

Allergies

Coping with an itchy pet can be extremely frustrating and can truly test the limits of the human-animal bond. Just like us, our pets can suffer from allergies and external parasites. Allergic skin disease is by far the most common medical problem faced by pet owners. Although allergies are not life threatening, the itching that they cause can make your pet miserable. It is important we get to the underlying cause to give your four-legged friend some much needed relief. Then they can get back to cuddling, playing and sleeping in peace.

What causes allergies?

In allergic animals, the immune system makes a mistake and goes crazy. It incorrectly targets a harmless protein in the environment and declares war. Then whenever the pet encounters that protein in the future (e.g. pollen, grass, mould, dust mites etc.) their immune system trigger the release of an itch signal. Sadly, most allergies look the same, a red itchy animal. Animals rarely have "hay fever" type signs. Pets can often have multiple allergies adding together.

Persistent scratching, chewing and head rubbing can also result in open wounds to the skin and pain to your pet. You may see hair loss and skin damage, sometimes with secondary infections; this can result in an obvious smell and greasy, flaky or red skin. Some pets get an itchy anal area and recurrent ear infections. Cats tend to itch around the face or neck, which produces scabs and hair loss.

The most common underlying causes

It is important to realise that regardless of the cause, most allergies look the same – i.e. a red itchy dog. Unfortunately some itchy pets are allergic to two or more of the following.

- Biting insect:** This is a common cause of irritated pets and includes fleas and other biting insects such as mosquitos and sandflies. For any allergic patient, vigilant flea and biting insect control is essential for remaining symptom-free and this requires year-round treatment regardless of the main cause of their itch as insect bites make them significantly worse. The allergy is caused by the insect's saliva, and it only takes a few bites. In the case of fleas, itchy pets can scratch so much that adult fleas are hard to find because they are removed from the body. In warm climates or in our homes, fleas may survive in low numbers year-round.
- Food allergy:** Some pets develop hypersensitivities to foods. Proteins and meats are the most common allergens, but carbohydrates, or even preservatives or dyes can all be potential causes. People wrongly assume that itching due to food allergy requires a recent diet change of some sort. In fact, food allergy requires time to develop. Most animals have been eating the offending food for years with no issues. Symptoms are usually skin related but may include vomiting or diarrhoea.
- Contact Allergy:** Direct physical contact is necessary – e.g. lying on a particular patch of vegetation (for example Rhoeo or grass). Only the skin that touches it becomes red so normally the feet and belly/chest regions are visibly affected.
- Atopy:** Atopy or atopic dermatitis is one of the most common causes of itch in animals. Your pet's genetics and immune system may predispose them to this condition and it usually presents between 1-3 years of age. It may be triggered by environmental allergens such as pollens, moulds, dust mites etc. Abnormalities in an atopic pet's skin means that it does not form the normal tight protective layer, this allows penetration of allergens and infection which stimulates the immune system. It is a complex disease that has a strong allergic component with similarities to hay fever and eczema in people. It is usually seasonal at first and targets the skin. Classic signs include chewing the paws, red itchy ears and belly. Our knowledge about atopy in animals is ever changing and expanding over time.
- Secondary infections:** Allergies are often the underlying cause of recurring skin and/or ear infections. Bacterial and yeast infections, though secondary to the allergy, can increase your pet's level of itching. These need to be confirmed through skin testing. Long-term treatment with antibiotics and anti-yeast medications is commonly required, along with medicated bathing programs. It is important to



use an animal licenced, low-irritant shampoo. Your vet will direct you to whether this needs to be antifungal, antibacterial or a combination to work the best for your pet's condition. These treat current and recurrent skin infections and protect the skin's barrier function while removing scaly skin and grease. Your pet's skin is a vital barrier against allergens and irritants in the environment. Your pet's skin requires key nutrients including ceramides and balanced animal friendly essential fatty acids (omega 3 and 6) to maintain skin barrier function, reduce inflammation and keep the skin healthy and hydrated. There are a number of specialist skin support diets that have been shown to reduce the symptoms of atopy. In addition to this, oatmeal shampoo and conditioners, ceramide conditioners and various bath oils can all help the skin's hydration and provide short term relief of irritation.

Trials & treatments

There are several trials we can do to help establish which group your pet is in. These trials need to be done **100% by-the-book** otherwise they will not be helpful.

- **Biting insect trial:** Vigilant treatment for fleas and biting insects and the elimination of fleas from your pet's environment and treatment of all in-contact pets. Anti-inflammatory medication may be required in the short term to settle the allergic reaction and allow healing of any lesions. Once developed, there is NO cure for the allergy. For mosquitoes, the most successful treatment is avoidance. This may mean changing the pet's routine so that it is locked inside in a screened (insect free) area at dusk and dawn, the times of greatest mosquito activity. There are animal insect repellents that may be used but with caution in cats.
- **Food allergy trial:** The only method of diagnosing a food allergy is by placing your dog on a carefully selected hypoallergenic diet for several weeks, which is called a food trial. The diet must contain a unique protein source broken down into the smallest possible units of protein to minimise the chance of reaction. It is impossible to prepare a comparable diet at home. If the allergy signs resolve, a food challenge is performed by feeding the former diet and watching for a return of the itching. If this occurs, a diagnosis of food allergy is confirmed. The food we recommend is Royal Canin Anallergenic for 8-12 weeks. Do NOT give

table scraps, treats or titbits while on this diet. Please ask us about tips to ensure the best results. Blood or skin tests cannot be used to either diagnose food allergy in the dog or cat as they are not reliable (different to humans).

- **Contact Allergy:** How these trials are performed will be discussed with you in detail at the time of your consultation. Sometimes closed patch testing may be required.
- **Atopy trial:** This is done last if the other 3 trials are negative. Diagnosis of atopy is made based on the results of intradermal skin testing by a dermatologist. These tests help us create a list of allergens for a "vaccine" (allergen specific immunotherapy) to decrease your pet's sensitivity. Improvement of skin barrier function and control of secondary infections is critical for long-term success. Approximately half the dogs receiving immunotherapy will have an excellent response. About 25 % will have a so-so response. About 25 % will not have any response at all.

Can the itching be treated without the expense of diagnostic testing?

There are many anti-allergy medications to reduce itching. These medications do not cure allergies but can help decrease the symptoms. However without addressing the underlying cause of the allergy, the itching will return when the medication is stopped. Long-term use of some anti-allergy medications, such as steroids, can result in many health problems. Working with us to diagnose the underlying cause of the allergy and itching may reduce the need for medications or enable us to use more specific and targeted allergy treatments.

Can allergies be cured?

Unfortunately, there is no cure for allergy and it is usually a life-long problem that often requires time and patience to control. If the allergy occurs for only a few weeks of each year then a short course of treatment is often all that is needed however some allergies are severe and chronic needing long-term management. We will tailor on an individual basis the best program of management to improve your pet's quality of life.

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Allergy Treatment Plan



We will start with focusing on:

- ☐ Insect bites
- ☐ Contact allergy
- ☐ Adverse reaction to food
- ☐ Referral/management of atopy

We have detected the following on your pet:

- ☐ Bacterial infection
- ☐ Yeast infection
- ☐ Ringworm infection

This will be treated by the

- ☐ Oral antibiotics
- ☐ Oral antifungals
- ☐ Topical cream
- ☐ Shampoo and conditioner

Due to the nature of your dog's itch we need to control the scratching with the following medications

- ☐ Antihistamines
- ☐ Apoquel
- ☐ Corticosteroids
- ☐ Cytopoint
- ☐ Cyclosporin

For the environment we recommend

- ☐ Flea control
- ☐ Mosquito screening
- ☐ Gardening
- ☐ Gentle cleaning products for the home and bedding

For the diet we recommend feeding for 6-12 weeks or ongoing as directed by your vet

- ☐ Royal Canin Anallergenic
- ☐ Royal Canin Hypoallergenic
- ☐ Royal Canin Skin Support
- ☐ Royal Canin Sensitivity
- ☐ Other novel diet as advised by vet
- ☐ Additional supplementation with PAWs Dermega or Virbac Megaderm