FREE GUIDE

Skin & allergy basics

Flea, food, and environmental allergies, and hot spots — told apart

Introduction

Itching, scratching, and skin irritation are among the most common reasons pets see a vet, but "my pet is itchy" covers several genuinely different conditions with different causes and different fixes. This guide covers the three main allergy types, the fast-moving skin infection known as a hot spot, and a clear line for when home care is reasonable versus when it's time to call a vet.

Flea allergy dermatitis

The most common skin allergy in both dogs and cats isn't a reaction to fleas themselves — it's a hypersensitivity to proteins in flea saliva, meaning a single bite can trigger a disproportionate reaction in a sensitive pet. In dogs, this typically shows up as itching and crusted bumps along the lower back, tail base, and inner thighs. In cats, it more often appears as overgrooming, scabbing, and small crusty bumps across a wider area. The fix is consistent, year-round flea prevention on every pet in the household, not just the affected one — reinfestation undoes progress fast.

Food allergies

Genuinely less common than owners often assume, food allergies are an immune overreaction to a specific protein — chicken and beef are frequently implicated. Signs overlap heavily with other allergy types (itching, skin irritation), which is exactly why food allergies are typically diagnosed by ruling other causes out first, often through a structured elimination diet under veterinary guidance rather than guessing and switching foods repeatedly.

Environmental allergies

Also called atopic dermatitis, this is a reaction to airborne allergens — pollen, mold, dust mites, dander — and is usually diagnosed once flea and food causes have been ruled out. A telling pattern is seasonality: symptoms that flare at the same time each year point toward an environmental trigger. Commonly affected areas include the face, ears, feet, and armpits. Unlike flea or food allergy, this one is typically lifelong rather than a one-time fix — our managing-chronic-environmental-allergies-long-term article covers what ongoing treatment actually looks like.

Hot spots: when skin irritation turns into an emergency-feeling mess

A hot spot (acute moist dermatitis) is what happens when persistent licking, biting, or scratching — from any of the causes above, or from mats, boredom, or an ear or anal gland issue — breaks the skin and lets bacteria take hold. The defining feature is speed: a hot spot can go from a small irritated patch to a large, oozing, painful area within hours, often hidden under matted fur until it's already significant. Two things are safe to do yourself the moment you find

one: stop the licking with an E-collar, and clip away the fur surrounding the area so it can air out and actually be seen. What comes after that — cleaning the wound itself, treating any infection, and addressing whatever caused it in the first place — needs a vet, not a home remedy. A hot spot that hasn't resolved within 24 hours has moved past the point where waiting makes sense, even if it still looks minor. Our hot-spots-what-causes-them-and-what-to-do-first article covers that timeline in full, plus why some dogs get them again and again.

Home care versus a vet visit

Mild, occasional itching with no broken skin is reasonable to monitor for a few days, especially if a recent change (new food, new season, a missed flea treatment) points to an obvious cause. See a vet the same week for: any broken or oozing skin, a rapidly spreading irritated area, hair loss, a strong odor, or itching severe enough to disrupt sleep or daily behavior. A hot spot moves on a faster clock than this — the 24-hour window above applies specifically to that, not the general few-days-to-a-week timeline for ordinary itching. None of the three allergy types above are reliably self-diagnosable — the overlap in symptoms is exactly why a vet visit, not a guess, is what actually shortens the problem.

Skin and allergy checklist

- [ ] Year-round flea prevention on every pet in the household, not just the itchy one
- [ ] Noting whether symptoms are seasonal (points to environmental) or tied to a specific food change (points to food allergy)
- [ ] An E-collar and clipping away surrounding fur are reasonable immediately, but never attempting to clean or treat a hot spot's wound entirely at home
- [ ] A vet visit within 24 hours for any hot spot that isn't resolving, even if it still looks minor
- [ ] A same-week vet visit for other broken/oozing skin, rapid spreading, hair loss, odor, or sleep-disrupting itching not tied to a hot spot

Summary

Most itching has one of three causes — fleas, food, or environment — and telling them apart reliably takes a vet, not a guess. Fast flea prevention and a same-week vet visit for anything beyond mild, occasional scratching prevents the bigger, faster-moving problem: a hot spot that turns a manageable issue into an urgent one.

This guide is for general education only and is not a substitute for advice from a certified trainer, veterinarian, or veterinary behaviorist. If you're seeing signs of distress, aggression, or a sudden change in behavior, please consult a professional who can assess your pet directly.