

The Skin Condition That Stops Dogs in Their Tracks

Your dog's paws guide them through every adventure, from a romp at the park to a cozy evening by your side. Protecting their paws from this condition means safeguarding their comfort, mobility, and happiness for years to come.

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Painful paw bumps called interdigital furunculosis (often referred to as interdigital cysts) form when the hair follicles between a dog's toes become infected, inflamed, and swollen, causing intense itching, licking, painfulness, and limping
- Multiple factors contribute to its formation, including bacteria, yeast, allergies, paw trauma, excess weight, and underlying hormonal conditions like hypothyroidism or Cushing's disease
- Certain breeds are more at risk, especially Bulldogs, Shar Peis, Pit Bulls, Labradors, and German Shepherds — dogs with short, coarse hair or wide, webbed feet that rub and trap debris
- Treatment focuses on infection control and comfort, using antibiotics, anti-inflammatories, Epsom salt soaks, natural paw balms, and sometimes allergy management or dietary changes to support healing from within
- Prevention begins with whole-body wellness. A fresh, balanced diet rich in omega-3s and zinc, healthy weight, regular paw checks, and gentle grooming help keep paws strong, itch-free, and ready for adventure

Imagine if every step you took made you wince, the space between your toes burning, itching, and throbbing. But no matter how much you scratched, the irritation only got worse. That is what many dogs experience when they suffer from a painful skin condition called interdigital furunculosis, often known as "interdigital cysts."

Although the name sounds technical, the problem is fairly common, especially among certain breeds. If your dog can't stop licking or chewing their paws, or seems to limp for no clear reason, this deep-seated skin infection might be the culprit. The good news? Once you understand the causes and triggers, it is possible to help your dog find relief, and even prevent flareups in the future.

What Is Interdigital Furunculosis?

Furunculosis simply means a deep skin infection that begins in a hair follicle and spreads beneath the skin's surface. When this occurs between a dog's toes, it is called interdigital furunculosis — an especially painful condition because the paws are constantly in motion and exposed to dirt and bacteria.

Despite being commonly called "interdigital cysts," these are not true cysts filled with fluid or keratin. Instead, they are boil-like bumps that form when hair follicles in the webbing between the toes become infected, inflamed, and swollen.^{1,2}

You might notice your dog licking or chewing at the area, limping, or refusing to let you touch their feet. The skin between the toes can look red, swollen, or even oozing with pus. In severe cases, the infection can spread, making it painful for your dog to walk at all.

Why It Happens — The Hidden Causes Behind the Itch

There is no single cause of interdigital furunculosis. It is often a combination of irritation, infection, and inflammation that feeds a vicious cycle.^{3,4,5}

1. **Bacterial or fungal infections** — Most cases begin when bacteria, such as *Staphylococcus* or *Pseudomonas*, invade damaged skin or hair follicles. Fungal infections and yeast can make matters worse by creating a warm, moist environment for bacteria to thrive.
2. **Trauma to the hair follicles** — When a dog's paw rubs repeatedly on hard surfaces, or when the fur between their toes is cut too short, the hair shafts can break and irritate the follicles. This micro-damage opens the door for infection.

Even excessive paw licking, whether due to allergies or stress, can trigger the same trauma, creating a painful loop. Licking causes irritation, which leads to infection, which makes the dog lick more.

3. **Allergies** — Environmental triggers (like pollen or grass), food allergies, or contact allergies often make dogs lick their paws, trying to relieve itching. The constant moisture and friction can eventually cause furuncles to form. In these cases, the skin infection is really a symptom of an allergic reaction that needs to be addressed from the inside out.
4. **Poor foot conformation** — Dogs that are overweight or have flat, wide paws may experience extra friction and pressure on the webbing between their toes. Over time, this can lead to irritation and swelling that sets the stage for infection.
5. **Underlying health conditions** — Diseases like hypothyroidism or Cushing's disease (hyperadrenocorticism) can weaken a dog's immune system and skin defenses, making infections more likely. Some breeds, such as Bulldogs and Labrador Retrievers, are naturally prone to both hormonal and skin issues, which increases their risk.

Breeds That Are Most at Risk

Any dog can develop interdigital furunculosis, but certain breeds are more likely to suffer from it due to their skin type, coat texture, or body structure. Those most commonly affected include:^{6,7}

- Bulldogs (English, French, and American)
- Chinese Shar Peis
- Pit Bull Terriers
- Mastiffs
- Basset Hounds
- Boxers
- Pugs
- Labrador Retrievers

- German Shepherds

Dogs with short, coarse coats or deeply webbed feet tend to be at the highest risk because their short hairs can easily break and embed into the skin.

Spotting the Signs Early

Early detection can make all the difference in how quickly your dog heals. The first signs are often subtle — maybe your dog starts licking one paw more than usual or hesitates to put weight on it. Over time, the area between the toes may become red and swollen. Here are key symptoms to look out for:

- Persistent licking, chewing, or biting at the paws
- Limping or reluctance to walk
- Hair loss between the toes
- Red, raised, or shiny bumps
- Oozing or pus-filled sores
- A foul smell coming from the paw

If the infection progresses, the pain can become intense. Your dog might yelp when you touch the area or avoid letting you near their feet.⁸

Getting a Proper Diagnosis

Because interdigital furunculosis can look similar to other skin issues like cysts, abscesses, or even cancerous growths, a veterinary diagnosis is essential. Your veterinarian will likely:

- Take a skin cytology sample (such as a skin scraping) to look for bacteria, yeast, or mites.
- Perform blood tests to rule out hormonal diseases.
- Examine for foreign bodies like grass awns or splinters.
- Possibly send samples to a lab, such as a bacterial culture or a biopsy sample, to confirm the diagnosis and assess for deeper infections or rare causes.

Sometimes, what looks like a simple sore is actually a sign of an underlying immune or endocrine problem, so getting a thorough check-up is crucial.

Conventional Treatments for Furunculosis

Treatment depends on the severity and cause of the infection. Most cases can be managed with patience and consistent care, but advanced cases may require more intensive treatment.

1. **Antibiotics and anti-inflammatories** — Because interdigital furunculosis is usually bacterial, veterinarians often prescribe antibiotics for several weeks. Anti-inflammatory medications or NSAIDs may also be used to reduce pain and swelling.

2. **Foot soaks and topical treatments** — Daily Epsom salt soaks are one of the simplest and most effective home treatments. The salt helps draw out infection and reduce swelling while soothing the skin. After soaking, the paw needs to be thoroughly dried to prevent yeast from growing in the damp crevices.

Topical antiseptics or natural soothing balms can help speed up healing and reduce bacteria. Creams, however, should be used carefully, as they can encourage licking, which often makes the condition worse. In some cases, a cone or protective bootie may be needed to stop your dog from chewing at the paw. Talk to your veterinarian about what measures will be best for your pet.

3. **Allergy and immune management** — If allergies are the root cause, your veterinarian may recommend allergy testing or an elimination diet to pinpoint triggers. Improving immune balance through diet, probiotics, and essential fatty acids can make a major difference in long-term prevention.
4. **Surgical options** — In rare, chronic cases where infections keep returning, some veterinarians may recommend surgical removal of the webbing between the toes. However, this is typically a last resort since it can lead to long-term mobility problems and further complications.

The Natural Approach — Supporting Healing from the Inside Out

While medication can control infection and pain, true healing comes from supporting your dog's overall health. Natural care focuses on restoring balance in the gut, skin, and immune system to stop the cycle of irritation and infection.

- **Feed fresh, moist foods** — Highly processed kibble diets are low in moisture, high in the pro-inflammatory omega-6 fatty acids, and can stress the digestive system. Since 70% to 80% of your dog's immune system lives in the gut, feeding fresh, species-appropriate foods can strengthen natural defenses and reduce inflammation throughout the body.
- **Try gut-supportive supplements** — Herbal mucilage compounds such as slippery elm, marshmallow root, or licorice can soothe the digestive tract, while probiotics help balance gut bacteria. This combination can calm the immune system and reduce skin flareups. Some natural formulations combine all three for convenience and effectiveness.
- **Add anti-inflammatory nutrients** — Omega-3 fatty acids from sources like sardines, anchovies, whitefish, flaxseed, or algae oil can dramatically reduce skin inflammation. These fats work from the inside out, making the skin less reactive to allergens and irritation.

Adding zinc-rich foods such as pumpkin seeds or supplements can also help dogs prone to chronic skin infections, since zinc supports healing and immune function. As with all diet and supplement changes, talk to your veterinarian first to be sure these changes are appropriate for your pet.

External Support — Simple Home Care That Helps

Managing interdigital furunculosis at home requires diligence but does not have to be complicated.^{9,10}

1. **Keep the paws clean** — Wipe your dog's paws daily, especially after walks. Use a mild, dog-safe cleanser or warm water to remove dirt and bacteria. This prevents microbes from setting up camp in small cracks or abrasions.

2. **Use Epsom salt soaks** — As mentioned earlier, soaking the paws in warm Epsom salt water once or twice daily helps reduce inflammation and draw out infection. Always dry thoroughly afterward to prevent more irritation.
3. **Protect with paw balms** — Natural paw balms containing healing herbs can soothe irritation while forming a gentle barrier against dirt and moisture. Avoid petroleum-based products, which can trap heat and bacteria.
4. **Manage activity** — When paws are swollen or sore, rest is vital. Too much walking, running, or jumping adds pressure and slows healing. Limit activity to short, gentle walks until the skin has improved.
5. **Watch grooming habits** — If your dog's furunculosis flares up after grooming, the cause might be irritation from harsh shampoos or tools. Choose mild, natural shampoos and avoid metal-tipped brushes that can damage the skin. If your groomer uses unfamiliar products, bring your own to avoid allergic reactions.

Preventing Future Flareups

Prevention starts with identifying and addressing the underlying cause. Once your dog's skin has healed, a few lifestyle changes can help keep those paws healthy.^{11,12}

1. **Maintain a healthy weight** — Extra weight adds pressure to your dog's paws, causing them to spread and rub more — a setup for future inflammation. Keeping your dog lean helps maintain proper paw structure and reduces friction.
2. **Balance the diet** — Feed nutrient-dense, minimally processed foods that support immune health. Include sources of omega-3s and zinc to protect the skin's natural barrier.
3. **Control allergies** — If allergies were part of the problem, stick to a controlled diet and avoid known triggers. Work with your veterinarian to manage environmental allergens through natural anti-inflammatories or targeted treatments.
4. **Regular paw checks** — Make a habit of inspecting your dog's feet every few days. Catching a red spot early can prevent it from turning into a painful infection. Keep paw hair neatly trimmed (but not shaved) and nails short to prevent splaying.
5. **Clean environment** — Wash bedding regularly, vacuum often, and keep floors clean. Reducing dust, pollen, and bacteria in your dog's environment helps minimize irritation and infection risk.

While mild cases can often be managed at home, call your veterinarian if the swelling worsens or spreads, they are in visible pain (limping severely), and there's blood, pus, or a foul odor. A rise in body temperature or drop in appetite are also red flags and require veterinary attention.

Final Thoughts — Healing from the Ground Up

Interdigital furunculosis might sound intimidating, but with early detection, good nutrition, and steady care, it is a condition you can manage — and often prevent altogether.

Focus not just on the surface symptoms but on your dog's overall wellness. By feeding a balanced diet, managing stress, and providing gentle skin care, you can break the cycle of itching, licking, and infection once and for all. Because when your dog walks comfortably, tail high and paws healthy, they are not just healing — they are thriving.

Sources and References

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[^{1,4,7,9,11} My Pet Nutritionist, November 9, 2023](#)

[^{2,5,6} Natural Dog Company, April 13, 2021](#)

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[¹² Merck Manual Veterinary Manual, June 2024](#)
