Itching has always been an issue among domesticated animals. Treating skin disorders can be frustrating for veterinarians. Treatment options are limited, side effects are not infrequent, and results are often unsatisfactory. Chinese herbal formulas can expand the veterinarian's treatment options with a variety of clinically effective and comparatively safe remedies.

When prescribing Chinese medicine it is essential to identify the patient's disease pattern. The modern medicine approach to treating itching is to focus on relieving the symptom; the cause of the itching is sometimes overlooked. The Traditional Chinese Medical (TCM) strategy is to address the underlying cause (the root) of the problem while relieving the symptoms (the branch manifestation). In order to guide our treatment plan accordingly, we diagnose by naming the manifestation as well as the root pattern involved. For example, "itching of the flanks due to wind dryness." Besides being more specific than merely stating the symptom, this approach to diagnosis helps determine our selection of formulas. [See Treatment Guide below.]

DISEASE PATTERN

Differentiation of the disease pattern usually begins with noting the collection of symptoms and manifestations. For itching disorders this would include location of the itch and specifics of skin abnormalities throughout the body. Determination of whether the itch is localized or generalized, chronic or acute, weeping or dry are all part of differentiating the pattern. In addition to itch-specific information, the practitioner should note general signs and symptoms as well. Is the skin or tongue pale? Is the pulse rapid, slow, broad or thin? Did the animal exhibit any behavioral abnormalities before or after the itching began?

Internal or External

After gathering the information, an assessment is made as to whether the origin of the itch is internal or external. Examples of an external origin would be; contact allergies, parasites attacking the skin from the outside, accompanying symptoms of acute viral infection, or sudden and acute onset of itching. If the cause is seen to be external, oftentimes a topical formula such as Spring Wind Ointment (for dry, flat, itchy areas) or Golden Yellow Ointment (for red, infected, raised areas) is applied with excellent results. Topicals may need to be supplemented with an ingested formula that "cools and releases the exterior" like Yin Chiao Formula.

Excess or Deficiency

The next phase of the assessment is to determine whether the manifestations are caused by excess or deficient factors. This differentiation can help determine the duration of the treatment. Excess patterns are typically more severe, but faster to clear. Deficiency patterns are usually less severe, but slower to resolve. There can also be a combination of deficient and excess factors.

The root cause of almost any chronic condition will be internal. Common internal patterns that can lead to itching include blood dryness, blood heat, blood deficiency, or blood stagnation. The operative word here is "blood." Two other common patterns for itching are dampness or dryness. It is very important to distinguish between dampness and dryness since their treatments are generally opposite. Damp and dry conditions can be either external or internal, but blood conditions are always internal. Once the implicated elements are identified they can be resolved through the use of herbs, nutrition, and acupuncture. Patience is needed to clear up some itching patterns, as they often clear slowly, like a freight train coming to a stop. The beauty of this type of treatment is that once a pattern has been properly identified and the corresponding formula has been taken for sufficient duration, the itching will stay "stopped."

The Wind Factor

In most cases of itching there is an element of "wind." In TCM we look to our climate to describe the nature of pathogens. A distinguishing characteristic of wind is that it changes quickly. Itches that seem to be many places at once or that travel around the body have a wind component. Sudden onset or intermittent itching can also be an indication of wind.

When wind causes itching it is always a matter of yang overpowering yin. Wind is a yang pathogen. It can penetrate the skin's defenses from an external source or it can arise from within due to an excess of heat or a deficiency of blood. This addresses why releasing the exterior often is not enough to relieve the itching and may in fact exacerbate the situation by damaging the blood.

Wind from Blood Deficiency

Blood deficiency can lead to wind because there is insufficient blood to nourish the skin. The body conserves the blood and will send it to the organs first and then the muscles. There simply may not be enough to go around. The vessels that blood travels in are designed to function at full capacity. When blood is deficient the vessels attempt to compensate for this. The action of trying
to fill the vacuum creates wind in the vessels themselves, like a bellows. Being significantly less substantial than blood, the wind component travels in the vessel on top of or surrounding the blood itself. This wind easily escapes the vessel when it comes close to the exterior and the already undernourished skin doesn't have enough yin to absorb the yang of the wind. The wind in the blood keeps attempting to escape through the surface. Meanwhile the skin keeps trying to adjust and compensate. The wind/yang aspect is too strong for the surface yin and irritates it on its way out. The itch arises as a result of this irritation during the escape on the one hand, and the skin's too slow, too feeble attempts to adjust on the other.

Wind from Heat

Heat can lead to wind and itching because it damages the yin, and therefore the integrity of the surface. As in a forest fire, heat can create significant wind within the body. When heat is in the blood, the tendency of heat to rise and expand causes it to seek escape through the skin as well. Heat can create boils, red rashes, and itchy skin when it rises to the surface of the body.

Pathogenic stagnations like dampness or blood stasis can generate heat by blocking the normal flow of the wei (defensive) qi. Dampness always has impurities in suspension. When the stagnation leads to heat, the heat can combine with the impurities, causing swelling and itching. Itching is just a sign that there is an imbalance. The focus of TCM is to bring the whole body into balance to relieve what is causing the itch, rather than just "scratching" it. Your patients will benefit in many ways to relieve what is causing the itch, rather than just combining with the impurities, causing swelling and itching. Itching is just a sign that there is an imbalance. The focus of TCM is to bring the whole body into balance to relieve what is causing the itch, rather than just "scratching" it. Your patients will benefit in many ways combining with the impurities, causing swelling and itching.

TREATMENT GUIDE

Blood Deficiency

Tang Kuei & Tribulus Formula (Dang Gui Yin Zi)
- Dry coat/skin/eyes
- Pale tongue
- Pale nail beds
- Pale gums
- Tendency towards fearfulness

Wind Dryness

Tang Kuei & Tribulus Formula (Dang Gui Yin Zi)
with He Shou Wu Tablets (Shou Wu Pian)
- Dry Skin
- Brittle Coat and nails
- Dry or red eyes

This combination enhances the moistening properties. He Shou Wu Tablets nourish the blood, yin and essence and are more easily digested than similar herbs. Wind is expelled by nourishing the blood.

Blood Heat

Rehmannia Cool Blood Formula
(Tu Fu Ling Sheng Di Huang Wan)
- Reckless bleeding
- Redness and palpable heat at areas of interest
- Severe itching to the point of self-mutilation
- Tongue red to crimson
- Eyes red
- Irritability

Blood Heat with Dampness

Rehmannia Cool Blood Formula with Citrus & Pinellia Formula
(Shou Wu Pian)

Rehmannia Cool Blood Formula with Six Gentlemen Formula (Liu Jun Zi Tang)
- Blood heat signs
- Exudes pus
- Damp component to skin

Combine Rehmannia Cool Blood Formula with Citrus & Pinellia Formula until the oozing has subsided then combine Rehmannia Cool Blood Formula with Six Gentlemen Formula for a constitutional correction.

Severe Heat

Andrographis Formula (Chuan Xin Lian Kang Yan Pian)
- Itching to the point of self mutilation
- Stool very loose or dry constipation
- Concentrated /dark urine
- Ear infections
- Red / bleeding gums

Blood Stagnation

Tang Kuei & Salvia Formula (Jia Wei Si Wu Tang)
- Tongue purple/lavender
- Pulse choppy
- Intense / focused scratching without relief
- Itching remains after heat is cleared
- Dry, brittle coat
- Tendency to form skin tags

Often after blood heat has been cleared the residual stagnation will need to be moved. Blood stagnation can recreate the heat and the itching. To prevent this continue to move blood and to build blood with Tang Kuei & Salvia Formula. In addition, seven star needling can be applied to the area to break up stagnation and increase blood flow.