

Rusty Fur Stains

Allergies, mites, or other reasons may cause a dog's fur to discolor.

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Q. My 3-year-old Shih Tzu was treated for what our vet called a dust allergy. His skin was red and itchy. He advised starting with bathing twice a week, ensuring he was shampooed and rinsed completely. That was eventually tapered down to once a week, which I do now.

The fur around the affected areas turned rusty. The vet said this was from licking. Since he was treated, the redness comes and goes with no itching. His beard is rusty, his nails look like he has been digging in the dirt and washing does not remove this "dirt". It will not come off using a soft nailbrush; only scraping will take it off. This contributes to his feet looking rusty. His eyes also tear non-stop. I wipe his eyes daily with water.

Is there any help for him (and me)? I have changed foods, and been extremely careful about keeping his bedding clean. I know some products advertise erasing tearstains, but I would rather fix the problem, if possible. I've tried contacting breeders, asking questions of other dog owners and am still at a loss. This is probably only cosmetic, but I would like to make my little guy look nicer. Is there anything I can do?

A. It sounds like your dog does have allergies, but who knows to what? Without testing, it's all guesswork. It could be dust mites, but it could be cottonseed or anything else in the air.

An allergy to substances in the air is called atopy in dogs. In dogs, atopy shows up and skin, hair and coat problems, as a result of the immune system over-reacting to something in the air.

You have two choices. Either have an allergy test done (either a blood test or a skin test), or treat your dog for atopy, and see what the response is.

In both cases, you'll have to work closely with a veterinarian to monitor responses. I am going to give you some basic treatments for atopy, starting with the mildest and proceeding to the strongest. Try offering some fatty acid caps twice a day. There are multiple brands, but prescription strength is best. Fatty acids can slow down the immune response. In addition, give an antihistamine, such as Benadryl (25 mg twice a day) to help reduce itching. Your vet can prescribe a prescription-strength antihistamine that may work better (hydroxyzine). Also work with your vet to feed a special diet for dogs with allergies.

If these measures are not effective, it's time to try a steroid, such as prednisone. Your veterinarian must prescribe and monitor this. There are side effects to using steroids, but they may be worth it if you don't give too high a dose for very long. Steroids are the most powerful treatment for atopy, and sometimes are effective at very low doses.

I hope these suggestions are helpful; please discuss them with your veterinarian.

Best,
Jon Geller, DVM

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