

Skin Conditions in Animals in Shelter Care: Guidelines

This document provides a tool for animal centre managers and staff to understand the process of working with your veterinarian to manage skin conditions in shelter animals. It applies to all shelter and foster animals.

What is it? While veterinarians can sometimes diagnose skin conditions on physical examination, many conditions can look similar or be complicated by secondary infections or other complications, making diagnostic tests such as cytology, scraping or biopsies necessary in those cases. Because chronic skin conditions can sometimes take a few veterinary visits to manage and for the vet to assess response to appropriate treatment, it is helpful to discuss and understand the possible conditions, discuss the plan of action and what to expect, and to maintain consistency with the same veterinarian for scheduled follow-ups.

Contagious disease: Contagious conditions such as ringworm or sarcoptic mange (rare) are generally managed in care until clear to allow risk mitigation in the community. If your vet is recommending testing for ringworm, please notify the Animal Health Team, as this testing must be completed in our internal lab at the Vancouver SPCA Hospital (and in some cases, also through our internal Idexx account if directed by the AH team). Animals with suspected or confirmed ringworm must not be treated with steroids or other immunosuppressive medications in the shelter or in foster, as this will worsen the condition and infectious risk to others, and prolong time to clear.

A Word on Allergies: Allergies are fairly common in cats and dogs in British Columbia. In some animals (ex. older, having other symptoms), testing may be recommended to rule out underlying internal disease. If secondary infections are present, managing the allergy will initially require therapy to control the infection. These types of infections, such as Malassezia yeast or secondary bacterial infections, are generally not considered contagious to other animals with healthy skin. Confirming a diagnosis of allergy requires treatment trials (food, medication or both). Veterinary diets for skin conditions must be recommended by a veterinarian. This is important as there may be specific medical reasons for recommending specific diets and there may be cases where certain diets may not be appropriate. This is also important for the veterinarian to be able to appropriately assess response. For itchy animals, veterinarians will generally prescribe anti-inflammatory or anti-itch medication. In some cases where itch is the only symptom and there are no changes to the skin or hair loss, a short trial of this medication, along with making sure the animal is on regular flea prevention may be recommended. While allergic conditions can be managed, they cannot generally be cured, and this is important for us and adopters to know. For an animal with diagnosed allergies to be ready for adoption, infections, redness and itching must be well controlled, though it is okay if the animal is still on medication with instruction to follow up with their own veterinarian prior to finishing.

For adoptability criteria, please refer to the [Asilomar and Adoptability Guidelines](#). If an animal in your care is struggling with a skin condition that is not improving with treatment and you are uncertain about their pathway, or if you have questions about this protocol, please contact Dr. Hannah Weitzenfeld at ah@spca.bc.ca.

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