

# How to Prevent Licking or Chewing at the Skin

## BACKGROUND

Pets generally lick or chew at their skin for one of two reasons: itchiness, which is the more common reason, or compulsive behavior. In either case, the underlying cause must be managed, and this usually requires a visit to the veterinarian to determine the diagnosis. However, you can take certain steps to minimize the self-trauma a dog or cat can inflict on its skin while awaiting the veterinary appointment or in cases of sudden flare-ups. The following approaches are meant to be temporary and should be used while awaiting or together with (but never instead of) treatment of the underlying cause.

## GETTING STARTED

Equipment/materials that may be useful:

- Elizabethan collar (E-collar)
- Duct tape or medical bandage tape
- T-shirt
- Socks (a clean terrycloth tube-type sweat sock works best)
- Child-size sweat pants
- Bitter Apple
- Antiperspirant

## TROUBLESHOOTING BEFOREHAND

A common error is to not realize that techniques for stopping licking and chewing are only temporary measures. The trigger that causes this behavior must be found and treated for the best long-term results.

Pets can become extremely creative in removing items you have placed on them to discourage them from licking and chewing. Be sure you can monitor them with the device you have created to prevent them from damaging it or getting around it to lick the area of concern.

When an E-collar is placed on your pet, you must make sure the collar is long enough to prevent your pet from licking the area. If your pet is chewing at his or her feet, for example, the E-collar must extend past the tip of the nose. Otherwise, many pets learn to reach around the collar with the foot and continue licking and chewing.

Always make sure your pet has access to food and water despite wearing an E-collar or other anti-lick device. You may have to move the food and water bowls temporarily, or place them on a crate, allowing your pet full access to the bowls. Removing an E-collar for mealtimes is fine as long as you are available to discourage him/her from licking; put the collar back on after the meal.

## PROCEDURE

### Elizabethan Collars (E-Collars)

E-collars can be purchased at your veterinary hospital or pet store. Remember to choose a collar that is longer than your pet's nose. Place your pet's own collar through the holes to secure the E-collar on your pet. Make sure the E-collar is fastened so it is not too tight but also not so loose that your pet can remove it. You may also purchase a "soft" E-collar from a pet store. These are inflatable E-collars that prevent your pet from licking the back half of its body. E-collars are the ideal tool to prevent pets from licking a surgical incision or other area of concern.



Although not greatly appreciated, Elizabethan collars must be deeper than the length of the muzzle, and are an important way for preventing self-trauma in dogs and cats.

### T-Shirt

To prevent chewing or licking of the flank (side of the body), thighs, abdomen (belly), or groin area, you may place a child-size (cats, small dogs) or medium (middle- to large-breed dogs) T-shirt on your pet. The front legs are placed through the arm holes and the head through the head hole. The wide end of the T-shirt may be tied in a knot or taped together to keep the full length of the T-shirt covering your pet's chest and belly. For male dogs, be sure the T-shirt does not extend too far back and cover the penis; or if it needs to, such as to prevent licking or chewing at the groin area, remember to roll the T-shirt forward or remove it when your dog needs to urinate. T-shirts are especially helpful for preventing a pet from licking the front third of his/her body (depending on the size of the shirt and pet).



Placement of a T-shirt to prevent licking/chewing at the sides of the chest.

## Socks

Socks can be applied to your pet's paws to be a barrier against chewing or licking excessively at the paws. The sock should extend far enough up the leg to cover the affected area, but not farther than halfway up the leg. If the area being chewed or licked is more than halfway up the leg, a bandage rather than a sock would be appropriate.

Some pets will leave socks on; others will need to have bandaging tape placed over the sock to secure it. Make sure the sock stays dry. If your pet must go outside, place a plastic bag over the sock to act as a barrier against dirt and moisture, and then remove it immediately when back inside. Be careful with the tightness of tape securing the sock: it must be tight enough to prevent the sock from being removed, but never so tight as to compromise blood circulation to the foot. Therefore, be sure the foot remains warm and comfortable to the touch during the minutes to hours that follow application of bandage tape. It also can be helpful to have some of the tape extend further up the leg.



Placement of socks to prevent chewing at the front paws.

## Sweat Pants

If the rear quarter of the body is of concern and an E-collar cannot be purchased, you might try applying a pair of old sweat pants (depending on the size of your pet and the size of the pants). The

pet's legs are placed into the hind legs of the pants, and the elastic draw string is secured. Again, bandaging tape may be needed to help secure the pants. The pants will need to be removed when the pet needs to urinate/defecate.



Placement of sweat pants to prevent chewing the hind legs.

## Bitter Apple

Bitter Apple is a spray that does not taste good to animals. The area **around the incision or chewed area** can be sprayed (never directly on the incision or area, because this can be painful and can delay healing). This helps deter the pet from licking the area. This spray may have to be applied several times a day. Depending on the type of spray, you may wish to apply the spray outside, allowing the odor to clear the air before the pet comes into the home.

## Antiperspirant

If your pet is licking an area of skin incessantly in the middle of the night, and you have no other option for deterrent, you may try applying roll-on antiperspirant **around the incision or area of concern**, not directly on it (for the same reason stated above for Bitter Apple). Antiperspirant does not taste good and may act as a deterrent for your pet. Antiperspirant can make a pet lick his or her lips excessively until the offending taste has disappeared.

## AFTERWARDS

Always watch your pet with any of the devices listed above, especially socks, T-shirts, and other fabric. If there are signs of chewing on these barriers, you should consider switching to another technique, because a very ambitious dog or cat may chew and eat the barrier, causing an intestinal foreign body and intestinal obstruction requiring surgery.

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

*My pet is with me all day. Why do I need to place an E-collar on him/her?*

A pet can lick or damage the skin in a way that sets back healing by days or weeks in just a few seconds. Unless constant supervision can be ensured, an E-collar is extremely important because it can prevent otherwise unnecessary return trips to the vet. An E-collar provides continuous protection from chewing and licking. While this method of protection can be awkward for some pets at first, it is a temporary measure only, and most dogs and cats adjust over time.

*Can my pet eat and drink with the E-collar on?*

Yes, your pet should be able to eat and drink with the collar on. You may need to place the bowls on a crate to elevate them,

allowing your pet's E-collar to get around the bowls. You may remove the collar, but immediately replace it when your pet is finished eating.

*When can I remove the anti-lick device?*

Your veterinarian will advise you when to remove the collar, based on both healing of the skin and—just as importantly—on control of the inciting cause. You should not remove it too early, as this may allow for recurrent licking and reinjury to the area.

---

## OTHER RELATED INFORMATION SHEET

- [How to Assemble and Use an Elizabethan Collar](#)

Practice Stamp or Name & Address