Canine Demodicosis

Canine demodicosis (also known as demodectic mange or red mange) is a relatively common skin disease caused by a mite, Demodex canis. This mite lives deep within the hair follicle and is a normal inhabitant of dog skin. Demodex is a species specific and is NOT contagious to any other animals or humans. Other mammalian species (including humans) have their own Demodex mites, in certain dogs, problems with the immune system induce an increase in the number of mites such that they can cause skin disease.

Currently we do not know all the reasons that “trigger” the overpopulation of mites. In newborn puppies transmission is thought to occur from the bitch to the nursing puppies. In most pups the immune system keeps the mite population under control. Occasionally young dogs and puppies will break with demodicosis in a few spots which will spontaneously “disappear” as the dog’s immune system matures and drives the mite numbers down again. In older dogs we believe there is something wrong with the immune system whereby the body stops surveillance of the normal numbers of mites. Therefore the mites are allowed to reproduce in greater numbers and cause skin disease. Often an underlying disease process or a history of receiving certain types of drugs may be responsible for suppressing the immune system and inducing demodicosis. In nearly half of the cases no underlying reason can be found and the disease is assumed to be “idiopathic” or self-caused by an incompetent immune system. Finally, there is a strong tendency for certain breeds to acquire demodicosis. Rottweilers, Pit bull terriers, English bulldogs and the Chinese Shar Pei are at the top of the list. Because of this, spaying or neutering a pet with demodicosis is highly recommended.

Clinical signs
There are two forms of canine demodicosis; localized and generalized. Localized demodicosis involves fewer than 5 lesions over the body. Often this form resolves on its own. This is the form most commonly seen in puppies. Generalized demodicosis involves 5 or more lesions or may involve 1 or 2 large areas of infection (on the face or involving 2 or more feet). Generalized demodicosis can be a severe chronic disease. Unless a correctable underlying cause can be found, lifelong treatment is sometimes necessary. Secondary bacterial skin infections (pyoderma) are often present which complicates the disease.
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