

## First Aid for Hot Spots in Dogs

### What is a hot spot?

- (A) Night club with great music
- (B) Place with a strong wireless signal
- (C) Car parked in the sizzling summer sun
- (D) Sore spot on a dog's body
- (E) All of the above

Correct answer = E. While all of the above are hot spots, let's focus on the hot spots that affect our dogs.

Canine hot spots are red, inflamed skin lesions also known as *pyotraumatic dermatitis* or *acute moist dermatitis*. These names accurately describe the inflammatory (*itis*) skin (*derm*) lesions exacerbated by scratching (*traumatic*) that appear quickly (*acute*), ooze (*moist*), and may contain pus (*pyo*). Hot spots can be found anywhere on a dog's body, but the most common sites are head, legs, and hips. These painful, smelly sores may be very obvious or may be hidden beneath matted fur.



## What causes a hot spot?

Hot spots are usually caused by self-trauma when a dog scratches an itchy spot so vigorously that he creates an open wound. Dogs scratch for many reasons, but here are some of the more common underlying causes of hot spots:

1. **Allergies**, including food allergies or inhalant allergies that cause itching.
2. **Reactions to insect bites** from fleas, mites (*Sarcoptes*, *Cheyletiella*) or other small insects (caterpillars, bees, wasps, lice, gnats, etc)
3. **Ear infections**. Bacteria or yeast in the ear canal can be so irritating that the dog scratches at his ear creating hot spots on the ear flap, behind the ear, or on the neck.
4. **Pyoderma**. Primary skin infections also caused by bacteria or yeast may incite the dog to scratch an area so much that a secondary hot spot forms.
5. **Poor grooming**. Dogs with unkempt hair coats bite at tangles, creating open wounds. Matted fur prevents air from reaching the skin and retains water after a dog swims or gets caught in the rain so the skin stays wet. This sets up a perfect environment for a hot spot.
6. **Boredom**. Dogs, like people, develop bad habits. Instead of biting their fingernails, bored dogs lick areas that are easily accessible. When they lie down, the feet and forearms are right under their faces so hot spots often occur here.
7. **Orthopedic problems**. Dogs with arthritis or back problems tend to lie down much of the time. Lying on one side creates abrasions over pressure points, like hips or hocks, where bony protrusions have little muscular padding, especially in elderly dogs with diminishing muscle mass. When the dog licks the abrasion, a hot spot erupts. Dogs also lick or chew at degenerating joints much like people rub a sore knee to relieve the pain, creating hot spots in the process.
8. **Anal gland inflammation**. Infected or impacted anal glands are painful and annoying. Dogs lick the area around the rectum and can cause hot spots under or on top of the tail.

Regardless of the cause, hot spots are bothersome. When a dog licks the sore spot, he irritates superficial nerve endings in the skin which stimulates more itching followed by more licking, biting, and scratching. This lick-itch-lick cycle is the basis for the self trauma that causes hot spots. Hot spots can dramatically increase in size in a very short period of time. Pet owners may go to work after noticing a pin-point area of redness and come home at the end of the day to find a raw lesion the size of a pancake.

## How are hot spots treated?

The goal in treating a hot spot is to stop the trauma and prevent the development of a deep skin infection, so the first step in treating hot spots is to stop the self mutilation. But, how do you stop a dog from licking, biting, and scratching? Some options include:

- An Elizabethan collar (also known as a “cone”) that stops the dog from chewing at the hot spot.
- Covering the hot spot with a sock or bandage to act as a barrier.
- Topical or oral steroids and antihistamines to reduce the itching – consult your veterinarian before using anything like this as medications intended for humans are often toxic to dogs.



Often, it takes a combination of all options to stop the trauma.

In the meantime, the underlying cause of the hot spot must be addressed, so it's definitely time for a trip to your veterinarian.

- If the hot spot formed as a result of impacted anal glands, they will need to be expressed.
- If the cause is flea allergy, a flea control protocol beginning with a fast acting adulticide and continuing with a monthly product to control the entire flea life cycle will be needed.
- If arthritis is the culprit, your veterinarian may prescribe non-steroidal anti-inflammatory analgesics (NSAIDs) or other pain medications.
- For inhalant or food allergies, your veterinarian can help you to begin avoidance or de-sensitization therapy and recommend a hypoallergenic food.
- For ear infections, the underlying yeast or bacteria will be treated.
- If boredom or behavioral issues are the reason the dog traumatizes himself, training and behavior modification, additional exercise and enrichment, and/or medications may be the solution.
- If poor grooming is the cause, seek a professional that knows how to handle a pair of clippers.

Clipping the hair away from the hot spot and the surrounding area is crucial to a successful treatment plan. The hot spot will heal much quicker if the hair is removed so that the lesion can dry properly. Grooming may be painful so the dog may need to be sedated.

**"The hot spot will heal much quicker if the hair is removed so that the lesion can dry properly."**

After clipping, the lesion should be disinfected with a chlorhexiderm solution that kills bacteria and yeast. Topical antibiotics, desiccating sprays and soothing reagents will be more effective when applied to a clipped, clean skin surface. Oral antibiotics and steroids/antihistamines may also be in order for serious hot spots.

## **How can hot spots be prevented?**

Continued monitoring and treatment of the underlying cause should prevent future hot spots. Some dogs also benefit from seasonal grooming, as well as regular brushing and bathing. With a vigilant protocol, the only kind of hot spot dogs should be concerned about is the location of the most popular dog park.

*This client information sheet is based on material written by: Lynn Buzhardt, DVM  
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