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Canine Allergies



Canine allergies are an inherited predisposition to develop allergic symptoms after repeated exposure to some otherwise harmless substance, an “allergen” such as dust, dust mites, grasses, or pollen. Most dogs begin to show their allergic signs between 1 and 3 years of age. Breeds that are more commonly affected are Golden Retrievers, most terriers (especially West Highlands), Lhasas, Dalmations, Bulldogs, Schnauzers, Shar Peis, and most white haired dogs.

Allergic animals usually rub, lick, chew, or scratch at their feet, face, ears, armpits, or groin, causing hair loss and reddening and thickening of the skin. Some dogs have chronic ear infections. In some cases, several allergens can “add” together to cause an animal to itch where each individual substance alone would not be enough to cause a problem. Allergens may be airborne (e.g. pollens), contact surfaces (e.g. carpet, grasses or cleaners), or certain foods (usually chicken or beef). Sometimes secondary skin infections can add to the problem. Eliminating some but not all of the problems may cause a dog or cat’s itchiness to go away. Therefore, it is important to treat any other problems that could be making your pet itch while dealing with allergy.

Diagnosis of allergic dermatitis is based on clinical signs (areas of itching) and an initial seasonality to the skin problem. However, many dogs soon begin to scratch and rub year round. Dogs can be allergy tested by a dermatologist to determine the specific substance your dog is allergic to. Specific therapy is based on the results of a skin test or blood test to detect reaction to the specific allergic substance.

Treatment can be frustrating, as there is no “magic pill” for this problem.

Treatment can include:

1. Avoidance of the substance,
2. Topical therapy to control the itching (symptomatic therapy),
3. Oral therapy or,
4. Desensitization vaccine in an attempt to desensitize your pet to the specific substances to which he or she is found to be allergic. Patience is key – it may take several treatments before we find one or two that help the problem.

Complete avoidance of the allergic substance may not be practical, but decreased exposure may be feasible. If your pet is allergic to pollen, decreasing the outdoor exposure especially at dusk and dawn is helpful. Your pet should never be walked through fields with high grass or weeds and never should be outside when the lawn is cut. If your pet has an allergy to fungi or molds, it should not be kept in rooms with high moisture levels (bathroom or laundry room) or allowed to be in areas of increased dust (crawl spaces under the house). Control of house dust or mites in the home can be a major undertaking, consisting of removing carpeting, covering mattresses, regular washing of the bedding, high-efficiency vacuuming, avoiding stuffed toys, and frequent damp mopping of the areas most frequented by your pet.

Your pet may be allergic to a **food ingredient**. Food allergies affect only 20% of allergic pets, though we may do a food trial to rule it out. A special prescription diet is strictly fed for 2 months (no rawhides or other treats!), and your pet is re-evaluated for any relief of the symptoms.

Fatty acids may decrease the itching sensation in about 10-20% of atopic pets. Your pet can take fatty acids for life with no long-term problems. You may also try such diets as Avoderm, Natural Balance Venison and Potato or a “skin and coat formula” which contain extra fatty acids.

Products applied topically to the skin (shampoos, cream rinses, leave-on conditioners, sprays) with anti-itch properties may also be of benefit. These products usually do not eliminate the problem completely, but provide temporary relief from itching. Shampoos also help to remove the pollens, grasses etc. from your pet’s haircoat. It is important to bathe your pet in **cool water** because warm or hot water increases the itching sensation. If your pet has allergies in a small area or just along the stomach area, you may use baby wipes at night to remove allergens, followed by a steroid spray (ask us for a prescription). Additionally, clean blankets, rugs and areas where your pet sleeps as often as possible.

Steroids (e.g., prednisone, cortisone) can also be used to alleviate the itch. These drugs can have side effects and are reserved for pets for which other therapy is ineffective, or to control a severe itch for a short period of time. Steroids work better than any other medication to stop the itch, however most dogs drink excessive amounts of water, (then urinate a lot), are very hungry, gain weight, pant, and may seem anxious. Side effects will diminish over time. Cats rarely demonstrate any adverse effects. Also, we give higher doses initially, then reduce the dose to the lowest one that relieves symptoms – usually every other day. Most animals tolerate every other day doses well. If your pet needs long term prednisone (more than 3 months), we need to do bloodwork to check the liver to make sure it is not adversely affected.

Desensitization vaccines can be formulated for you pet on the basis of results of a skin test or blood test. This testing and a 6 month supply of vaccine usually costs between \$450-500. One-third of dogs respond very well to the vaccines, one-third demonstrate some improvement, and one-third show no response. However, desensitization takes time. Improvement may not be seen for 3 to 6 months or longer. If results are not seen in 9 to 12 months, a reevaluation of the vaccine usage is necessary. When the desensitization shows a benefit, these vaccines are usually given for the lifetime of your pet. After an initial series of injections, periodic boosters are needed (every few weeks).

Allergies are a lifelong problem and tend not to just go away. The best chance for success is realized when you can spend the time and effort in utilizing symptomatic therapy only on your pet or while your pet is undergoing desensitization. Only by trial and error can the optimal therapy be formulated. **Time and patience are the keys!**