

***Question: Why does my dog lick or chew its feet?***

There are three major reasons why dogs lick or chew their feet. Foot licking is an integral part of grooming, a practice that all dogs undertake. Some canines, as with the human race, are more fastidious when it comes to their personal grooming, and they spend a lot more time on the detail of the grooming. You could be forgiven for believing vanity plays a role in canine behaviour in much the same way as it does in human behaviour!

However, not all grooming is vanity. Cleanliness, as they say, is next to godliness, and for the dog an irritating fragment of dried mud between the toes can be as off-putting as a small stone in your shoe. Grass seeds lodged between the toes are another major irritant that can lead to injury should the dog or the owner fail to ensure good foot hygiene is observed.

Boredom and stress can also play a large role in the foot licking process. Some dogs derive comfort from the act of grooming their feet, particularly those that are not necessarily the most relaxed members of the canine community. It is not uncommon for a dog to undergo a lengthy foot licking session as a part of their evening ritual prior to turning in for the night. This type of behaviour can become habitual for some to the extent the constant licking will ultimately cause skin irritation. In a similar manner, some dogs take to chewing their toenails in much the same way as some people chew their fingernails. A degree of discipline is required to break these habits; both for the dog and the human!.

By far the most concerning reason for extensive foot licking is to do with the issue of skin allergies. Licking is the dog's way of removing irritants such as pollen and dust after running around in the grass, and itchy feet are often the first indication of a more serious condition. Sensitivities of this nature are an indication of an over-active immune system, which is caused by dysbiosis of the gut microbiome, a loss of microbial diversity. When the diversity of the microbial population that inhabit the gut of the dog reduces, the remaining species multiply in numbers, and it is this concentration of species that the immune system incorrectly interprets as an invasion by pathogens. The immune system then ramps up the attack in the mistaken belief the pollen or dust irritant is a pathogen, when in fact they were most likely the innocent bystanders.

A seasonal grass allergy, first seen as irritation of the feet, will often develop to a full-blown skin sensitivity dilemma. Red and irritated skin on other parts of the body develop, as too can the incidence of ear infections and anal gland problems arise. This is a progressive disease that will ultimately consume the dog if left untreated. Other more serious issues include auto immune disorders that affect the nails causing splitting and breakages. This often results in lameness and a seriously compromised canine companion.

As with all immune response disorders, wiping or washing the feet to remove irritants, topical applications such as iodine type creams or calamine lotion can ease the itching, whilst veterinary treatments to calm the immune system are often effective in providing short term relief. The long-term solution for the problem however is to rebuild and strengthen the microbiome, a difficult and lengthy process that relies on correct nutrition aided by supplementation with probiotics.

*About the author... Bill Wiadrowski is a consulting nutritionist who has worked in the field of performance animal nutrition for over 50 years. His latest development is the LifeWise range of next generation foods that are rapidly gaining acclaim for their ability to repair common gut and skin sensitivities issues in domestic canines.*