

Allergies and Your Pet

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Let's get some depressing things out of the way. Here's the bad news:

- **Allergies are FRUSTRATING.** Frustrating for you, me, and certainly your pet.
- **This is a CHRONIC disease** that is CONTROLLED, not CURED.
- Allergies can CHANGE over time. Meaning, we may see quite a bit of each other over the coming years as new strategies are needed to keep your pet comfortable.
- Allergies are DIFFICULT and often require a MULTI-PRONGED approach to getting your pet comfortable. It often takes multiple visits to establish a treatment plan that works. Hang in there!

Ok, on to some things you can do at home to minimize allergies:

1. **Keep a calendar** of all skin, ear, feet, and anal gland problems. This helps us determine if this is a year-round or seasonal issue. And by knowing that, we can narrow down our list of possible allergies.
2. **Use proper flea control year-round!** Remember, fleas don't completely die off when it gets cold out--they move inside! Proper flea control means ALL of the pets in the household. This means you, indoor cats and roommate's new puppy. Even if your pet's allergy is to something totally different, fleas make the whole situation worse.
3. Unless we are concerned about a food allergy, consider adding omega 3 fatty acids to your pet's diet. Ask us for a dose.
4. Improve the home environment. Consider a dehumidifier in damp areas to avoid mold. Consider running the A/C in hot, humid weather. Keep all filters clean, sweep and vacuum often and use an allergen filter. Keep the pet out of the room while sweeping or vacuuming. Consider a HEPA filter for the house. Most people won't rip up their carpets for their pet, but hardwood and tile trap far fewer allergens and dirt making it a good idea for everyone in the house to get rid of old carpeting.
5. Wash beds and plush toys at least weekly in hot water and mild detergent. This removes accumulated dust mites and pollen.
6. Wash your dog weekly for the same reason! (Cat owners, you can try!). Use a pet shampoo (not a human one, wrong pH). Oatmeal or fatty acid-based shampoos may help, as may a prescription shampoo. You can rinse your dog off daily and wipe off his feet before coming in the house during the high-pollen season.
7. Keep grass cut short and keep your dog off the lawn while cutting.

Despite all of these things, most dogs and cats with significant allergies will require either long-term medications or treatment during "flare-ups." These can include: medicated shampoos, sprays, lotions, as well as oral medication. If an environmental allergy (such as a grass or pollen) is suspected, we may discuss allergy testing. If a food allergy is suspected, we may discuss a "food trial" (see reverse).

The Scoop on Food Allergies and a Proper “Food Trial”

If your dog has a year-round problem with ear infections and/or itchy skin, we have to consider food allergy.

Let's start by dispelling some myths:

1. Many people assume that food can't be the problem because they haven't switched the pet's diet. It actually takes time for food allergies to develop, so most allergic dogs have been on the same diet for years before developing a problem.
2. “Grain-free” foods are all the craze right now. Many people think these foods are superior and that they are appropriate for a pet with food allergies. In fact, most dogs and cats are NOT allergic to grains at all, but to another protein or carbohydrate source! “Grain-free” does NOT equal “appropriate for food allergies”.
3. You can test for other allergies; can't you just test for food allergy? There ARE food allergy tests on the market but there are so many false positives and cross-reactions they aren't useful.

Ok, so what do we do?

Since we can't test to see which ingredient(s) your pet is allergic to, there are two strategies:

1. Feed a food where ALL of the ingredients are new to your pet. The most common allergens for dogs are: beef, dairy, wheat, chicken, egg, lamb, soy, corn, pork, fish and rice. Appropriate choices would then be: bison and sweet potato or duck and green peas. For cats, rabbit or duck-based diets are good options. You have to look at the ENTIRE INGREDIENT LIST, not just what it says on the front of the bag. Many times, a diet will sound appropriate but in the middle of the ingredient list, there will be something listed that is a deal-breaker. The best bets will be either a prescription diet or a home-cooked diet. Prescription diets are made on equipment that is dedicated solely to those ingredients, so there is no chance of cross-contamination. Over the counter diets are made on shared equipment meaning there is often enough contamination to throw a diet trial completely off. There is also currently no regulation in place with over the counter foods to verify that the bag actually contains what is on the ingredient list! Recent studies have shown that many brands' ingredient lists aren't even close to accurate. If you are up for the challenge of a home-cooked diet, ask us for recipes.
2. Feed a hydrolyzed diet. These diets are only available by prescription and the idea is that the ingredients in the food are processed into such small molecules that the immune system can't find them to react. This is an appealing option in that it takes the guesswork out of the equation. The ingredient list will look like any other bag of dog food; the magic is in the way it is processed.

Finally, the “rules”

1. Feed only the diet that you have settled on for the trial. No snacks, treats, or flavored medication for the duration of the trial. Ask us about topical heartworm preventive to use during the trial. No sneaking into other pets' bowls. No children dropping food on the floor. No grandma giving them “just one biscuit”. Not everyone can do a proper food trial. If you can't get the whole family on board, you are sunk before you even start.
2. Give it time. It takes quite a while for the immune system to calm down. We consider a proper trial to take 8 weeks. You are NOT going to see instant results. You will see a pretty quick flare-up if someone cheats though!

What if it works? Great! Stay on the diet long-term or consider adding just 1 new ingredient every two weeks until you hit on the ingredient that causes a flare-up. Then just avoid that ingredient.

What if it doesn't work? Let's take another look at the diagnosis and make sure that food allergy is still our top contender. If it is, let's do ANOTHER trial with a different diet. Especially if you started with an over the counter diet, let's switch to a prescription diet to rule out contamination or an inaccurate ingredient list.