

## Allergies in Cats and Dogs

**Allergens can be categorised into three main groups. Within each group, your pet may be allergic to something very specific or multiple allergens from different groups.**

**The main groups are:**

### **Flea allergy**

Cats and dogs can be allergic to the saliva of fleas which is injected into the skin when they bite. This is the most common type of allergy and in cats it typically causes over grooming, and in dogs, scratching and nibbling. The skin develops little red spots (papules) and in cats, they are felt as widespread crusts (this is called miliary dermatitis).

### **Atopic dermatitis**

Atopic dermatitis is basically a reaction to an environmental allergen. The environmental allergen may be seasonal, for example pollen, or be present all year round, for example house dust mites. For seasonal atopic dermatitis, cats and dogs only itch when the allergen is in abundance – so only at certain times of the year. Cats and dogs with atopic dermatitis may scratch their body, lick and chew their paws and rub their face.

### **Food allergy**

A food allergy is a reaction to a particular protein or food chemical and the reaction manifests in the skin. Common proteins that cats and dogs are allergic to include chicken, fish, gluten, and egg. Cats that have a food allergy generally scratch around the head and neck, but in dogs, any excessively itchy dog could have a food allergy.

### **Diagnosing Allergies in Dogs and Cats:**

To try to find out what your pet is allergic to, vets follow a step-by-step approach in order to rule out the different groups. The approach starts by taking a detailed history from you about your pet to gain information about parasite control, diet, etc. The vet will then perform a general physical exam and then focus on the skin and areas of concern (for example, any lesions).

### **Testing for skin parasites**

To rule out skin parasites, simple tests such as coat brushings, hair plucks and skin scrapes can be performed. All these samples are viewed under the microscope and if parasites are present, they can be viewed. In some cases further testing is required and samples will need to be sent to an external lab, for example testing for fox mange involves taking a blood sample.

The next step is to diagnose and treat any existing skin infections; due to the composition of their skin, cats and dogs with allergy are very susceptible to getting secondary bacterial and/or fungal infections. Skin infections can also be very itchy and therefore complicate the diagnostic approach.

### **Diagnosing Atopic dermatitis**

Atopic dermatitis is a diagnosis made by ruling out parasites, secondary infections and food allergy. It can be very difficult to find out exactly what your pet is allergic to in the

environment and physically minimise exposure to it, but there are tests that can be performed to help.

### **Allergy blood test**

This test simply involves a routine blood test and the blood sample is sent to an external lab to find out what your pet is allergic to. The blood is tested against an extensive profile of allergens such as parasites, grass pollens and tree pollens.

### **How to treat allergies in Cats and Dogs:**

#### **How to treat flea allergy**

Cats and dogs with flea allergy are treated and managed by giving regular flea treatment; the vet will advise a product for you to use. Majority of the flea life-cycle is in the environment so hoovering carpets and washing bedding can help eliminate the immature stages. Furthermore, the vet may recommend a house spray for you to use.

#### **How to treat food allergy**

If a diagnosis of food allergy is confirmed, then the treatment involves avoidance of the food/s your pet is allergic to. The dermatological prescription diets are nutritionally complete and can be fed long term.

#### **How to treat Atopic dermatitis**

Atopic dermatitis requires life-long management to control the condition as best as possible. The management is usually multimodal, meaning it includes different therapies given in various ways. The different therapies are:

#### **Anti-itch medication**

This medication comes in the form of tablets, capsules, liquid and injection. The vet will discuss with you all the various options and select the most appropriate. The aim of anti-itch medication is to provide treatment for as long as necessary and then taper to the lowest possible dose to make your pet comfortable.

#### **Antibacterial/antifungal shampoos, foams, wipes and pads**

Cats and dogs with atopic dermatitis have a “weaker” skin barrier and as a result, the normal micro-organisms that live on the skin can take advantage and over grow or cause infection. Therefore, to keep numbers under control, your vet may recommend a washing/cleaning regime.

#### **Antihistamines**

Antihistamines may be given to enhance the effect of concurrent medication and/or to reduce the allergic reaction in the skin.

#### **Essential fatty acids (EFAs)**

It is thought that EFAs improve skin barrier function and there is no contraindication to give them. They can be added to the diet or found in specific dermatological diets.

#### **Immunotherapy**

If desired, we can refer your pet for immunotherapy. Immunotherapy can be started after the necessary tests have identified the allergen(s). Vials are made containing the allergens your pet is most allergic to. Your pet will receive regular injections at the vets to start with (induction phase) and then monthly injections (maintenance phase). Theoretically, immunotherapy works by desensitising your pet to the allergens it is allergic to so that in its day-to-day life when it is exposed to these environmental allergens, it does not react. This type of therapy takes six to eight months to have its full effect so initially, your pet may require anti-itch medication. Furthermore, immunotherapy is not effective in every cat and dog and may be discontinued.

**Note: It is very common for a pet to have a dermatological flare up: it will start itching more and the skin will appear red. It is important for you to contact your vet if your pet suffers a flare to regain balance and control of skin.**

**Unfortunately, skin allergies require life-long management. Successful treatment requires the owner to understand and administer treatments consistently. This is essential to keep a pet's allergies under control in the long term.**

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