



Prepared for: Test McTest

Animal Medical and Surgical Clinic of Wisconsin Rapids James

DOG AND CAT ALLERGIES

Allergic dermatitis (skin allergy) is one of the most frustrating conditions in veterinary medicine. The pet is itchy, the owners are unhappy, and the veterinarian does not have an “easy fix” to offer. The frustration begins with the difficulty in trying to determine what a dog or cat is actually allergic to. Veterinary dermatologists believe that a dog or cat that is showing symptoms of allergies is reacting to more than one thing—generally both foods AND airborne allergens.

Although there are “allergy tests” available, experts disagree on which tests are most reliable and what to do with the results.

When it comes to treating allergies, we never expect a cure, just control of symptoms. For that, you have a number of options:

- **Referral to a specialist.** Allergies are a lifelong problem that can be frustrating to control. It can actually save you time and money to go to a specialist who can streamline a diagnostic and treatment approach for your pet.
- **Hyposensitization:** this is the standard of care for people with allergies. It involves having your pet tested to see what he/she is allergic to, then having a special solution prepared that you inject or put in his/her mouth according to a set schedule. Some pets can go through a series of treatments over ten months and then never need them again. Some go through the series, then only need treatments during peak allergy season. Some need regular treatments year long for life. Others don't seem to respond to the treatment at all.
- **Cyclosporine:** this drug suppresses the immune system, and can either be used instead of or along with steroids. The main disadvantage is the expense, but the advantage is that this medication has less potential for severe side effects as compared to steroids.
- **Steroid therapy:** this is the simplest, but not always the best, treatment available. Corticosteroids like prednisone and a combination product called Temaril-P are given by mouth to suppress the immune system just enough to get the allergy symptoms under control. It's important to use the lowest dose possible in order to prevent side effects (excessive urination, infections, diabetes, etc). For many pets, steroids alone are enough to keep symptoms under control.
- **Apoquel:** this medication is fairly new. It primarily suppresses the chemicals responsible for the “itch” sensation that accompanies allergies, therefore suppresses the immune system less so than cyclosporine or steroids. Most dogs do extremely well on this product, though it is common for severely affected pets to need a combination of therapies to stay comfortable.
- **Antihistamines:** people with hay fever rely on antihistamines like Benadryl and Claritin to stay comfortable during allergy season. These medications can help allergic pets, but are not strong enough on their own to keep a pet comfortable. They can, however, reduce the amount of Apoquel, steroid, or cyclosporine needed.
- **Fatty-acid nutritional supplements** containing omega-3 fatty acids (salmon oil, flax seed oil) such as eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA) and docosahexanoic acid (DHA) may help normalize the skin's barrier function, reduce inflammation, and reduce the amount of other medications that are needed. It may take up to three months before a noticeable improvement is seen. The recommended dose is about 23 mg/pound (your dog's weight multiplied by 23) daily of combined EPA and DHA. Fatty acids supplements are reported to reduce itchiness in up to 30% of dogs. There are many different over-the-counter brands available. Welactin is one product commonly recommended by specialists; it can be purchased from various sources, including online: <http://www.welactin.com/dog>
- **Food allergy trials:** even pets that only have symptoms of allergies part of the year may benefit from being placed on a hypoallergenic or novel protein diet. Many researchers believe that pets have an “allergy tolerance threshold”,

meaning that they may be allergic to many things, but if you can take away one or two, the rest aren't enough to cause symptoms. For example, a pet that is allergic to chicken, ragweed, and dust mites may only show symptoms when all three things are present (no itchiness in the winter, but symptoms in the summer and fall). If you take away the chicken, the pet may not have any symptoms, even when ragweed is at its peak. Also, there is some cross-reactivity between airborne allergens and food allergens—your pet's immune system may not be able to tell the difference between (for example) birch pollen and digested chicken. Food allergy trials require a very strict diet: ONLY the allergy food can be fed, and it must be a food that is formulated with a small number of ingredients, using ingredients that your dog has never been exposed to before (like rabbit and potato). No treats can be given during this time and it can take two months to determine whether or not the food change is helping. According to a 2015 study, the most likely food allergens in dogs are beef, dairy products, chicken, and wheat. The most common food allergens in cats are beef, fish and chicken.

- **Topical products** (shampoos, conditioners, sprays): these can help alleviate symptoms, but few people have the time or patience to use them regularly.
- **Probiotics:** The latest research in the human medical field has shown that inflammation in the intestines with an accompanying change in intestinal bacterial populations affect the whole immune system. Patients with allergies, asthma, and rheumatoid arthritis have all shown improvement in their symptoms when placed on a probiotic supplement. For that reason, we also recommend probiotics for our allergic patients. ProViable by Nutramax is one of the brands most commonly recommended by specialist. We carry it here but it can also be ordered online. <http://www.proviable.com/>

FOR SKIN INFECTIONS THAT ARE NOT ON THE FACE/HEAD:

Some dermatologists will recommend using a combination of chlorhexidine (surgical scrub) and diluted bleach rinses to treat skin infections. If you choose to try this, the instructions are:

- Dilute 1 ounce (2 tablespoons) of chlorhexidine in 1 gallon of water. Rinse your pet, avoiding the face/eyes, allow the rinse to sit for ten minutes, then rinse with plain water. Cool, room-temperature water helps soothe itchy skin. Do this every-other-day for three weeks.
- Dilute 1-2 tablespoons of bleach in 1 quart of water. Rinse your pet, avoiding the face/eyes. Allow the rinse to sit for ten minutes, then rinse with plain water. Do this once per day for 3 weeks.

Antibiotics and anti-yeast medications aren't included in this list because they don't treat allergies. Instead, they treat the secondary infections that allergic pets often develop.

As you can see, the treatment options are many and varied. Most pets rely on a combination of therapies to stay comfortable without suffering side effects from medications. This complexity is why we recommend seeing a veterinary dermatologist when your pet's allergies prove to be difficult to control.

Please call if you have any questions about your options.
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