

ACRAL LICK DERMATITIS

What is it?

Acral lick dermatitis refers to a situation where a dog repetitively licks their own skin, usually the top of a front leg but sometimes a hind leg or another area. This results in an oval patch of red, raw skin developing. It is what is known as a reaction pattern, which means that a wide range of different problems can cause the same reaction in the skin. Identifying the problem as acral lick dermatitis is just the first step. The key to a permanent cure is finding the reason why the licking started in the first place. It is often said that acral lick dermatitis is a very frustrating and complicated disease to treat, and this is because it can be hard to find the trigger and treat this effectively.

How do we diagnose it?

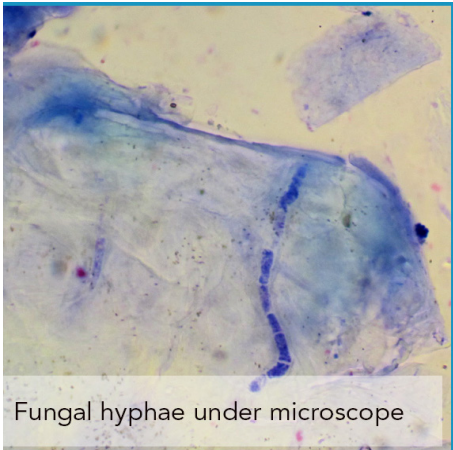
A thorough work up is essential as infectious diseases, cancers, and arthritis can all cause similar looking skin lesions so these need to be investigated with radiographs (x rays), biopsy and a culture from tissue deep in the wound. Bacterial infection is present in about 95% of cases and perpetuates the problem - the surface bacteria are often different to the deep bacteria, so accurately identifying the bacteria requires taking a sample from under the skin, not just from the top. Allergies have also been associated with this problem and part of the investigation might involve a food trial, flea control trial and/or intradermal skin testing or blood testing for hypersensitivities.

Can the problem be behavioural?

Acral lick dermatitis has been associated with anxiety and boredom in dogs, as well as with obsessive compulsive disorder (like continual hand washing in humans). Dogs who lick their legs for behavioural reasons often have other behaviour problems. It is important to consider the dog's lifestyle early on in the investigation of possible causes - in one study approximately 70% of affected dogs were kept outside in a small area and were never walked or played with. Acral lick dermatitis has been reported in a zoo jackal that was kept on her own - after she was moved to a cage with other jackals, the problem resolved.

The overall prognosis

If the underlying cause can be found and treated, the prognosis for acral lick dermatitis is very good. If a trigger cannot be found, the problem is likely to require ongoing management so that it does not progress and cause serious problems with infection and damage to the bones, joints and tissues underneath.



Fungal hyphae under microscope



Severe hairloss & crusting on a dog's rump and tail due to ringworm



Improvement in crusting after 3 weeks of treatment



Hair growing back after only 6 weeks of treatment