Seborrhea in Dogs: Excessive Oily or Flaky Skin

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff

If your pet has flaky, dry skin or greasy scales, he may have a condition called seborrhea.

What is seborrhea?

Seborrhea is characterized by skin that is excessively flaky. An abnormal turnover of the skin cells (keratinocytes) into dead scale (keratin) occurs. Normally, the cells in the skin are constantly dying and being worn off; new cells to replace them form deeper in the skin. So there is a constant migration of deeper cells moving to the surface, undergoing keratinization (making keratin and dying), and being sloughed off. This migration usually takes 3 weeks. This cycle is changed in animals with seborrhea. The migration is greatly accelerated and only takes several days. Thus, there is a buildup of this keratin on the surface of the skin. This is why seborrhea is commonly termed a 'keratinization disorder.' The dead cells are the flakes that we see.

There may also be an alteration of the amount and quality of sebaceous gland secretions. Sebaceous glands are found in or near hair follicles and their normal function is to enrich the skin with oil secretions.

What causes seborrhea?

Seborrhea can be broken down into two groups, depending upon the cause. Primary seborrhea is genetic-based. Secondary seborrhea results from injury to the skin due to other causes such as allergies, parasites, nutritional disorders, and endocrine (hormonal) disorders such as hypothyroidism.

What are the types of seborrhea?

- *Seborrhea sicca*, or dry seborrhea, shows scaliness only.
- *Seborrhea oleosa*, or oily seborrhea, has scales as well as excess oil production by the skin. It is accompanied by a malodorous, oily coat.
- *Seborrheic dermatitis* is characterized by greasiness and flaking, and is accompanied by inflammation.

How can I tell if my pet has seborrhea?

Some flakiness is normal, especially in some young puppies. However if your dog has excessive scaliness, it may be a sign of seborrhea. In some cases, the hair will feel greasy and have a distinctive odor. The skin may or may not appear red. In some cases, the ears may be inflamed and have excess secretions. You may see your dog scratching and licking more. If you suspect your pet has seborrhea, he should be seen by a veterinarian. Your veterinarian will want to know your observations.

What is the treatment of seborrhea?

Treatment includes managing the symptoms, and in the case of secondary seborrhea, also managing the underlying cause. Symptomatic treatment includes frequent bathing with specially medicated shampoos. The shampoos must be selected based upon the type of seborrhea present (sicca or oleosa). Clipping or shaving the haircoat is often necessary so the medicated shampoos can penetrate through the fur to the skin. Special rinses may also be used. With secondary seborrhea, the underlying cause will also need to be treated. In many cases there are accompanying yeast and bacterial infections, as well, and these are treated with appropriate medications.

Since inflammation is often present, an omega-3 fatty-acid supplement may be recommended by your veterinarian. This may seem counterintuitive since the coat may already feel 'greasy,' however, the fatty acids are essential for normal skin cell function and will help the condition, not exacerbate it.

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