

MANGE AND CREEPY THINGS THAT ITCH

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Nature has provided us, our pets, and wildlife too, with no under-abundance of creepy crawly critters to make the surfaces of the skin and hair very uncomfortable. The term uncomfortable is a major understatement in and of itself, as people and pets suffering with lice and mites can be just down right miserable.

While bacteria and viruses cause infections, the term reserved for attack by parasitic insects is called infestation. There are basically two types of bugs that attack the skin and hair. The first are the lice which are true insects with six legs. The second type are the mites which are members of the spider family and all have 8 legs.

Perhaps the best known lice to invade the two-legged animal's family are the so-called crab lice. Crabs infest that area down-under, and are very contagious. They are an external form of an STD. Contrary to popular belief they are not found on our pets. They all have several of their own species of lice. One time a young couple brought their pet cat into the office, and pronounced that she had some bug on her. They handed me a jar with a human crab louse in it and said they found it in their bed under the cat where she was sleeping. It was somewhat uncomfortable to inform them that they couldn't blame this on the cat, and poor kitty was just an innocent victim. I suggested that they consult their personal health clinic about this problem, and that I couldn't help them with this situation. They were arguing all the way out to the parking lot about who had brought the critters home. Another common louse in people is the head lice that the kids bring home from school. These are large and pretty creepy. Just makes your skin crawl doesn't it? Dogs and cats can carry lice too. They are long and flat and scurry around the skin in amongst the fur. Lice come in two types; the chewing, or the biting lice. The chewers eat skin flakes and debris, and the biting suck out blood like a flea. Lice have a peculiar habit of laying very sticky eggs all along the shafts of the hair. These eggs look like tiny white beads stuck on the hairs and are called nits. These nits ensure survival of the young lice. When a hair falls off these nits can hatch, and get on another animal that may lie down in that place, or, if the adult lice are all killed on a pet, the nits still stuck on the hairs will hatch in a week or two, and start the infestation all over again. Dr. Doug finds lice commonly on guinea pigs, many species of wildlife, mostly birds, dogs that are cared for poorly by their owners, or stray dogs trying to hack out an existence as best they can. His own dog, Ronnie, was obtained from the Tulalip reservation as a six week old neglected pup. She was blind, emaciated and covered with hungry lice. You could just see the look of thankfulness on her face when she got her first bath of organic lemon insecticidal shampoo, and most of the adult lice were removed. It took a couple more baths as the nits hatched to finally finish the job.

Another common belief is that pet birds that pick their feathers have lice. In 26 years of practice with pet birds, Dr. Doug has only seen two pet birds with lice, and neither picked their feathers. Although lice are common in sick wild birds, they are extremely

uncommon in pet birds. It is just not necessary to have to buy, or use any products meant to remove lice in pet birds, as they are rarely the cause of the picking.

Now that you are sufficiently grossed out from the first half of this column this brings us to the last part about mites. Anyone who has gardened has seen spider mites on some of your plants. There are mites that infest plants, birds, humans, and just about any critter that you can name. Mites can even be found in sea birds, and mammals that dive deeply down into the water. The most common mites people know about are the ones that cause scabies. There are similar mites in pets that cause animal scabies (mange). Scabies in any creature or human is an experience one step lower than miserable. The mites are very tiny (the size of the tip of a needle), and not usually visible to the naked eye. When they crawl onto a new host they immediately search for thinly haired or naked skin, and drill down into the tissue almost to the depth of a mosquito bite. The scabies mite, *Sarcoptes scabiei*, variety-*canis* has very short stubby legs, and powerful sharp drilling mouth parts. The female sets up shop burrowing around and laying lots of eggs. In these tunnels she also leaves her droppings which are very allergenic, and irritating to the skin. Large hive like eruptions spread into tracts of patch-like red inflamed skin, where the hair falls out, and scabs form. The skin oils secrete like crazy and the coat gets greasy and sour smelling. Left unchecked, the mites will eventually spread all over the body in an immune system suppressed or compromised animal or human. The skin lesions itch in a relentless uncontrollable way. In fact in the old days they called the disease “the inveterate itch”! Scratching takes up the majority of the day until the skin bleeds, and can literally drive one mad with frenzy. The itch is always worse at night from the heat of the bed. When the eggs hatch the new mites come out of the burrows to breed on the surface, and then it starts the whole cycle all over again. Contagion is usually from direct contact with an infested host. Treatment involves multiple weekly baths, spot on insecticide drops, and other drugs. Animal scabies can, and does infest humans temporarily. Dr. Doug recently adopted another stray puppy from the good old Tulalip reservation again. The poor six week old sickly pup was covered with scabies lesions all over her body. Even though she was bathed daily with insecticide shampoo, her blankets washed, and extreme care taken when handling, the mites crossed the species barrier, and made the Christmas holiday a miserable gift that kept on giving. Animal mites that have gotten into people are a dead end infestation, and die out on their own when they realize they are in the wrong host. Needless to say, Dr Doug now has a new appreciation of the discomfort his animal patients with mange endure.

Now that you are sufficiently itchy, we’ll mention the last type of mange called Demodex. This mange is also called the “red mange” because the skin of the dog usually gets very reddened from the inflammation. Now we are going to really gross you out, and tell you that all of us have a few human demodex mange mites living normally in the hair follicles of our faces, (usually the eyebrows). So it follows then, that all normal puppies will have a few as well. We all get them from our parents after the time of birth. They cause no problems or sensation of any kind. When a pup, or guinea pig, or hamster suffers from a poorly functioning immune system, the mites reproduce wildly, and infest hairs all over the body (usually around the face and front legs). The hairs will all fall out, and patches of moth eaten hairless areas show up. The skin then gets inflamed, red, and a secondary infection with Staph bacteria ensues, which makes the skin itch badly. Again the skin oils secrete excessively, and the coat becomes greasy, and smells bad. Usually the

dog will eventually grow out of this in a year or so when the immune system strengthens. If treatment is necessary, the dog must be given immune stimulants, homeopathic remedies to help the body fight off the mites, along with shampoos and rinses to kill the mites. If treated conventionally, antibiotics, harsh insecticide dips and oral mite killing drugs will be used!