

Itchy Dog Returns From Grooming Shop

Fleas or a reaction to shampoo could be the cause of a dog's scratching after a trip to the groomer.

By Kathy Salzberg, NCMG

Q. I took my 4-month-old Border Collie to be washed and trimmed three weeks ago and she has not stopped scratching since. I thought she caught fleas at the place, but when I took her for a flea bath somewhere else afterwards, the person said she didn't have fleas. I asked for a flea bath because I did see a small black bug on her and I have small bites on my feet.

Also, she is cleaning herself all the time. This is a dog who never cleans herself. I don't take her in for baths because I have a small child's pool in the yard for her. I use only water, no soap. I also just changed her food because I thought maybe that would have something to do with this problem. Any ideas?

A. If your dog was itching immediately after being bathed at the groomer's, you should have called that establishment right away and told them about the problem so they could remedy the situation. My guess is that the itching was probably not caused by fleas but was a reaction to the shampoo used to bathe her. Dogs are like people in that way. One brand of soap may work fine for you but make me itch like crazy. If we get a complaint like yours, we take the dog back in immediately to check for signs of fleas or dry skin and provide the appropriate treatment. A soothing oatmeal-based shampoo works wonders in such cases. For best results, we leave the lather on for a full 15 minutes to soothe the skin, alleviating dryness and itching.

To see if fleas are the culprits, stand her on a damp white towel and go through her coat with a fine-toothed "flea comb." If tiny black particles resembling pepper fall onto the towel and turn red when they land, they are flea feces. If your own feet are getting bitten by fleas, you have a major infestation on your hands that has been festering for a lot longer than the three weeks that have elapsed since you went to the groomer. In such a case, you must treat the house as well as the puppy. Since flea problems usually start outdoors, you may want to treat your property with a yard and kennel spray as well.

During flea season, groomers need to practice strict flea control in their salons. We use foggers in the grooming area once a week and we isolate any pets that come in for flea treatments, away from other dogs. We regularly use a strong disinfectant that kills viruses, bacteria, and fungal spores to sanitize all work surfaces and crates.

When a dog scratches, it may be from flea bites even after the fleas have been eliminated, but it may also be from dry skin, food allergies, mange mites, or an allergic reaction to the saliva of the flea itself. Fleas are very tiny and hard to see; they don't stay still long enough for us to get a good look.

How do you keep her from getting fleas in the future? While flea collars, powders and sprays are still extensively used, we now have more effective options in the many topical treatments now available, most applied on a monthly basis. Some kill and repel ticks, offering protection from tick-borne diseases as well. In addition to killing adult fleas on the dog quickly, some eliminate eggs and larvae too, preventing all stages of fleas from developing. Such spot-on treatments work by spreading over the dog's entire body via its coat oils. Be sure to purchase the right size for your pet and if she has just been bathed, wait 24 hours before applying it.

As far as bathing her in a kiddie pool using only water, I think you'd do better using a puppy tearless shampoo. Sooner or later, every dog needs a real bath. Just make sure to rinse very thoroughly and always brush her bountiful coat before popping her into the tub.