

## Seek Alternatives for Dogs With Tough Skin Problems

**Without a traditional diagnosis, a complementary treatment for dog skin problems may help.**

*By Jon Geller, DVM*

Q. My 10-year-old black Labrador Retriever has a baffling skin condition. She has been seen by four vets and a dermatology specialist. Everyone is stumped. This started below her left eye about seven weeks ago. The skin is puffy, scaly, and has crept down. Then the rough spots on her elbows that Labs have from rubbing got really scaly and spread further. Next came the bony spots on her rump where she sits. Now she has it between her toes.

When the dermatologist examined the dead scales from her leg, she showed me there were nuclei in the scale, which she couldn't understand. Then she did a biopsy. The pathologist also isn't sure what this is, but guesses she might have a zinc deficiency.

So far this has cost over \$1,200. I'm not sure what to do. I understand zinc supplements in large doses can lead to anemia. I have been putting Vaseline on her elbows on the dermatologist's advice. Now those areas have an odor. The scaly skin doesn't seem to itch.

A. You actually have seen six veterinarians if you include the veterinary pathologist.

Sometimes, even using all of the resources of modern medicine, we cannot come up with a diagnosis. Usually a skin disease biopsy will provide an absolute answer. Unfortunately, your black Lab is part of that tiny percentage of cases for which the diagnosis remains a mystery.

Based on the recommendations, I would not hesitate to use a zinc supplement, either orally or as an ointment, or both, for a while. To avoid undesirable effects such as anemia, have your dog's red cell count checked once a week. Keep applying the Vaseline, and try to ignore the unpleasant odor. This will keep your dog comfortable. After one month, if there is no improvement, it is time to visit the newest specialist in veterinary medicine: the complementary medicine veterinarian.

The world of complementary veterinary medicine includes alternative treatments such as acupuncture, herbal medicine, chiropractic adjustments, and homeopathy. Make sure you go to someone who has been doing it for a while (at least several years), and who can give you referrals from clients who had dogs with problems similar to your dog's.

Alternative treatments, such as herbal remedies and acupuncture, have provided positive benefits in some of these difficult dermatology cases, especially when combined with conventional medications.

There are only a few veterinarians who have actually gone through formalized training in these alternative fields, so feel free to ask about credentials. Just as in the human medical world, this area is fraught with potential quackery and voodoo medicine.

Once you connect with a veterinarian who appears competent with complementary medicine, give it a try for at least one month. Hopefully this will give you some answers, and your dog some relief.