

Dealing with Hot Spots

Reprinted with permission from Scott A. Krick D.V.M.

It's very likely that if you've owned dogs long enough, you have had the unfortunate opportunity to experience a "hot spot" on your pet. "Hot spots," more correctly referred to as acute moist dermatitis, are areas of superficial irritation, moisture, and subsequent infection on the surface of the skin. They can occur anywhere on the body, but common sites of occurrence include the underside of the neck, the cheeks, the flanks and thighs. They can be as small as a centimeter in diameter, or as large as a dinner plate. "Hot spots" are generally extremely irritating and cause excessive itching and/or chewing.

There is no "one" cause for their formation, and they often seem to arise very rapidly. In my experience, the majority of them are the result of inhalant allergy. But, I've also seen them arise as the result of a tick or other insect bite, localized infection, or local injury or irritation. Occasionally they also occur when a dog's coat remains wet after swimming or bathing. If you've never seen a "hot spot," they typically are areas of very swollen, red, irritated skin with a thick exudate of sticky serum which causes the hair to mat down. The affected areas also frequently have a disagreeable odor due to bacterial growth.

"Hot spots" are treated in a variety of ways. Some veterinarians focus on the fact that infection is a component of the dermatitis and rely on antibiotics (either topical or systemic) to eliminate them. Others feel that since allergy is a common cause, anti-inflammatory medications are chosen. More important, however, is the initial handling of the lesion. Most veterinarians recommend that the entire affected area be clipped and cleaned. Removing the overlying and surrounding hair discourages the accumulation of tissue fluid and exudates and, consequently, discourages superficial infection. The area should be carefully cleansed with an antiseptic solution such as Chlorhexidene. Oral and topical medications are then prescribed.

My personal preference is to clip the affected area and clean it gently with Chlorhexidene. I generally have the owner treat it topically with a product that contains both hydrocortisone and Domeboro's solution (a drying agent), twice daily for 5 to 7 days. I also typically use an anti-inflammatory medication (either a steroidal or anti-histamine).

You may be able to avoid a veterinary visit completely if you are vigilant and clip and clean the wound at its earliest appearance. Cleanse the wound with an antiseptic solution after removing the overlying hair. Apply a topical antibiotic or hydrocortisone ointment twice daily until the skin dries and a light scab forms. Use over-the-counter antihistamines as recommended by your veterinarian to eliminate the irritation.

"Hot spots" are rarely life threatening, but they are, nonetheless, very uncomfortable and annoying for both the dog and its family. Careful and regular examination of your pet's coat should detect these nuisance problems in their earliest development. Be sure to contact your veterinarian if any questions or concerns arise.