

How to Deal With Severe, Self-Inflicted Skin Erosions

BACKGROUND

Itchiness in animals can arise for many different reasons. Some pets will come into contact with a substance or organism, or have an insect bite, that will cause the skin to become itchy. Others have allergies to food ingredients, or pollens in the air, or fleas, that trigger intense itching. Still others have problems within the skin, such as a bacterial infection or mange, which also cause a desire to scratch. No matter what the underlying cause, dogs and cats that begin scratching, licking, or chewing an area of their own skin cause it to become inflamed and irritated. The inflammation and irritation itself can be very itchy, and the cycle continues until a large skin lesion or erosion has occurred.

The area of skin that is affected should be clipped of hair and the skin gently cleaned immediately. Occasionally, this can be done without sedation; however, in severe cases, the inflamed skin is extremely painful, and touching the skin causes crying out or even biting on the part of the pet feeling the pain. Therefore, severe skin lesions often must be examined and treated by a veterinarian who can give the affected pet a sedative and pain medication.

Medications may be prescribed for pets to treat these areas of the skin. Topical treatment, meaning medication that is applied directly to the skin in the form of ointments or creams, usually can be done easily at home. The most important goal is allowing the medication to remain in contact with the skin for a prescribed period of time. Generally, your veterinarian will shave the hair around the area where the medication should be applied to prevent the hair from becoming matted with the ointment or cream.

Veterinarians may be able to determine the cause of the lesion/erosion and may prescribe additional medication in oral form (pills, syrups) to treat the condition. You should give all medications as directed and for the length of time prescribed, because ending treatment early when the situation looks improved may allow a relapse to flare up soon afterward.

GETTING STARTED

Equipment/materials needed (available at your veterinarian and/or a combination of human pharmacy and pet store):

- Medicated ointment/cream
- Gloves
- Gauze
- Antibacterial solution
- Clean bowl
- Human medical thermometer
- Elizabethan collar or anti-lick device

Your veterinarian may have prescribed a cream or ointment to place on the affected area of skin. You should wear latex (or similar) medical exam gloves to prevent you from coming in contact with potential bacteria or fungi that your pet may harbor. Gloves will also prevent your skin from coming in contact with the medication.

TROUBLESHOOTING BEFOREHAND

The skin that is affected should begin healing within the first few days of medication application. In serious conditions, wound healing may take longer. However, if you notice any of the following symptoms in your pet, you should contact your veterinarian immediately:

- Increased discharge
- Increased redness, swelling or heat in the area of concern
- Increased pain
- Spreading of the condition

- Inability to apply the ointment or cream (for example, if your pet will not allow it or because you feel you are not doing it correctly)

If your pet shows resentment to having this done, stop the procedure and call your veterinarian for further advice. The area may be too painful to treat without additional medications, and it is imperative that you not put yourself at risk of being bitten or scratched by a painful pet that reacts without inhibition. This may also be an indication that a skin infection is worsening and needs to be rechecked immediately.

PROCEDURE

- In calm (or asleep) pets, application of topical medication can be done with just one person, but with young, excited animals, it may be necessary to have one person distracting and/or holding the pet while another person applies the ointment or cream. The whole process should take about 5 minutes. If it is too complicated or difficult, notify your veterinarian to discuss whether there are alternative strategies such as oral medication or periodic injections to replace the ointment or cream.
- Clean the area with a diluted, lukewarm, soapy antibacterial solution such as diluted chlorhexidine or diluted povidone-iodine (Betadine) if dirt or grit is on the area where the medication will be applied. These antiseptics can be purchased without a prescription at a human pharmacy, and they should be diluted 10 parts lukewarm water to 1 part antiseptic before being used on raw skin. You can dilute the antiseptic solution by combining the antiseptic and tap water in a clean bowl.
- The solution should be lukewarm—slightly warmer than room temperature but very comfortable to the touch. Remember that raw skin is extremely temperature sensitive, so you should try to make sure the solution is as close to body temperature (99°F–102°F [37.2°C–38.9°C]) as possible; a thermometer placed in a disposable plastic bag (for hygienic reasons, so a used thermometer is not in contact with the solution) is useful for confirming this.
- You should soak one or more gauze pads in the solution, and then apply the solution-soaked gauze pad to the affected area for 5 minutes, allowing the moisture to penetrate the skin and soften any dried secretions and debris on the skin surface.
- Once all dirt, scabs, and medication left over from any previous treatment have been removed, you can rinse the area well and wipe it down carefully with lukewarm water and allow it to dry.
- You can then apply the medication directly to the affected area of the skin. If the area is already clean, these antiseptic steps are not necessary.
- To apply the ointment or cream, squeeze enough from the tube or vial onto your gloved index finger (like putting toothpaste on a toothbrush). The amount should be sufficient to cover the area with a thin film, and this usually means one or more pea-sized dollops. If unsure, you can review this with a veterinary technician in person or on the phone.
- It is imperative that your pet not lick the area where you have applied the medication. Licking will remove medication from where it needs to be, and some medications can be harmful to pets if swallowed. If your pet can lick the area of concern, an Elizabethan collar (E-collar) is probably wise. These collars can be purchased from your veterinarian or any pet supply store. If the area of concern is located on the paw, your pet may still be able to reach the lesion if the collar is too short, so be sure to use one that is sufficiently long. Otherwise, you can apply a



After hair clipping (if needed), disinfection, and drying, you can apply ointment as shown.

sock, tied loosely with white cotton bandaging tape (available at any pharmacy/drugstore) to prevent any licking. T-shirts may also work as a barrier to prevent your pet from licking affected areas on the chest or abdomen.

- To apply a spray medication, apply 1 to 2 pumps to the area after cleaning and drying as described above. The lesion does not have to be saturated with solution.
- Remember that the medication is cooler than body temperature and may feel cold to your pet when you apply it to the area, especially on raw or sensitive wounds. Apply it with a gentle touch, using small circular motions of the finger on the affected area. There should be no pain or resentment (see beginning of this section, above). Another excellent way to make the medication application bearable is to put the closed container (bottle or tube) of ointment or cream in your armpit for at least 20 minutes immediately prior to application, which raises the temperature to comfortable body temperature. The goal with most medications is to leave a thin film over the entire area so the medication penetrates gradually over several hours.



An Elizabethan collar is essential to prevent a pet from licking ointment off the skin of almost all areas of the body.

- In a first-aid situation, when prescription ointments or creams are not yet available, over-the-counter (nonprescription) human soothing creams that contain aloe vera, hydrocortisone, or both may be used for 48 hours or less. Application of the cream can proceed as described above.

AFTERWARDS

Once you have finished cleaning the area, discard any remaining antibacterial solution, used gauze, and gloves. Fresh solution and new gauze should be used for each treatment to prevent contamination. Replace the cap on the medication, and place in a safe area out of reach of children and pets.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

My pet is with me all day. Why does he or she need an E-collar?

A pet can lick or damage the skin in a way that sets back healing by days or weeks in just a few seconds. Unless constant supervision can be ensured, an E-collar is extremely important because it can prevent otherwise unnecessary return trips to the veterinarian. An E-collar provides continuous protection from chewing and licking. Although this method of protection can be awkward for some pets at first, it is a temporary measure, and most dogs and cats adjust well over time.

How often do I need to clean the area and apply the medication?

Your veterinarian will direct you as to how often to clean the area and apply the medication. It is imperative that you follow the directions given, preventing unwanted return trips to the hospital. Usually, during the initial few days, treatment is needed at least once a day.

Should I apply the medication only until the area of concern is healed?

Cleaning the affected area of skin and application of the medication should go on for as long as your veterinarian recommends. Some

lesions or infections may appear healed externally, when in actuality, the healing of deep tissues is incomplete. Some types of infections take much longer to heal than others. If you have any question about the area, contact your veterinarian.

Can I catch what my pet has?

Possibly. Some fungal and bacterial infections can be contagious to people. It is imperative to wear gloves when cleaning the affected area and discard all items that were used. If you or anyone in your family develops skin lesions, be sure to mention to your physician that you have a pet with a disorder requiring you to apply medication to the pet's skin. Be sure to have the diagnosis (the medical name of your pet's problem) to avoid misinterpretation or overreaction.

Are there any restrictions for my pet?

Your pet should not have a bath or play in water until the area of concern has healed. Your veterinarian should recheck your pet's condition and advise you when your pet can have a bath.

OTHER RELATED INFORMATION SHEET

- [How to Assemble and Use an Elizabethan Collar](#)

Practice Stamp or Name & Address

Also available in Spanish.