

Pet Allergies Bite

by Lyn T. Garson, CVT

Imagine how it would feel to be so itchy you would resort to biting your own skin. Or pulling out all your hair. Suppose your skin and ears were red, irritated or thickened, covered with scabs, or infected, causing you to scratch constantly. These are some of the most frequently seen symptoms in animals with allergies. While there is not necessarily a cure for allergies, with proper diagnoses and treatment allergies can be managed effectively.

Causes of Allergies

Many things can stimulate allergies in dogs and cats. In the simplest terms, allergies develop as a result of hypersensitivity to a harmless substance which triggers an overreaction from an animal's immune system. Four different types of allergies are commonly seen in dogs and cats: environmental, food, fleas and contact with irritants, such as grooming products or other topical treatments.

Similar to their human owners, animals can be allergic to a number of environmental factors, including pollen, dander, grasses, trees, molds and house dust. While pets can develop these allergies at any time during their life, it is most commonly seen between six months and three years of age. Symptoms include irritation, itching, hair loss, rashes and skin or ear infections. The skin often becomes red and thickened. In dogs, the typical areas affected are the muzzle, armpits, feet, legs, abdomen and the area around the anus. In cats, facial hair loss or a series of small scabs may also be seen.

Food allergies can be challenging for both owners and pets alike. This type of allergy develops over a long period of time and is not the result of a sudden diet change. In many cases the pet has eaten the same food for years without any previous problem. With food allergy, owners might expect their pet to show signs of stomach or intestinal symptoms; however, it is the skin—the largest organ of the body—that is usually affected, resulting in extreme itchiness. Ingredients typically producing allergies in dogs are beef, dairy and wheat, while for cats the offenders are often beef, dairy and fish.

Flea allergy dermatitis is the most common skin disease in dogs and cats. Interestingly, the allergy is actually caused by the flea's saliva, and just a few fleas can cause a major problem. Owners often report not seeing any fleas at all on their pet, and wonder how they can have such an allergy. But it is important to note that pets with flea allergies bite and groom themselves so excessively they may be removing fleas making them difficult to find on the skin. The use of year-round flea control products is recommended.

Diagnoses

With the broad range of allergy inducing factors, diagnosing and treating allergies can be a complex and lengthy process. Diagnostic tools vary depending on the type of allergy suspected and may include skin scraping, biopsies, blood testing, bacterial and fungal cultures, and diet trials. These tests help determine the cause of your pet's allergy as well as rule out other skin or medical conditions not caused by allergies.

According to Dr. Judy Seltzer, BVetMed, MRCVS, a veterinary dermatologist at the Veterinary Medical Center of Long Island, many blood tests are available for food allergies, however these tests, as well as skin testing for food allergy, have been found to be non-informative. “The most successful way of diagnosing an animal with a food allergy,” said Dr. Seltzer “is by removing all of the currently fed foods and starting a strict special diet trial.”

Treatment Plans

Allergy treatment is generally multifaceted consisting of a combination of interventions, such as shampoos, topical applications, nutritional supplements, medications and desensitization with allergy shots. Antibiotics are frequently used for secondary infections which contribute to itching. Once your veterinarian develops an appropriate treatment plan, be sure you understand why each medication is prescribed and the expected outcome.

“The biggest thing for owners to realize is that there is no cure for environmental allergies,” said Dr. Seltzer. “Our goal is to minimize severity and frequency of clinical signs- just like with humans. Even the most well controlled case will have flare-ups (skin/ear infections or itchiness) during the year.”

Long-term treatment can be frustrating and overwhelming for pet owners. Dr. Seltzer emphasizes the importance of “regular rechecks, communication with your veterinarian(s), and compliance with prescribed therapies. Most pets can live a healthy, normal life once they are managed properly,” said Dr. Seltzer.

Living with Allergies

How much of a role genetics plays into allergies is yet unknown. There is no way to predict when—or if—allergies will develop and no way to prevent them. But there are some steps you can take to help minimize your pet’s exposure to potential allergens. Keep your pet indoors during peak pollen hours. If possible, lessen the number of carpets in your home. Frequent bathing and grooming also helps to reduce allergens. Avoid situations that may be stressful to your pet as these can be a trigger for allergies. Finally, provide a high-quality diet free of additives, by-products and artificial coloring to keep your pet’s immune system healthy.

Integrated Medicine—Another Approach

Much like conventional treatments, alternative therapies seek to desensitize the body to be less sensitive to allergens. Dr. Masuma Barrett, DVM of Canobie Lake Veterinary Hospital, in New Hampshire, and Dr. Allys Maybank, VMD of Frontier Medicine in North Granby, Connecticut, both offer a new treatment method called Advanced Allergy Therapeutics (AAT) in their respective practices.

AAT treats the symptoms associated with allergies and sensitivities, through muscle response testing and acupuncture. Acupuncture is known to stimulate the body to release certain chemicals (endorphins and serotonin). These chemicals help reduce biological stress resulting from exposure to allergens. AAT reduces biological stress in relation to a specific allergen, thereby creating a positive association for the body to that allergen.

Muscle response testing, herbal therapies, acupuncture, and conventional desensitization, such as allergy shots, all take the treatment of allergies a step beyond management solely with medications. Dr. Barrett considers the most effective and long-lasting approach to patient symptom relief is to incorporate alternative techniques along with conventional medicine.