

Golden Health

Those Pesky, Itchy, Hot Spots

by Becky LaBrum

Nearly 10 years ago, Eric and I got our first Golden, Lulu, from Helen Dorrance. "What health issues are we likely to encounter?" we asked. "Hot spots and skin allergies," she promptly replied. She was right! I don't think there's a Golden owner on the planet who hasn't had to deal with the dread hot spot on at least a few occasions. For those of you lucky enough not to be all too familiar with the problem: a hot spot is a sore place, usually raw and seeping, that a dog makes from biting or scratching at herself. Hot spots range from dime-sized to enormous, and they can appear in their full glory literally within a few hours, much to the horror of the owners, who feel they must somehow have missed some earlier, less nightmarish stage. If the hot spot goes unattended for long, the whole nasty mess of blood, serum, saliva, and wet, matted fur can pack down and form a hardened plaque on the skin, creating an ideal moist, airtight environment for bacterial growth and skin infection.

So, what to do? Preventive techniques are many, and we will get to those in a minute. As for dealing with a hot spot that is already there—here are some ideas from all of us.

From Kathy Burton: "We've used 99% pure aloe vera gel on it (after trimming an area the size of a quarter)."

From Becky LaBrum: "Groom your dog often and run your fingers back and forth under her fur, not forgetting the insides of her legs and her tummy. This is a good way to find hot spots before they get too far. If you find one, shave or clip the fur over and around it. When the sore place is fully exposed to air, it often dries up, scabs over, and heals very quickly. After clipping, gently clean with a mild antiseptic soap. While it heals, treat as needed with a cooling or anti-itch spray. We generally use Genta-vet (gentamycin spray). Genesis is another good product.

Finally, if it already looks really horrible when you catch it, head for the vet. Sometimes antibiotics are needed." *From GRR president Maura Phelan:* "I have used Gold Bond Powder and a hot spot cool spray from the people who make Travel-Ease with good results. Bathing the wound with chlorhexiderm or betadine first, to clean, then drying with a blow dryer (as hot as they can stand) and dusting with Gold Bond or spraying with the hot spot spray (which contains witch hazel) works well. Remember, I am trying to NOT take off the hair for my show dogs."

What about prevention? Good diet is critical. Feed a high-quality food and give supplements such as salmon oil caps, Derm Caps, Lipiderm, 3Vs, Vitacoat—there are many on the market. The idea is to keep the dog from getting dry, itchy skin in the first place. Some people have good luck with allergy meds at particularly "itchy" times of year; you can start with Benadryl (works for some dogs, not at all for others) or Tavist. If nothing seems to help with the fierce scratching/biting that can generate hot spots in a hurry, talk to your vet. Atarax is a prescription antihistamine that has helped my Golden Donna; Beth Freeman, whose Golden mix Sierra used to turn herself into hamburger, has had superb results with Atopica (expensive, but a lifesaver for this dog). A low dose of prednisone for a limited time can also help break the cycle. Emily Tuczowski has had excellent success with flaxseed oil. She adds a tablespoon to Sweet's evening meals on a daily basis, and there has not been a re-occurrence of hot spots in over 18 months. Says Emily, "it's probably true that dogs, like humans, are prone to different reactions to different things. And similarly, what resolves a problem in one may do nothing for another, **so just keep trying!**"

Lick granulomas

We've probably all seen our dogs occasionally licking their paws. In some cases, though, the licking becomes obsessive, to the point where all the fur is gone and the dog creates a raw, spreading area of raised, thickened skin with an ulcerated center. In especially bad cases the dog also chews, and can deepen the lesion almost to the bone. The area is often infected. Cam Snyder, frequent GRR foster dad, recalls his foster dog Duke: "Duke was a wonderful dog who would occasionally chew on his left back leg, right above his foot. I was never able to identify what triggered it. He didn't have any other abnormal behavior, at least that I noticed. The first couple of weeks he was here, nothing happened. Then I came home one day and he had chewed almost to the bone. We went right to the vet, and returned the next day for a recheck. Margo met us there, and can verify it was not a pretty sight. The daily treatment was to clean the wound, apply a topical antibiotic like Mycitracin, cover it with a sterile pad and then wrap gauze around his leg to hold it on, secured with tape. Then put a layer of bitter apple on top. I ended up keeping an eye on him when I was home, and he wore an Elizabethan collar if I was going to be out. Even so, he still would chew. His wound would get smaller and start to close, then he would open it again, although never as bad as the first time."

About the only thing that became clear to me after several days reading the tons of information to be had on the subject: there's no one cause, and (**as Cam's account illustrates**) the problem is extremely persistent and frustrating to treat."

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Possible culprits include:

- Skin allergies;
- Bone or joint pain: the dog's attention is drawn to the aching area, which he then licks in an attempt to soothe it;
- Low thyroid;
- Boredom;
- Separation or other anxiety: one theory is that the pain from the chewing causes the release of endorphins, the body's feel-good chemical, so that the behavior becomes self-reinforcing.

As far as treatments go, if you do have an idea about causes, you can at least start on the road to management– by addressing the allergies or treating arthritis pain; by adding thyroid supplements; by giving the dog a more interesting life (walking him more to vary his environment, or leaving toys and food puzzles for him when he's home alone, for instance); by trying low doses of anti-anxiety meds such as amitriptyline, clomipramine, or prozac. But as anybody who has dealt with lick granulomas can attest, once the licking has become a habit, it is really hard to break. For dealing with the persistent lesions, some sources advocate physical barriers: bandaging the area and spraying it with bitter apple or Tabasco sauce, or even

wrapping the limb in a plaster cast enclosing barbed wire! Others say that these tactics don't do much. Once collars are removed, for instance, the whole business may start up again; or the dog may lick above and below a cast. For really drastic cases, surgical excision (by traditional, laser, or cryosurgery) is sometimes recommended to remove dead and infected tissue and seal off nerve endings. But even here, the dog may lick at the incision line or the healing area, and... back onto the merry-go-round we go.

The latest wisdom from some vets is a long course of antibiotics (from 3 weeks to several months) to eradicate the deep-seated infection so typical of these lesions. This was the approach recommended for Scout, an 8-year-old girl who arrived at GRR this fall. She went on 3 weeks of cephalexin, and was also prescribed a topical treatment, Synotic Solution with Banamine & DSO. Synotic is a topical solvent for thick, dense connective tissue, often used for horses; it absorbs quickly and helps deal with the thickened, granular skin of the lesion. Banamine is an anti-inflammatory.

Susie Schaffer, Scout's new mom, comments: "Sometimes the spot looks like

it is gone and other times I see a little area that needs attention. Her fur is still a little discolored on that area of the paw. She likes to lick at her paws and I'm always getting after her. I wash the area with Malaseb [an anti-fungal shampoo] and leave it on for 10 minutes a couple of times a week. I have cut a sponge in fourths and just put a dab of shampoo on the area and rub it in with the sponge. If I see that she is licking more than usual then I spray bitter apple on the area."

This is one of those cases where vets and owners aim for management above all, because we're unlikely actually to achieve a cure. It's a case of working with your vet, trying to pinpoint the triggers, and having faith that eventually you will find something that helps your particular dog.

Web sources. You'll find dozens of web articles on doggie skin troubles. A few links to try:
www.dogstarr.com/hotspots.htm;
www.aztecanimalclinic.com/lick_gran.htm;
www.thepetcenter.com/exa/lick.html;
www.2ndchance.info/acral.htm;
www.skinvet.com/diseasedetail.asp?index=2;
www.nzymes.com/tests.htm (non-pharmaceutical approaches for various problems).

