

The Dog Who Licks His Paws

Stains that result from incessant licking can be cleaned, but may be a sign of a bigger problem.

By Kathy Salzberg, NCMG

Q. I have 15-year-old Bichon Frise. He has lost most of his hearing. However, he is in good health and is still very active. In the past year he has been licking his paws and even our cloth furniture. His paws have turned brown from the licking. Do you know what may be causing him to lick everything? Also, do know if there is a shampoo that will remove the brown stains from his feet?

A. Dogs lick their paws for many reasons. It could be an allergy to grass, mold, pollen, or some synthetic product in their environment, like chemicals in the carpet or household cleansers. It could also be from a yeast infection, due to excessive wheat, corn, soy, or other grains in the dog's diet. In addition to a diet change if excessive yeast is the culprit, I would suggest giving him a product called Angels' Eyes in his food or water daily. The powdered additive somehow ties up the circulating compounds in the system that react with light to produce those ugly stains. (A more technical explanation is available at www.angelseyesonline.com). Dogs also lick and chew their feet to relieve pain which may not even originate there, or because they are just plain bored.

Since the potential causes vary greatly, I would suggest taking your dear old friend to the vet for a checkup. Allergy tests, a dietary change, or a course of medication may help if itching is the root cause of his behavior. Sometimes spraying the feet with Bitter Apple will help break the habit cycle, especially if you can distract him with another enjoyable activity. Sometimes an Elizabethan collar is recommended to make it impossible for a dog to chew his feet, but that would be enormously unpleasant for an old fellow like him.

Grooming the paws is a favorite activity of many pets, but if they take it too far, it becomes destructive, like nail-biting in humans, causing inflammation and bleeding. In older pets, arthritis in their feet can lead to this behavior as they lick to relieve their discomfort. These canine senior citizens often respond well to anti-inflammatory drugs or aspirin therapy. Your vet would need to x-ray him to diagnose this condition and prescribe the appropriate course of treatment.

As to whitening shampoos, sometimes they work and sometimes they don't. At best, they provide a temporary topical fix. Their whitening effect is caused by blue or blue/violet tints that change the color spectrum, optical reflective brighteners that make the hair sparkle, or bleaching agents. A mild and effective one I have used is Tomlyn's Sho Sno Whitening Shampoo, which removes stains from the coat without using bleach, dyes, or harsh chemicals and also contains soothing moisturizers. On an older pet like yours, I would first give a soothing oatmeal bath, allowing him to sit in the lather for a full fifteen minutes, rinse well with tepid – not hot – water, and shampoo him again with this product, also leaving it on the coat for a while before rinsing. Other steps that may help are to wash and dry his feet every time he goes outdoors and feed him no product – including treats – that contains color additives.

I think you must also take his advanced age into consideration. At this point in his life, the quality of his life begins to overshadow his physical beauty. Realistically, you may never get his feet sparkling white again, but you can do everything in your power to make him happy and comfortable each and every day that you have him in your life.