

Demodectic Mange & The Immature Immune System

Dateline April 2005 It is something breeders don't like to talk about but it's more common today than it was in the fifties. Demodectic, demodex, or "red mange" generally affects 3 to 5 month old puppies but can get a foothold in an elderly or debilitated dog. Good owners want to know how and why disease happens because in many instances, it is entirely preventable. That puts Doctors and Vets between a rock and a hard place; duty to the patient and the cold necessity to make a profit so they can afford to keep doing what they genuinely love. Complicating matters, patients demand cures. Right now! And with the least amount of effort on our part. This is another "*Take It To The Vet*" paper. Use it to open communication with your vet and arrive at a safe solution for the puppy's sake.

First, demodex is neither contagious nor hereditary. For fifty years we were led to believe "red mange" was hereditary. Vets blamed breeders and consequently, so did owners. More than a few disputes arose and the poor puppy invariably got the short end of that stick. In the late sixties I was told that my Doberman pup had inherited mange. As a *Dog World* columnist, I had access to Norma Price, famed Dalmatian breeder. Norma was emphatic. Demodectic mange is NOT hereditary but even after irrefutable documentation, it took the veterinary profession another couple of decades to agree. The microscopic mites that attack the hair follicles are everywhere. Probably one on your nose right now....

Diagnosis is confirmed only by "scraping" the skin and looking at the loosened cells under a microscope. Demodex mites are easily identified under magnification. Just because the dog has reddened skin, or itches does not mean it has "mange." While sarcoptic mange causes intense itching, demodex usually doesn't but resulting infection can. There are many causes for skin eruptions, the most common problem in adult dogs is due to an allergic reaction to something in the environment or food. If the symptoms persist more than a few days, take the dog to the vet and catch the problem early.

My personal belief is that it's because those areas are most frequently exposed to early morning dew and rain-wet soil. Puppies quietly harboring the demodex mite suddenly develop increased hair loss and increasingly irritated skin because of bacterial growth. You may remember my columns about "grass rash" which may also explain why puppies don't seem symptomatic until they begin to go outside to play or potty. They already have the mites but now they have a catalyst for dormant bacterial development at a time when stress is at its peak.

Demodectic mites have no effect on a healthy adult. Puppies can succumb because they are puppies! Adults are spared weaning, wormings, and shots during the upheaval of Sibling Separation. Some breeds go through ear cropping which is admittedly a stress to the immune system, mostly due to subsequent wrapping, itching, and irritation. There's a lot more to be said on ear cropping as it relates to Humaniacs, Terrorists, and Vets but that's another column!

Puppies are challenged by a New Home, New Humans, and adjusting to strange dogs and situations. Pile on different food and water. Add Housebreaking, then puppy training. So *many* environmental changes take place in a relatively short time! Add the stress of teething, then changing hormonal activity. And for giant breeds, *growing!* Makes one wonder how they survive at all! A wild carnivore contends with only a fraction of what cuddled, coddled puppies endure. It demands our utmost respect for the strength and resiliency of the domestic dog.

If during this time the puppy is bombarded with excessive vaccinations, the owner can expect problems. If the immune system is assaulted by *systemic poison* designed to control heartworm, internal and external parasites, something has to give! Study materials in the Resource Library. Learn the importance of chemical and preservative free, natural nutrition. Read the latest on booster shots. As with red mange, veterinary leaders are finally in agreement - after over a decade of clinical studies in the U.K. Dogs receive too many vaccines, and some vaccines are for diseases so *rare* in adults as to be practically non-existent. 'Nother subject, 'nother time.

A weak immune system may be hereditary though. It's difficult to discern unless you really know the genetics behind the pup. Some breeders are forthcoming about frequency and type of disease. Others conceal such information in fear of recrimination. Regardless of whether it is inherited or the result of stress, poor sanitation, diet, chemicals, disease or parasites, a weakened immune system can allow demodectic mites to overwhelm the dog.

Genetically strong or not, the puppy's immune system is simply not designed to handle man-made assaults. So nurture and support a new puppy. Use common sense. Talk to your vet. Help your vet help your pet from puppyhood to a long and healthy old age!

Question Dipping. There are effective, safe alternative solutions. Before you accede to traditional dipping, do your homework. Oh shucks, let me save you the trouble. Remember I said vets should be forthcoming about the whys and wherefores of disease and treatment? Ask your vet if the dip about to be dispensed is *SAFE* for the puppy and safe for *YOU*?

Most such dips contain the pesticide amitraz which is a very potent poison! For example, you can't use it at all if you are pregnant. Because of potential liability, some vets insist on doing the weekly dipping themselves. Amitraz is a potentially dangerous pesticide but it's commonly used because it works best. Before you embark on dipping protocol, ask your vet to explain the risks to you and to your already challenged pet.

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