



Skin and Ears

What problems do we see with the skin and ears of pets?

Ear and skin complaints are among the most common concerns we see here at The Vet Clinic. Frequently, the two conditions are linked, as 'itchy skin' dogs often also have itchy ears! Unfortunately, diagnosing the reason for a pet's skin condition is often quite complicated, as most cases have multiple underlying causes. The majority of pet owners assume their pet has an allergy to grasses, but this is only one of a myriad of possible causes of their discomfort. For this reason, each pet will need an individualised treatment and management plan to help control their condition, which in many cases, is life-long.

In general, causes of skin complaints can be divided into:

- Contact allergies (plants, irritants)
- Inhaled allergies (pollens, dust mites)
- Food allergies (frequently to chicken or beef)
- Parasite effects (fleas, mosquitos, mites)
- Skin barrier dysfunction (leading to infections)
- Genetic predisposition
- Other rare conditions

Often these categories overlap, and the resulting effects we see in or on the skin can appear very similar despite having several possible underlying causes. An itchy dog may have an allergy to pollens, the sap of a plant, chicken, AND have fleas. Despite these differing causes, the actual appearance of the skin may look the same, making it difficult to determine the underlying cause just by looking.

Because of the wide spectrum of triggers, in most cases, management of skin and ear disease is multimodal, meaning that one single medication or treatment is usually not enough on its own. Instead, multiple avenues may be required to maintain a healthy balance. Skin issues are often a symptom of an internal issue, and therefore topical treatments alone are usually not enough to keep the skin healthy.

Infections are by far the most common complaint seen with ears, but lodged foreign bodies such as grass seeds are also extremely common in the warmer months. Rarely, other complaints such as injuries, tumours, or polyps are encountered.

Are some breeds more predisposed to skin disease?

Unfortunately, as much as we may love them, there are some breeds who have a general genetic predisposition to skin disease, although any individual of any breed may still suffer from dermatological complaints. The most commonly affected dog breeds include West Highland White Terriers, Sharpeis, English or American Staffordshires, Bulldogs, Spaniels, German Shepherds, Collies, Labradors and Retrievers. Cats of any breed may display skin or ear concerns, but Persians, Bengals and Himalayans are the most prone.

What is involved in a dermatology or ear consultation?

Because skin and ear disease has so many potential underlying causes, we often need to perform a multitude of tests to bring us closer to a diagnosis. It is really important for pet owners to pay close attention to any triggers that may cause their pet's skin to flare up, as we will ask a lot of questions in order to gain a full and thorough picture of your pet's condition.

Tests may include any or all of the following:

- Skin scrapings
- Sticky tape impressions
- Ear swabs
- Hair plucks
- Ultraviolet light exam
- Otoscopic (ear instrument) exam
- Sedation
- Blood tests
- Treatment trials
- Fine needle aspiration
- Biopsy
- Culture and sensitivity testing
- Microscopic exam
- Diet trials

For this reason, a full 'work up' of skin or ear disease can be time consuming, costly, and frustrating for the pet owner. At The Vet Clinic, we understand that pet owners' wishes, expectations, and budgets differ, so we do our very best to keep owners informed at all times, and to provide diagnostic and treatment choices wherever possible.

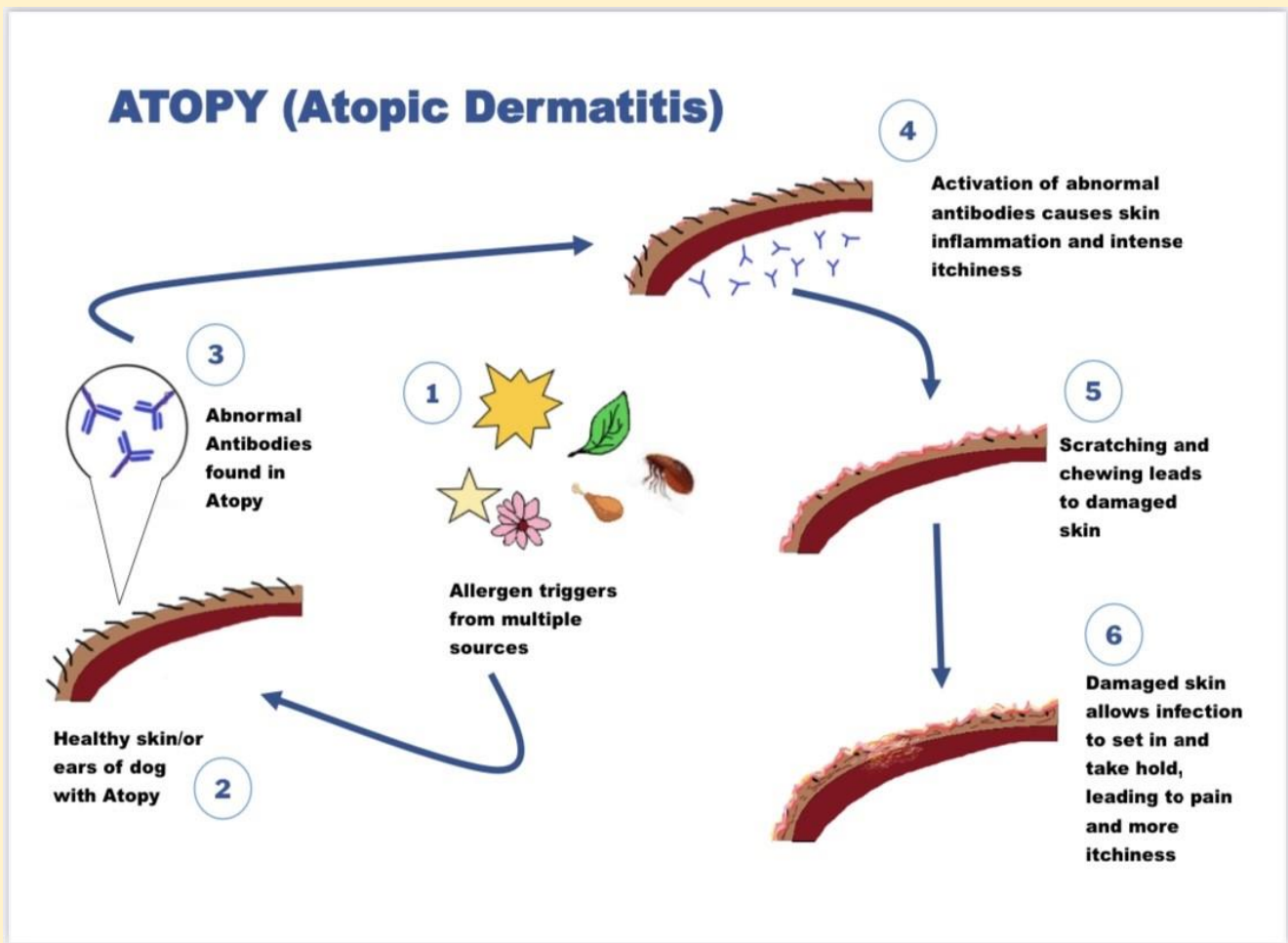
Due to the complex nature of skin and ear disease, it is really important to follow your vet's recommendations and strictly adhere to any medication instructions, so that your pet may remain as comfortable as possible.

What is Atopy?

Atopy (atopic dermatitis) is a complex and frustrating condition that affects approximately 10 to 15% of Australian dogs of all breeds. Similar to certain types of eczema in humans, it is a hereditary inflammatory disease resulting in abnormal antibody function, which leads to intense itchiness, rashes, skin infections, and discomfort.

Most of the time, clinical signs are non-seasonal and are present throughout the year, but depending on the underlying trigger they may be worse or occur more frequently in spring and summer.

The clinical signs we see are secondary to the underlying abnormal antibody response found with Atopy; this response may be set off by a multitude of triggers.



Parasites, or inhaled, contacted, or ingested allergens may trigger this antibody cascade, which ultimately leads to itchiness and a damaged skin barrier, allowing infection to settle in the skin. An allergic response to dust mites is extremely common. Infection may be caused by bacteria, yeast, or a combination of the two.

Most pets with Atopy begin to show clinical signs before 6 months of age.

What is dietary sensitivity?

Intolerance to certain foods is commonly found in dogs who suffer from Atopy. Approximately 70% of Atopic dogs are triggered by diet, however very few dogs WITHOUT Atopy suffer from dietary sensitivities, so overall it is actually much less common than many owners think. The degree of effect can be classed as either a food allergy, a food intolerance, or a non-allergic food hypersensitivity, with the overall condition termed Adverse Food Reaction (AFR). The pattern of damage we see on the pet's skin cannot be distinguished from other causes, and therefore cannot be diagnosed simply from looking at your pet. Commonly we see very itchy skin, crusty patches, hair loss, and in cats especially, a very itchy face and neck. It is important to note that intolerance develops over time and is not necessarily only seen with the introduction of a new diet. The top three ingredients that may trigger AFR in dogs include beef, dairy, and chicken, whereas in cats it is most frequently to beef, fish, and chicken in that order.

What are external parasites?

The most common culprits are fleas and mites, though at times we may also see skin problems caused from mosquitoes, flies, ants, bees, lice, ticks, or other critters.

Flea Allergy Dermatitis (FAD) is a frustrating condition for your pet. In low numbers, fleas are usually no more than a mild irritation to dogs and cats, and are a completely normal finding. For those pets with FAD though, the bite from a single flea can cause intense itchiness and the development of large areas of inflamed dermatitis. Many pets with Atopy will also suffer from FAD. For these animals, it is essential to be up to date at all times with flea prevention medications and other flea prevention strategies. Our team can discuss with you the best options for your pet.

There are several species of mites that may cause skin issues in dogs and cats. Ear mites are quite common in cats, and lead to intensely itchy ears. Often cats with ear mites will have thick black discharge in or from their ears. Ear mites are highly contagious between cats, but only occasionally affect dogs.

Demodex mites and sarcoptes mites are responsible for 'mange' in dogs. They can also cause this condition in cats, but this is rare. Mites live deep in the hair follicles and cannot be seen with the naked eye. They cause hair loss, itching, skin thickening and discolouration, and may be transmissible to humans.

Fortunately, there are many products available over the counter for the prevention of fleas, mites and other parasites. For severe infestations, it may be necessary for your pet to see a vet in order to provide immediate relief, clear up any infection, and develop a treatment plan tailored to your pet.

What is infectious dermatitis?

Many skin conditions that we see in the clinic present as some form of secondary infectious dermatitis. The underlying cause of the infection may never be discovered, but often an atopic component is identified (see above). All animals have various species of bacteria and yeast living on the skin in low numbers, as part of a healthy system. Once the protective skin barrier is damaged, either from an outside source or due to an inherently weakened structure, these bacteria and yeasts are able to invade the deeper structures of the skin and develop into an infection.

Skin infections may range from quite mild to very severe. Mild bacterial infections may appear as a rash of small pimple-like pustules, often on the belly or in the groin. This is known as superficial pyoderma (pyo = pus and derm = skin). Severe infections, or deep pyoderma, may appear anywhere on the body and are frequently quite large areas of moist hair, wet skin, pus and bleeding, often with a foul odour. Deep pyoderma is painful, and these lesions can spread very rapidly and if large enough, can make your pet very sick.

Yeast infections are very common and may be confined to a single area, especially the ears or feet. In some cases, the infection can be widespread, affecting most of the body.

All cases of infectious dermatitis require a visit to the vet. Some diagnostics may be performed, and medications are usually prescribed. It is likely that our vets will want to see your pet again during or at the end of the medication course in order to assess the effectiveness of the treatment.



Superficial pyoderma



Deep pyoderma

What is Otitis?

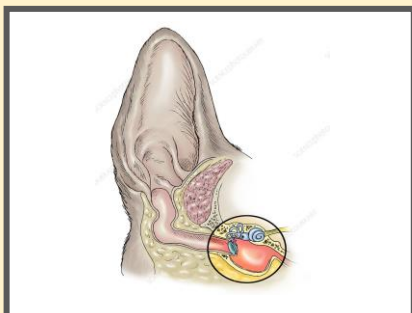
Otitis is basically an infectious dermatitis of the ear canals caused by bacteria or yeast or a combination of both. It is one of the most common complaints we see in small animal general practice. Both cats and dogs can suffer from ear infections, and whilst Atopy certainly predisposes many dogs to otitis, ear infections can also occur independently from this condition. Ear infections may also be caused by ear mites, ear canal injury, foreign objects in the ear canal (for instance, grass seeds), or rarely tumours or polyps.

Otitis may be confined to the external ear canal, that is, outside of the ear drum (otitis externa); or present within the middle of the ear structure where the tiny ear bones reside (otitis media). The infection may even be located within the skull itself and affect the organs responsible for balance - the cochlea and vestibular system (otitis media).

Most cases of otitis externa are straight forward and respond to a short course of medication, however, at times longer courses or medication changes may be required. In all cases, the vet will take a swab from your pet's ear to look at under the microscope to ensure we are using 'the right drugs for the right bug', as an incorrect diagnosis or an assumption as to the kind of infection present may lead to potentially serious complications. This is why it is extremely important not to administer any ear medications at home without first bringing your pet to see your vet, as it is definitely possible to do more harm than good. It is also important to understand that without special instruments, it is impossible to see down the entire ear canal of dogs and cats due to the 'L' shape of the canal.

Occasionally, we may need to take a sterile swab from your pet's ears to send to an external laboratory for a Culture and Sensitivity test (C&S). This is where the discharge is grown in the lab to identify the strain of bacteria or yeast responsible for the infection. The 'bug' is then tested with several antibiotics to determine which one will be most effective.

Otitis media and interna can at times be extremely serious, with otitis media having the potential to lead to life threatening infections, which are not always visible or obvious from the outside.



Dog ear canal



Dog ear infection

Are there any other causes for skin disease?

Other less common causes of skin and ear disease are also sometimes seen in general practice. Autoimmune conditions such as lupus are the most common. Skin changes, hair loss, and infections may also be seen with some forms of cancer, as well as with some conditions involving hormone imbalances.

What treatments are available for my pet?

The best treatment plan for your pet will depend on the underlying cause of the complaint, the specific skin or ear lesions present, your pet's age and breed, and a multitude of other factors.

It is important to be aware that skin and ear disease are usually present for life, and there is often no complete cure. Management is aimed at keeping flare ups to a minimum in order to keep your pet as happy and comfortable as we can. Wherever possible, we do try our best to take your budget into account when formulating treatment plans.

Our vets may choose from a range of medications, diets, topicals, shampoos, supplements, and other management tools. Often a combination of approaches is recommended.

Apoquel is a commonly used medication. Given daily, these tablets can prevent the itch before it even happens, keeping your pet comfortable and helping to prevent skin and ear infections. Cytopoint is a monthly injection given by your vet, that controls itching for around 4-6 weeks. Both of these medications are very effective in managing allergic skin conditions and are especially helpful for pets with Atopy.



A myriad of medicated and specially formulated shampoos are available including Malaseb, Aloveen and Epi-Soothe. Our team can advise which one may be best for your pet.



Many of the super premium diet ranges have scientifically formulated foods that are designed to assist in building a strong and healthy skin barrier, and provide new and low allergen protein sources that pets are unlikely to be allergic to. Our recommended brands and lines at The Vet Clinic include Royal Canin Hypoallergenic and Anallergenic, Hill's Prescription Diet z/d and Prime100.

Other treatment options may include supplementing with omega 3 and omega 6 essential fatty acids and various vitamins using products like Megaderm or PAW Dermega. For some dogs, wearing t-shirts, or applying prescription products such as Cortavance may help reduce the severity of some conditions.

Do I have any other options?

In most cases, there will be several treatment options for your pet. Our vets will discuss with you the option they feel is best for your pet. If you would prefer alternatives, they will also discuss these, together with the pros and cons of all treatment possibilities. Unfortunately, there is sometimes only one option for resolution, and in these cases our vets will do their very best to work with you to find the best way to ensure a good outcome for your pet.

There are two Specialist Veterinary Dermatologists in South Australia, both based in Adelaide city. For difficult or especially complex cases, there is always the option of referral to one of these Specialists.

What are the costs involved?

Due to the complex and life-long nature of many skin and ear diseases, costs can add up over time. We will work with you to find the most cost effective way to manage your pet's condition. Some of the more effective treatments are unfortunately also the most costly, with Apoquel and Cytopoint being around \$100 to \$250 per month depending on your pet's bodyweight. Prescription diets vary greatly in price according to brand and line, but low allergenic super premium dry food is usually around \$14 to \$32 per kg. The cost of ear consultations, examination, diagnostics and medications also vary, but you can expect to pay around \$300 to \$400 inclusive for one course of treatment. If oral antibiotics are needed, these may be around \$100 for the medications, in addition to the consultation, exam, and diagnostics.

How do I book a dermatology or ear consultation?

Please give The Vet Clinic a call 6 days a week to speak with our lovely nurses. They can advise on the best course of action, and can make an appointment for your pet's consultation at your convenience.