

Allergic Skin Disease in Pets

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Allergic skin disease is very common in dogs and cats. Pet allergies tend to manifest with itchy skin, rather than with sneezing and other respiratory signs as they do in humans. The three most common allergies are food, flea, and environmental. If your dog or cat has allergies, the first thing you might notice is scratching, licking, biting, chewing, head shaking, etc. while the skin looks completely normal. If left untreated, dogs and cats will eventually develop red bumps, greasy skin, and/or flaky skin, which usually means there is now an infection secondary to allergies.

Food allergies can start at any age, but are most common in dogs under one year of age or in dogs over seven years of age. Pets with food allergies may not respond completely to our typical anti-itch therapies and may also have additional gastrointestinal signs such as vomiting/diarrhea and seizures in rare cases. The gold standard diagnosis of a food allergy consists of a strict diet trial – where your pet eats ONLY the food that is recommended (NO supplements, other food, flavored medications, treats, etc.) typically for a period of 4-6 weeks. Additional methods of testing for food allergies, such as hair, saliva and blood tests, have NOT been shown to be able to accurately diagnose a food allergy. Food allergies can be managed with diet alone, only if not accompanied by additional allergies.

Flea allergies can manifest at any age. Typical signs include severe itching with skin lesions and secondary infections. Because this is a hypersensitivity reaction, fleas are NOT always seen on your pet. Treatment is with consistent year-round flea control and it may take up to three months to notice improvement. All pets in the household should be treated for optimal flea control. Flea allergies can be managed with flea control alone, only if not accompanied by additional allergies.

Environmental allergies can occur at any age, but are most common in young adults. Typical signs include itching and secondary skin and ear infections. Environmental allergens can include weeds, trees, grasses, epidermals (humans, dogs, cats, sheep), molds, mites, and insects. Because pets are typically allergic to many different allergens (typically 12 or more), trying to avoid all things your pet is allergic to is rarely effective. Therefore, some type of topical and/or systemic medication is often needed life-long. If therapy is stopped, relapse is likely to occur.

For many owners, the process of diagnosing the type of allergy and finding the most appropriate treatment plan can seem overwhelming in the beginning. However, your primary veterinarian or veterinary dermatologist is there to guide you every step of this process. It is therefore very important to continue to follow your veterinarians' guidelines regarding recheck appointments and medications. Once the type of allergy has been diagnosed and a maintenance plan has been developed, managing your pets' allergies can become a part of your daily routine. If you think your pet is suffering from allergies, do not hesitate to contact your primary veterinarian or seek out a veterinary dermatologist.