

Skin problems are some of the more common cases we deal with as veterinarians. Regardless of the species, skin diseases crop up regularly in our patients and can be very challenging at times to diagnose.

Spike has a skin problem. It seems over the past two months or so what started as an occasional bout of scratching has progressed to almost constant irritation. Spike, according to Andrea his caretaker, spends most of his waking hours scratching himself. Early on, Andrea noticed nothing on his skin although she admits that it is hard to actually see his skin, but reports lately she has started to see scabs with evidence of small amounts of blood and lots of what appear to be flakes of skin.

Andrea says she feels very bad for Spike and wants to do whatever it takes to bring him some relief, but has been afraid to take him to a veterinarian because he is a fugitive from the law. Actually, more precisely, Andrea is the one breaking the law because Spike is an illegal companion! He is a hedgehog.

Hedgehogs are small mammals native to Europe and Africa that have been introduced into the pet trade and are legal pets in many of the United States. That however, would not be the case in California. Here they are illegal. That said, we as veterinarians are able to treat these companions legally as patients.

Hedgehogs can be quite intriguing companions and there is lots of available information on caring for them properly in captivity. They do have one characteristic that does preclude them from being one of those cute cuddly little fur ball companions however, and that would be the fact that they are covered in spines. These spines are actually modified hairs similar to those found in porcupines except they do not easily come out of the skin as they do in porcupines. They are, however, every bit as sharp! The presence of these spines is likely why Andrea did not notice a problem with Spike's skin early on when he started to scratch. It is simply hard to see his skin through the spines.

Spike's now intense pruritis does have an underlying cause. It is up to his veterinarian to discover this cause. Andrea needs to find a veterinarian comfortable with working with hedgehogs and bring him in to be examined.

One distinct problem arises when we try to examine a hedgehog. They are not usually very cooperative and will ball up during an attempted exam exposing nothing but needle sharp spines. It is for this reason that I like to give them a bit of gas anesthetic to breath which allows them to take a short nap while I complete an examination. In Spikes case, this will be done with magnification to get a close look at the skin and most likely a skin scraping to examine some of the skin cells and debris under the microscope.

It is my guess that Spike has mange. In hedgehogs mange is usually caused by a sarcoptic mange mite. These mites burrow into the skin and as the population grows, and the burrowing becomes extensive, intense itching results which then leads to intense scratching. This condition is relatively easily diagnosed through the above mentioned skin scraping procedure, and once diagnosed, it is very straight-forward to treat.

Hopefully, for Spike this problem will require very little conscious involvement on his part and his skin condition can be resolved.