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Traditional Chinese Approaches to Canine Pruritis

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INTRODUCTION

Dermatological problems are some of the most difficult conditions to treat in veterinary medicine. Constant pruritis or itching is the most common reason a client seeks a Chinese medicine approach for a pet with skin disease. The most common cause of chronic itching in the dog is canine atopic dermatitis, also called allergic dermatitis or atopy, and is the most frequently diagnosed skin disorder. The etiology of atopy is unknown; it has been linked to flea, food and environmental allergens, singly or in combination. Because the etiology for this disease is unknown, conventional veterinary treatment focuses on the control of symptoms, of which constant pruritis is the most distressing to pet owners. Conventional veterinary therapy typically consists of multiple courses of antibiotic, antifungal, steroidal and immunomodulatory drugs to control symptoms. Clients whose dogs are diagnosed with this frustrating and challenging disease often choose a Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) approach to alleviate their pet's pain and suffering, and to prevent the long term effects of chronic drug therapy when conventional medicine fails to resolve or manage the problem adequately. TCM treatment of skin disease includes Chinese herbal medicine, acupuncture and food therapy. Chinese medicine can be used as a sole therapy to resolve the underlying causes of pruritis or in combination with conventional medicine for an integrative approach especially in acute, relapsing and severe cases.

CHINESE MEDICINE ETIOLOGY AND PATHOLOGY

Canine pruritis is considered to be a multi-factorial disease in TCM, and may involve one or more external and or internal disease factors occurring simultaneously: poor Kidney Jing (genetics), hypersensitivity to environmental allergens, food allergy, parasitic and infectious agents, over vaccination, inappropriate diet, lack of regular exercise, obesity, stress, aging, pharmaceutical drugs and Zang Fu organ deficiency or dysfunction. Pruritis or itching in Chinese medicine is called Wind. Wind can develop from exogenous (external invasion) or endogenous (internally generated) causes. Wind is characterized by acute onset and rapid changes in clinical signs and symptoms. Wind likes to move from place to place, cause abnormal movement and a large amount of destruction in a short period of time due to its violent blustery nature. Wind tends to injure Blood and Yin and one of the cardinal signs of Wind is itching. It should be noted that the term "External Wind" can include exogenous factors that are not directly related to climate such as; external parasites, inhalant and contact allergens, drug and vaccine reactions.

Wind can also be generated internally from a deficiency of Yin and Blood, deficiency and stagnation of Qi and Blood and the generation and accumulation of pathogenic factors such as Damp, Phlegm, Blood Heat and Toxic Heat. All of these factors can develop from an imbalance or dysfunction of one or more of the Zang Fu organs for example chronic Liver Qi-stagnation, Liver Fire, Liver Yin-Blood Deficiency, Liver-Gall Bladder Damp-Heat, Spleen-Stomach Damp Heat, and Kidney Yin-Essence Deficiency. The itching seen in these cases is usually chronic and non-seasonal in nature and characterized by signs of both excess and deficiency. Deficiency is the root cause of the problem and in turn leads to the development of excess signs as the branch.

DIAGNOSIS

The clinical signs of canine pruritis include itching, chewing, biting, rubbing, licking, and salivary staining of the axillae, inguinal region, flank, perineum, distal extremities and paws. Urticaria, erythema, alopecia, excoriation, papules, pustules, crusts, ulcers, scale, greasy hair coat, dandruff cracking of pads, toenails, hyper-pigmentation, lichenification and strong foul smelling body odor are often present. The typical distribution of lesions seen in canine pruritis include the face, ears, ventral abdomen, inguinal area and flanks, axillae, perineum, distal extremities and inter-digital areas of all four paws or may be

generalized. The type and distribution of the dermatologic lesions serves to define the pattern of illness and to identify not only the underlying pathogenic factors, but also the organ deficiency or dysfunction. There are multiple TCM patterns of disharmony which correspond to pruritis or canine atopy and each will require a different therapeutic approach for successful treatment. There are five common TCM skin patterns which correspond to pruritis and canine atopy, these are: External Wind, Wind Heat, Damp Heat, Yin Deficiency, Blood Deficiency and Blood stagnation. More than one pattern can be present at a time and the overlapping of patterns makes skin conditions a challenge to treat as both excess and deficiency can be present in the same animal, especially in chronic and severe cases. The five most common skin patterns and their associated biomedical conditions may be viewed in Table 1. TCM Patterns of canine pruritis and associated biomedical conditions.

Table 1. TCM Patterns of canine pruritis and associated biomedical conditions.

TCM pattern	Clinical signs	Biomedical disease
External Wind	Tongue: red to purple Pulse: rapid, superficial Location: face, head, upper body. No signs of dermatitis may be present except for itching and rubbing the face, skin hypersensitivity and restlessness with erythema, initially is seasonal and acute	Type I–Hypersensitivity, atopy, flea allergy, drug allergy, vaccine reaction, contact dermatitis
Wind-Heat	Tongue: red to purple Pulse: rapid, superficial, forceful, can be wiry Location: face, head, dorsum, can be generalized itching, hives, wheals, angioedema, erythema, papules, excoriation, alopecia, initially may be seasonal and acute	Type I–Hypersensitivity, recurrent or persistent urticaria, atopy
Damp-Heat	Tongue: red to purple, greasy coat Pulse: rapid, forceful, slippery or wiry Location: ventral abdomen, distal extremities, paws, flanks, perineum, ears, lips, generalized erythema, erosions, excoriation, papules, pustules crusts, scabs, alopecia, greasy, hair coat, itching. May be acute or chronic	food allergy, chronic GIT disease, bacterial pyoderma and otitis, chelitis, seborrhea, pododermatitis, onychitis, perianal dermatitis, <i>Malassezia</i> dermatitis and otitis, lick granuloma, anal sacculitis, bacterial folliculitis
Yin Deficiency	Tongue: red, dry, no coating, may be cracked Pulse: rapid, weak, thready, may be deep Location: generalized, chronic itching that is worse at night, dislikes heat, seeks cool, panting, hyperactive, restless at night, dry, flaky skin and haircoat, alopecia. Seen in geriatric animals, but also in chronically medicated young dogs	Chronic illness, chronically medicated dogs, seborrhea, endocrinopathies: Cushing’s, hypothyroidism, diabetes
Blood Deficiency	Tongue: pale, dry Pulse: rapid, deep, weak and thin Location: generalized, chronic itching, dry, flaky skin and hair coat, dry cracked paws and toenails, seen in chronically medicated young dogs, and old dogs	Hypothyroidism, any chronic disease, chronically medicated dogs especially those on antibiotic therapy

TREATMENT

The treatment of pruritis is based on the TCVM pattern of disease; without an accurate TCVM diagnosis treatment will be marginally effective. Once therapy has begun, it must be continued for an appropriate length of time in order to resolve the problem. Chinese medical treatment of pruritis includes Chinese

herbal therapy, acupuncture, dietary therapy, nutritional supplements and topical therapy. Conventional medications can be combined with Chinese medicine for a synergistic effect and or to control acute symptoms. Acupuncture as a sole therapy is typically not effective to resolve canine pruritis and is most commonly used to help control itching and help balance underlying organ dysfunction. Of the treatments recommended, Chinese herbal medicine, food therapy and regular exercise are essential for the long term resolution of chronic itching and canine atopy. The treatment of chronic dermatitis cases usually involves the use of multiple herbal formulas. Many of the formulas used to treat skin patterns contain cold and bitter herbs which can injure the middle jiao. It is often necessary to use Spleen-Stomach tonics to protect the middle *jiao* and to treat Spleen deficiency which is commonly seen in long term dermatology patients who have been chronically medicated. It can take 2-6 weeks to see the beneficial effects of Chinese medicine and up to 8 months to consolidate the effects of initial treatment to resolve the dermatitis seen in chronic and severe cases.

The herbal formula used to treat the five most common TCM skin patterns can be viewed in Table 2. Chinese Herbal Medicine for treatment of canine pruritis.

Table 2. Chinese Herbal Medicine for treatment of canine pruritis.

TCVM pattern	Herbal medications
External Wind	External Wind (JT)
Wind-Heat	Wind Toxin (JT) Xiao Feng San (classic)
Damp-Heat	Gentiana Compound (ET) Gentiana Drain Fire (GFCH) Si Miao San (EG, GFCH)
Yin Deficiency	Jade Shining (ET)
Blood Deficiency/stagnation	Glorious Sea (TT) Dermatrol PS (EG)
Blood Stagnation and Deficiency	Tang-Kuei and Salvia (GFCH) Dan Shen Yin Wan (MW)

KEY DRUGS, DOSAGES AND INDICATIONS

Information and purchase of Chinese herbal formula can be obtained from:

East Tao	easttao@aol.com	800-471-0624
Jing Tang	www.tcvmherbal.com	800-891-1986
Golden Flower Herbs	www.gfcherbs.com	800-729-8509
Evergreen Herbs	www.elotus.org	866-473-3697
Health Concerns	www.healthconcerns.com	800-233-9355
Three Treasures (TT)	www.three-treasures.com	800-227-4118

ADDITIONAL DETAIL

Acupuncture Points for Treatment of Canine Pruritis include: Gb1, GB2, GB3, GB8,GB20, SP6, SP9, SP10, BL17, BL20, GB29, ST25, ST36, ST40, ST44, LI4, LI11, GV14, LIV2, KI3, PC6, HT7, LU5, LU7, Er Jian, Wei Jian.

SUMMARY

Chinese herbal medicine and food therapy can be used as a primary system of medicine in the treatment of chronic pruritis and canine atopic dermatitis. There are six common patterns of canine pruritis in TCM, and each pattern is treated differently depending on the underlying cause. There can be more than one

pattern operating at the same time that are responsible for the clinical signs seen, which makes pruritus difficult to treat and manage. Chinese medicine can be used to treat the root or underlying causes of canine pruritis and as an adjunct with conventional medications to resolve or improve the condition in order to avoid life long administration of pharmaceutical drugs for control of symptoms alone. The prognosis for canine pruritis is good provided that a correct TCM diagnosis has been made, an appropriate treatment plan chosen and the client complies with treatment for the recommended period of time.

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