

Dog With Foot-Licking Obsession

Several factors could be contributing to a dog's obsession with his paws.

By Kathy Salzberg, NCMG

Q. I have a 2-year-old Westie who licks his front feet, between the toes a lot. He has done this since he was a puppy and changing foods doesn't seem to help. Now he has stains on his feet as well as a dark-colored chin area. I am assuming it is from the saliva. Any advice on his licking addiction, and how to get his coat to be white instead of dark brown?

A. West Highland White Terriers are notoriously prone to skin problems. Your little guy's foot-licking obsession and brown stains on his feet and face could spring from several causes. First, you must reconsider his diet. He may be eating a dog food that is causing his system to produce yeast toxins, a major cause of allergies and skin infections in dogs. No matter how popular or well-advertised, dog foods that are high in yeast-producing grains can overload his immune system to the point where it cannot handle the yeast toxins, resulting in a pet who suffers from itchy skin, ear infections, and unsightly red or brown staining.

Talk to your vet about switching to a well-balanced holistic diet with high meat or fish content. Avoid foods that are high in grains that are difficult to digest. Corn, wheat, gluten and soy are often used as a protein source instead of real meat. When your pet's immune system cannot handle all these substances, allergies are the usual result, causing his constant itching.

He may be allergic to chemicals used to improve your lawn, that new carpet in the family room, the chlorine in your swimming pool, a flea bite allergy, or a skin disorder caused by mange mites. In an effort to cleanse the body of foreign substances, his body produces histamines which cause the itching. And sometimes foot-licking is simply a habit, like nail-biting in humans. He might be anxious or bored so he chews on his feet, a practice that can lead to a serious skin malady called lick granuloma. Choosing the wrong grooming products may compound the problem. He may need to be bathed only with a soothing, medicated shampoo.

Inflammation, swelling, hot spots, hair loss, lesions, and unsightly brown stains caused by oxidation of his saliva can be the result. Some dogs react well to the same over-the-counter anti-histamines while some may require a steroid drug such as prednisone to depress their immune system and interrupt histamine production. Since steroids can produce serious side effects, they are a last resort and must only be used under your vet's supervision. Open sores may also require antibiotic treatment.

His foot and chin stains are indeed caused by the oxidation of his saliva. Treat the facial stains topically with tear stain remover, wiping his face each and every day with a cotton ball moistened with the product. Avoid treatments that use harsh bleach, peroxide or dye – they can worsen the problem and could make him sick if he ingests them. Next, sprinkle his meals with a powdered product that attacks the stains from the inside out. The one we sell contains beef liver and tylosin tartrate. Your groomer can trim the stained hair as it grows out, replaced by the snowy white hair that makes these adorable little characters look so sharp and sassy.