

Happy Pets, Happy Hearts: How UW-Madison Research Is Easing Pet Itch

University of Wisconsin-Madison

Wisconsin Alumni Research Foundation (WARF)



In the heart of Wisconsin, a group of University of Wisconsin–Madison alumni is transforming cutting-edge research into real relief for itchy pets everywhere. Their startup, Cold Water Technologies, is the brainchild of CEO Jordan Sand, a former UW–Madison researcher with a passion for science—and animals.

Their first product, Happy Scratch, is a daily, all-natural, over-the-counter supplement designed to ease itching and inflammation in pets, especially dogs suffering from dermatitis. But the secret ingredient isn't what you'd expect—it's made from an upcycled byproduct of pork processing: the lining of pig intestines.

"I'm really excited to see this team of UW alumni putting this useful technology on the market to help people help their pets," said Stephanie Whitehorse, director of IP, physical sciences at the Wisconsin Alumni Research Foundation (WARF).

This unlikely solution began as a research project on campus, part of a broader effort to find sustainable, value-added uses for meat industry leftovers. “We realized that while up to 70% of an animal is consumed by people, the remaining 30% holds incredible biological value,” Sand noted.

During testing, researchers found that one of these leftover materials, rich in immune-supporting proteins like immunoglobulin A (IgA), significantly reduced itchiness in mice. Then came the unexpected twist—it worked even better in dogs. What began as an agricultural study suddenly had the potential to change pet care.

That breakthrough shifted the research's entire direction. Originally funded by a major corporation with livestock goals in mind, the project nearly ended when the company was acquired. But Sand, committed to the idea's potential, pivoted the research toward the domestic pet market, keeping the work alive.

With support from WARF—which licensed the intellectual property behind the product—the team secured the rights they needed to move forward commercially. WARF director of licensing, Emily Bauer, praised the journey, “This is a great example of how a research project evolves and leads to a different end product than expected. What was originally a side effect became the first commercial application because of Jordan's vision and determination.”

Another key player is co-founder Maria Dashek, who earned both her veterinary and graduate degrees from UW–Madison. As she finished her PhD, Dashek worked in pet vaccine clinics and was constantly asked by pet owners how to help their itchy pets without the high cost of vet visits. That real-world experience made the mission personal.

“People care so deeply for their pets and want to provide them with good care,” she said.

And that's exactly what Happy Scratch delivers. While competitor prescriptions can cost between \$2–\$4 a day—plus an average \$75 vet visit—Happy Scratch costs about \$1 per day and can be purchased over the counter. Even better? Pets love the taste. “The spray-drying team said their dogs would lick their pants when they got home from work,” Sand laughed.

The product doesn't just mask symptoms—it helps support the immune system of pets suffering from IgA deficiency, a condition that leaves them vulnerable to skin inflammation and infections. By reintroducing this naturally occurring immune protein into their diet, Happy Scratch offers targeted relief.

The startup's journey is a testament to the power of university innovation. Sand credits much of the company's success to the late Dr. Mark Cook, his advisor and a dedicated advocate for translating UW research into products that help people—and animals. “He believed in this idea from the start. He would be incredibly proud,” Sand said.

Dashek touts the relationship between WARF and researchers on campus that resulted in patenting the intellectual property behind Happy Scratch. “Being able to hold that IP has been really important and allows us to have a product that we feel confident will be successful in the marketplace ... As we were starting the company, WARF was very willing to work with us in licensing the patent,” she said.

Today, Cold Water Technologies is exploring new ways to bring Happy Scratch to market—from direct-to-consumer sales to veterinary clinics—while remaining proudly based in Wisconsin. Dashek says the company is ready to grow alongside demand, all while staying true to its roots.

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