efforts.

Switching to clean, filtered water may seem like a minor detail, but it can have a major impact on your dog's comfort and long-term health. By understanding what is really in your dog's bathwater and making small adjustments, you can protect their skin, coat, and overall well-being.

Sources and References

^{1,2,7} [Dogster, March 5, 2025](#)

^{3,10} [Doglyness, June 17, 2025](#)

⁴ [Br J Dermatol. 2022 Aug 18;187\(5\):704–712](#)

⁵ [Journal of Investigative Dermatology, Volume 138, Issue 1, January 2018, Pages 68-77](#)

⁶ [Afina, April 18, 2025](#)

⁸ [American Water, Hard Water's Effect On Plants & Pets](#)

⁹ [PR News Wire, April 7, 2016](#)

¹¹ [Environmental Research Volume 251, Part 2, 15 June 2024, 118535](#)
