

Canine Sarcoptic Mange (Scabies)

What is sarcoptic mange?

Mange is a parasitic skin disease caused by microscopic mites. Two different mange mites cause skin disease in dogs. One lives just under the surface of the skin, while the other resides deep in the hair follicles. Although both mites share some similar characteristics, there are also important differences. It is important not to confuse the two types of mange because they have different causes, treatments, and prognoses.

What causes sarcoptic mange?

Sarcoptic mange is caused by a mite that burrows just beneath the surface of the skin. It may also crawl around on the skin surface. This mite feeds on material in and on the skin.

What does it do to the dog?

The presence of the sarcoptic mite causes severe itching. The dog will chew and scratch his skin constantly. This leads to the loss of large amounts of hair, especially on the legs and belly. Eventually, the skin will become thickened and will darken due to pigmentation.

Is it contagious?

Sarcoptic mange is highly contagious to other dogs; it is also contagious to humans. The dog's bedding should be washed in hot water with bleach or, preferably, discarded. Although the mites are not able to complete their life cycle on humans, they will cause quite a bit of itching before they finally die.

How is sarcoptic mange diagnosed?

Diagnosis is made by a skin scraping that is examined under the microscope, though only a small number of mites may be present. Because of this, a dog may be strongly suspected of having sarcoptic mange, but all skin scrapings are negative. A presumptive diagnosis can be made because the signs are quite typical. Age is not a significant factor in sarcoptic mange. Although most common in puppies, it affects dogs of all ages.

How is it treated?

There are several insecticides that are effective against this mite. Various dips have been used successfully. Dipping should occur weekly for at least four weeks, at which time your dog should be re-examined to determine if further treatment is needed. An oral product, Ivermectin, is also effective. This drug is approved for use in preventing heartworms, but it is not officially approved for use in treating sarcoptic mange. Its ease of administration compared to dipping makes it the drug of choice in certain situations, and it may actually be more effective than dipping in some dogs.