



## Allergies in Dogs and Cats

There are several types of allergies that dogs and cats experience; seasonal allergies, food allergies, moist dermatitis (hot spots), and atopic dermatitis (environmental allergies). An allergy is a persistent inappropriate immune system (inflammatory) response to specific allergens that are encountered on a daily basis. **Allergies are a lifelong condition.**

Allergies are different from an allergic reaction. An allergic reaction happens when an animal is exposed to an irritating substance, insect bite, etc. The most common clinical signs of an allergic reaction include swelling, hives, fever, and/or vomiting and diarrhea. Allergic reactions tend to happen only on occasion and often resolve without major intervention.

### Common Symptoms of Allergies in Pets

#### Itching (Pruritus)

Allergies typically cause a constant, intense itch. If your dog or cat cannot seem to stop scratching, allergies may be the reason. Itching can occur around the eyes, mouth, feet, armpits, belly, thighs, and anus. In addition to scratching, your pet may also drag its face or body across carpeting or other rough surfaces in an attempt to gain some relief from the itching. *Whenever your pet is itchy, it is important to remember that external parasites and fungal or bacterial infections can cause very similar symptoms. Your veterinarian can help you distinguish between infectious skin diseases, parasites, or allergies.*

#### Biting and Licking

Your pet will do anything to try to reduce itching, including biting and licking the skin. Unfortunately, biting, licking and scratching can result in hair loss, open sores and scabs. Sores can become infected, which can make your pet even more uncomfortable. The paws are readily available and often a focus for biting or licking. Licking can lead to secondary yeast overgrowth which can then lead to more inflammation and itching ... and more licking and biting.

#### Skin Infections

Constant inflammation combined with trauma from itching can create a perfect environment for bacteria and yeast to grow resulting in skin infection. Signs of skin infection include redness, small bumps and pustules, areas of scale, crusting, and/or hair loss. Yeast overgrowth often causes a brown

staining of the hair, skin, or toe nails, a greasy or oily feel to the haircoat, and/or odor. Skin infection can increase scratching and licking.

### Frequent Ear Infections

Allergies can also cause ear infections. Symptoms of ear infections in cats and dogs include scratching, redness, discharge, odor, excessive ear wax, and crusts or scabs.

### Anal Gland Disease

The anal glands can be affected by inflammation caused by allergies -often food allergy. Inflamed anal glands become thickened leading to difficult expression. They can be painful/uncomfortable/irritating when full. This usually results in scooting or licking the hind end. Occasionally, full or inflamed anal glands can become impacted or infected leading to abscesses.

### Eyes and Nose

Our pets can occasionally have upper respiratory signs associated with allergies. This may include red, watery, or itchy eyes and/or runny nose. This seems to be less common than a skin response. It is important to have your veterinarian check for other causes of these signs.

## **Types of Allergies**

### Seasonal Allergies

The change in seasons can cause unpleasant symptoms for pets that suffer from seasonal allergies. Because dogs and cats do not experience the same allergy symptoms as people, you might not even be aware that your pet has allergies. Allergies are more likely to affect your pet's skin than their upper respiratory system (eyes, sinuses). Seasonal allergies tend to recur during certain times of the year. They are typically caused by pollen, changes in humidity, air quality, or seasonal plants.

### Environmental Allergies (Atopic Dermatitis)

Clinical signs of environmental allergies are very similar to seasonal allergies but occur year-round. Many pets will start showing signs of environmental allergies as early as six months of age and most will occur before the animal is five years old. Pets with environmental allergies can be allergic to anything. They also often suffer from food and/or seasonal "flare ups" as well. Often, allergies present after moving to a new climate/region.

### Food Allergies

Food allergies are just as it sounds. Although dogs and cats can be allergic to any ingredient in food, they are most commonly allergic to animal proteins. It is uncommon for dogs and cats to be allergic to grains. Pets with food allergies have similar symptoms as with other allergies but may also suffer from

sensitive stomach and/or chronic or recurrent gastrointestinal signs like vomiting or diarrhea. Anal gland disease is commonly associated with food allergies. A food trial should be performed to confirm food allergies and to find the best diet for your pet.

## Diagnosing Allergies

- ♥ Diagnosing allergies includes ruling out all other diseases that may cause itchy or irritated skin. A full history will be asked to determine chronicity or seasonality of clinical signs. It may be helpful to keep a diary of symptoms and when they seem to improve or worsen, what food your pet is given, and any medications they may be on including herbs, homeopathic treatments, supplements, and preventatives (flea/tick/heartworm/etc).
- ♥ Blood tests may be performed to rule out underlying disease and to make sure your pet is healthy enough for medications.
- ♥ Skin scrapings are used to rule out parasites like mites and fleas. To perform a skin scraping, the edge of a scalpel blade is used to scrape the top layer of skin in several affected areas. The sample is then looked at under the microscope. If positive, the condition can be treated and allergies typically ruled out. Treating with flea/tick/mite prevention medications should be done regardless of skin scraping results. There are many safe products currently available.
- ♥ Some dogs with environmental allergies also have food allergies. A food trial may be performed to find the best diet for your dog. Food trials consist of exclusively feeding one single diet. This diet should be a prescription diet that has limited ingredients (but not nutrients). Nothing else should be fed to the pet. This includes treats, edible toys, and people food. Flavored medications and pill pockets should also be limited.
- ♥ Allergy testing can be used to help find the specific allergens that may be causing the symptoms. During the test, various types of allergens are injected into your dog or cat's skin. If your pet is allergic to the substance, small red bumps will appear on the skin. A second option for allergy testing includes measuring antibodies in the blood and only requires a blood sample. Identifying the type of allergens that trigger reactions can help your veterinarian develop an effective treatment plan such as avoidance, seasonal therapy, specific diet, or immunotherapy.

## Treatment

Allergies can be controlled with bathing, medications, managing their environment and sometimes with immunotherapy and/or prescription diets. Thankfully, veterinarians now have several new medications for dog allergies. These new medications have very few side effects. We no longer have to rely solely on corticosteroids and manage their side effects. You'll need good communication with your veterinarian and maybe even a veterinary dermatologist. Even well controlled pets will have occasional flare ups that require additional treatment. **Pets with allergies need to be managed for life.**

## Home Care

Home care is an extremely important part of managing all types of allergies. Here are a few things you can do to make allergy season more bearable for your pet:

- ♥ Bathe your pet frequently. Washing your dog at least once a week removes allergens that can get caught in hair and fur. Be sure to rinse your pet thoroughly to prevent residue which may irritate the skin further. Your cat can benefit from a bath, too. Hypoallergenic shampoos are best. Oatmeal-based products can help reduce itching and soothe skin. If your feline friend has a strong dislike of water, as many cats do, remove allergens by running a damp cloth over its body.
- ♥ If regular bathing is difficult to do, there are several topical products that can be used between bathing to reduce the frequency of full baths. This is also a good option if your pet's skin dries out easily.
- ♥ If your dog loves to swim, rinse or bathe more often and use a gentle ear cleaner with a drying agent to reduce the amount of moisture in the ear canals. Keep in mind that river, pond, and canal water tend to cause skin irritation even in animals that do not have allergies.
- ♥ Wipe your pet's paws. Pollen can become stuck to the bottoms of your pet's feet. When your dog or cat returns inside, remove the pollen with a damp cloth. Pollen can also stick to the bottoms of your shoes. Pollen counts in the home can be reduced by asking family and visitors to remove their shoes at the door. Your pet will not only benefit if you remove your shoes when you enter your house, but you will too if you have seasonal allergies.
- ♥ Give your furry friend Omega-3 fatty acid supplements ("fish oils"). These supplements can help keep your pet's skin healthy and reduce the effects of seasonal allergies.
- ♥ Bring your pet indoors before you mow. Whether your pet is allergic to grasses or pollen, keeping your friend indoors while you mow will help decrease exposure to allergens.
- ♥ Pay attention to the allergy forecast. Online weather sites, such as Weather.com, feature allergy forecasts that let you know when pollen or mold levels are high in your area. If levels rise, keep your pet inside as much as possible until the levels begin to drop.
- ♥ Use the air-conditioner or air purifier. Pollen is so small that it can drift through the holes in window and door screens. High quality air-conditioner filters and air purifiers catch the pollen and prevent it from settling on surfaces in your home.
- ♥ For pets that suffer seasonal allergies, being prepared ahead of time is key. Some mildly suffering pets can benefit from daily cool water rinses and a fragrance-free shampoo once every week or two. Clipping longhaired pets decreases the allergen load and makes bathing easier.
- ♥ Routine vacuuming of areas that pets frequent and washing of pet bedding in mild, fragrance-free detergents can also limit the allergen exposure inside.
- ♥ Try not to change their diet very often -stick to a food that your pet has done well on. No new treats, no people food. We want to reduce the number of variables their bodies are processing.

## **Can My Pet Take Allergy Medications?**

Allergy medications can reduce your pet's symptoms but it's important to check with a veterinarian before you give your dog or cat any type of medication. Your vet may prescribe a topical cream, ointment, or shampoo that reduces itching, or may recommend antihistamines, steroids, or other types of medications.

## **Veterinary Care**

Allergies can be high maintenance and sometimes frustrating. Be sure to discuss all your concerns and challenges with your vet. Dr. Parish will do everything she can to create an effective protocol that is easy to stick to. Response to treatment is a great way to find the perfect protocol. Stay in touch with your vet.