

Acral Lick Dermatitis

courtesy of Animal Info Publications

Author: Cathy Lambert

What is acral lick dermatitis?

This is a condition whereby a dog will continuously lick at a specific area on their body (usually a leg), and create a very nasty sore, also known as a "lick granuloma". The cause of this apparently obsessive behaviour is a little difficult to pin down, however boredom is highly likely to be contributory, or perhaps a psychological or sensory nerve disorder. It is more often seen in intelligent breeds that are perhaps not kept stimulated, and/or left without company for long periods.



What are the signs or symptoms of acral lick dermatitis?

The constant licking may produce an open weeping sore that ulcerates, won't heal, and may easily become infected.

How is it diagnosed?

If you notice your dog licking at a sore that won't heal, you should take it to your vet for a diagnosis. A sore like this may not be a Lick Granuloma, and a skin biopsy may be necessary to rule out other possibilities.

How is acral lick dermatitis treated?

If a lick granuloma is diagnosed then you will need to get the sore treated, especially if it has become infected, and then most importantly, try to discover the underlying reason for the licking behaviour to prevent any recurrence. As boredom is generally the key, you will need to try and modify your dog's environment. Try to give it more time with the family, and play-time with other dogs. When you do go out and leave the dog alone, perhaps exercise it heavily so it will be more settled while you are away, and provide toys for it to play with - bones, food in a puzzle ball or "Kong" toy, and on hot days try giving it a water ice-block with a piece of raw-hide or other food frozen in the middle. Provide stimulation by teaching your dog some tricks, or even join an obedience or agility club - you will probably get as much out of it as your dog. As the licking behaviour has probably developed over time and become quite an obsessive habit, it will generally take some time and effort to break, so be patient. The earlier you get onto it, the better chance you have of a swift result. If you don't make any progress with the above changes, then short periods of anti-depressant or anti-anxiety medications may help to break the lick cycle.

How can you avoid buying a dog with acral lick dermatitis?

Evidence suggests that the condition may be hereditary, so responsible breeders will generally not breed with affected animals. When considering purchasing a puppy, ask the breeder whether there is any evidence of the condition in its ancestral lines.