

What's with the **lick**?

Is your pet licking to excess? Here's what you can do about it.

Your limber pet uses her teeth and tongue to do many things you do with your hands—like scratching, rubbing tender joints, or removing thorns. But excessive licking can signal a real problem.

Causes

Most pets bathe themselves with their tongues. Cats lick their feet to clean them. Dogs may lick to soothe their feet after a walk on hot asphalt or to remove itchy chemicals, such as lawn fertilizer or road salt.

Pets who are frequently left alone sometimes lick and chew at their legs out of boredom. Some pets also lick to relieve muscles or joints that are sore from overuse or arthritis. Other causes include:

- > **allergies** (from food, airborne substances, and fleas)
- > **skin infections** (bacterial, fungal, and yeast)
- > **parasites** (fleas, lice, mites, and some gastrointestinal parasites)
- > **obsessive-compulsive disorder**
- > **skin diseases** caused by immune system disorders and in some cases, **cancer**.

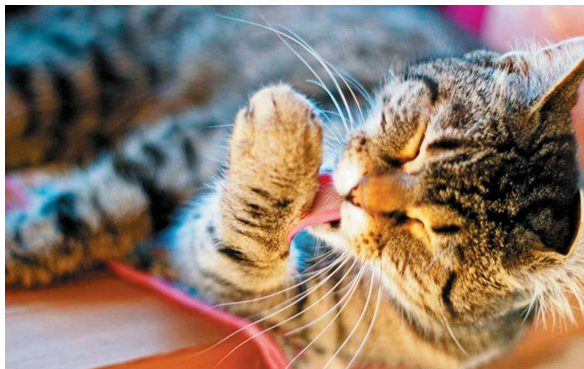
What you can do at home

You can soothe your dog's skin with a cool bath using a mild hypoallergenic shampoo or a colloidal oatmeal soak (such as Aveeno). Cats are not usually sold on the idea of a bath, so try moistening a clean cloth and gently toweling your cat off. This will relieve the tender skin and may remove any bothersome dirt or topical irritants.

Use a flea comb to check your pet for fleas, especially near the base of her tail. If you find any pepper-like specks, collect them onto a lightly moistened white paper towel and rub the towel together. A reddish color means you've found flea dirt, which is blood that fleas have ingested and excreted. If it turns tan or gray, your pet probably just needs a bath.

If your pet's fixated on her feet, check them out. Look between the toes, at the nails, under the fur, and around the foot and toe pads for signs of a cut, skin infection, or a foreign object.

If you don't unearth any problems, your pet may be



licking because of allergies. Allergic pets should stay indoors during the early morning and evening hours, when the pollen count is the highest. Consider rinsing your pet's feet with water after bathroom breaks and outdoor playtime. Vacuum the house regularly, especially the areas frequented by pets and under the beds and sofas (dust mites like to accumulate there).

If your bored pet just won't give her skin a rest, distract her with toys, daily walks, and plenty of affection.

When to call the veterinarian

Although skin licking is not life-threatening, some conditions that cause this compulsive behavior can have serious complications. Schedule an appointment with your veterinarian if your pet's skin is red or swollen or if you notice sores, hives, or hair loss. If your pet suffers from limping, lethargy, appetite loss, or other symptoms, take her to the veterinarian as soon as possible.

What your veterinarian will do

Your veterinarian will ask you about the duration and frequency of licking and whether your pet exhibits any other symptoms. After a careful examination, the doctor may recommend skin scrapings, cultures, or biopsy; blood or fecal tests; allergy tests; or X-rays.

Many things can cause pets to slather their skin with spit. It may take your veterinarian time to reach a diagnosis, but most conditions will resolve quickly with treatment. Then you can stop wondering how your limber pet can reach that distant body part with her tongue!